Current affairs

Objectification and abjectification of migrants: reflections to help guide psychosocial workers

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This is a personal reflection concerning the migration crisis in Europe and its political repercussions on migration policies around the globe. Instead of the usual focus on analyses of needs, this article examines a variety of philosophical categories, such as objectification, abjectification as well as political paradigms, including the risk management approach to governance. It further examines how philosophical categories can be used to read situations in a manner that can be useful to guide psychosocial practitioners, and that can be both intrinsically and necessarily interlinked with migration policies, in order to avoid compromise and not be complicit in creation of spaces of vulnerability for migrants.

Keywords: abjectification, agency, crisis, migrants, objectification, psychosocial practitioners, psychosocial work, therapeutic governance

Migration and psychosocial work: definitions and figures

A migrant is defined by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as: '*any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State, away from his/ her habitual place of residence, regardless of the person's legal status; whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; what the causes for the movement are; or what the length of the stay is,*' (IOM, 2016). In the IOM's conceptualisation, a psychosocial approach to human phenomena consists of understanding necessary and organic interrelations of socio economic/ socio relational, cultural anthropological and biopsychological elements in any human activity, and in determining individual and collective identities and wellbeing (IOM, 2010). This organic interrelation is particularly challenged by migration in general, and in particular, by forced and vulnerable migration which affects the identities of individuals and groups in origin, migrant and host communities alike. This understanding, which is central in defining migrants' wellbeing, is related to psychosocial work as a discipline and as a body of knowledge. As German chancellor Angela Merkel puts it, migration is '*a challenging task of historical magnitude*' and this decade's defining issue for our democracies (Merkel, 2015). In other words, population mobility is not a problem, but a fundamental element of the new anthropology, strictly linked to globalisation, mass communication, inequality and individual aspirations. By the end of 2015, there were 244 million international migrants worldwide, which represented 3.3% of the world's population (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2016). This figure is underestimated, because it doesn't include internal migrants and all international irregular migrants, but only those irregular migrants who were identified by law enforcement agencies. It also includes the 19.5 million asylum seekers and refugees – 8% of all international migrants – even though the recent situation in Europe demonstrates how differentiation between an economic migrant and a refugee has become increasingly less clear-cut and, at times, subservient to political considerations. Hinting at inequalities as one of the main drivers of migration, 71% of migrants live in highly developed countries

(IOM, 2016). Hinting at personal aspirations, most of them originate from middle income rather than extremely poor or conflict affected countries (UNDESA, 2016). Yet, negative and biased public and political discourses on migration affect not only the dignity of migrants, but theirs and our emotions, interrelations and the deep cultures of a generation, globally. Without tackling these misconceptions, the psychosocial wellbeing of migrants is probably not attainable.

Psychosocial workers

It is important at this stage to clarify that a psychosocial worker, as defined by the author, is not only a clinical psychologist, a counselling psychologist, a public health specialist or a clinical social worker. Instead, a psychosocial worker is any social scientist and/or psychologist working on the interconnectedness described above, a concept better explained later in this paper. Therefore, psychosocial workers have a fundamental role to play in redefining the current narratives on migration, the way migrants are received and accompanied upon their arrival in both transit and destination countries, and in redefining the administrative understanding of service provision for vulnerable migrants through a more person centred approach, while maintaining an awareness of the complexity of the systems involved. In doing so, psychosocial workers could not only contribute to better service provision for migrants, but could also aim at the higher objective of political redefinition of the migration phenomenon. Additionally, working in such a liminal domain, psychosocial workers may be able to better identify what has gone *'wrong'* with the psychosocial professions, and the way they are perceived and used today in general, with the goal of reformation.

Healthy and unhealthy migrant myths: an historical perspective

According to Cattacin and colleagues (Cattacin, Chimienti, & Cuadra, 2006), the perception of wellbeing in relation to migration, at least in Europe, can be divided into two macro entities: the industrial and the post-industrial periods. Until around the 1980s, international migration was mainly related to low skilled labourers moving from the global and internal south to the global and internal north, regulated influxes from (former) colonies, and a comparatively low number of refugees. From a mental health perspective, migrants were usually perceived as emotionally strong, as they had dared to take a risk and consequently faced many challenges. Their migration was seen as a pro-active movement, as it was often linked to an upward social mobility strategy. Additionally, their health was usually assessed at the borders, with exclusion the result of a poor assessment. These perceptions, in particular, contributed to the formation of the *'healthy migrant'* myth. The reality, however, was far more complex. Stigmatisation existed, as well as blatant forms of racism, but it remained overall a positive myth.

However, since the 1980s, the scope and pace of worldwide mobility has increased drastically. This has been caused, in part, by the collapse of the global order provided by the *'cold war'*, the unprecedented role played by mass communication, and the improvement and increased accessibility of means of transportation. The generic definition of migrant nowadays encompasses a constellation of legal and life course patterns, including: refugees and asylum seekers, foreign students, labour migrants, cyclic or seasonal workers, foreign domestic workers, intercontinental and interregional migrants, mobile and travelling populations, victims of trafficking, separated and unaccompanied children, undocumented migrants and transnational families, among others. This has led to the diversification of migrant populations, increased transnationalism, a variety of socioeconomic conditions of migrants, a progressive *'feminisation'* of migration, an increase of flow from

developing countries, as well as an increase of irregular movements. Safe and vulnerable migration processes coexist, but it is the latter that monopolises the political and social discourse on migration. Accordingly, the *'healthy migrant'* myth has been progressively superseded by the *'vulnerable'* and, therefore, *'unhealthy migrant'* myth. Since the 1990s, this vulnerability myth has been semantically characterised by *'mental trauma'* narratives, whose pertinence is clinically, sociologically and politically questioned by many critics (Papadopoulos, 2002; Summerfield, 2001).

Migrants as objects and the therapeutic governance of migration

Parallel to the consolidation of the *'unhealthy migrant'* myth, the public discourse and national social and access policies on migration from the 1980 s on have progressively transformed migrants from subjects to objects. Subjects may be stigmatised and potentially discriminated against, but there is still value placed on their individuality. Migrants as objects, on the other hand, are placed in artificially created categories based on ever changing legal provisions and supposed levels of vulnerabilities, with these categories measured by looking at their perceived needs rather than their agency. The transformation of migrants from subjects to objects is very much embedded in what Pupavac referred to as the therapeutic governance of societies (Pupavac, 2001). She posited that in former decades, representative democratic societies and ruling political classes had understood governance in terms of risk management rather than participation and strategy. This approach appears to question (or at least minimise) the value of democracy, and has been hampered by ideological presumptions and vested interests embedded in identification and prioritisation of risks that *'need'* to be managed, yet has gone largely unquestioned. Pupavac

does not link the therapeutic governance of societies to migration governance. However, as therapeutic governance is strictly linked with acts of defining categories based on vulnerabilities and managing them in terms of risk, it is all too easy to see how this connects to the way migration governance has been approached over the last decades. One of the first executive orders signed by the newly elected president of the USA in January 2017, referred to in the media as the *'Muslim ban'* (Lyons-Padilla & Gelfand, 2017) is at the moment of closure of this paper, the ultimate example of this tendency. More notably for psychosocial practitioners, Pupavac refers to the function of international psychosocial workers to describe the role that politicians have assumed within the framework of therapeutic governance of societies, such as abjuring participation and governance to assess risk, categorise them and manage them (Pupavac, 2001). This is a sad return to the biased way psychosocial work has been increasingly perceived in the past years. A bias that psychosocial workers, including the author of this paper, contribute to reinforcing every time they passively accept administrative provisions that look at categories rather than persons, hence strengthening power inequalities and becoming functional to biased approaches, something that happens all too often.

Migrants as abjects and trauma narratives

In the last decade, progressively, migrants have been transformed from objects into *'abjects'*. The Bulgarian philosopher Kristeva defined the abject as neither an object nor a subject, but as an entity that was radically excluded by our *symbolic order* of meaning to allow the intersubjective community to persist – the opposite of the object of desire (Kristeva, 1982). In this sense, the abject is concerned with *'what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules'*, what highlights the *'fragility of the law'*

and marks the eruption of the '*real*' into our lives (Kristeva, 1982, p.6). We are attracted and repelled by the abject because we are attracted and repelled by '*death's insistent materiality*', meaning we are being confronted with concrete images and events that traumatically *show us* our own death and our own temporal and symbolic limits as individuals and as a society (Kristeva, 1982). Because of their abjectisation, migrants have recently become significant for us only if they are dead, or if they suffer in the act of migrating. Their suffering only becomes interesting when it brings us again to the concrete image of an unacceptable death. This was manifest in the tragic and appalling case of little Aylan Kurd, whose death ' … *forced Western nations to confront the consequence of a collective failure to help migrants fleeing the Middle East and Africa to Europe in search of hope, opportunity and safety*' (Barnard & Shoumali, 2015). Proving the abjectification of migration, the only migrant in the last so-called '*migration crisis*' in Europe that received individual, universal coverage in the media and brought revision of some policies was the image of a dead toddler.

The suffering of the abject, on the other hand, tends to be understood in terms of trauma, which involves the engagement of psychosocial support. In reality, a migrant's presence makes us question our very symbolic and social order because migration displays all the horrors that, as a society, we have tried to exclude in order for us to persist (poverty, war, injustice, pandemics). The existence of migrants traumatises us by reminding us that these horrors still exist. Yet, instead of addressing the horrors, we refer to the people as traumatised, because they are indeed the carrier of the trauma they provoke us to see, with their testimony of the persistence of the abject, that remind us of our own temporal and symbolic limits. This paradox lies at the centre of the ongoing migration debate; the very suffering of the migrant is the only reason that makes us finally look at a migrant as more than a category, but also the main reason why we reject him or her. Not surprisingly, in the last decade, psychosocial work in the realm of migration has been defined by activities and paradigms derived from clinical and counselling psychology, public health and specialised social work, while other equally important social science professions that work on exactly the same interrelations between the collective and the individual, the biopsychological, the social and the cultural and anthropological have been overlooked. Yet, anthropologists, social and community psychologists, scholars of language and of linguistic biases (Maas, 1999), sociologists and analysts of communication (Sontag, 2003) artists and applied artists can all give paramount contributions to the wellbeing of migrants, whereas the '*clinicisation*' of migration can risk to be an integral part of its abjectification.

The role of psychosocial workers: reminder to self

To turn Pupavac's argument upside down, if psychosocial workers work as true psychosocial workers and not as bad politicians, they can play a decisive role in readdressing the narrative and those policies that both objectify and abjectify migrants. It is true, as Pupavac analysed, that social policies and procedures nowadays aim primarily at a categorical approach that allows large scale risk management. However, needs and risks are also individually based, as they are resources and strengths. Psychosocial workers know how to act on the edge of this contradiction, as their work has always been, at the least, to help individuals confront complicated realities and to help systems to serve individuals in need, in addition to understand the need as the combination of individual deficits, individual resources and environmental determinants and conditions. Moreover, psychosocial work, in its essence, has always been about empowering the person. Not excluding the

category, but beyond the category. This sapience is extremely important in bridging the gap between current categorical policies and services for migrants to a more person centred approach. Psychosocial workers know how to do this better than anyone else, they just need to be willing to take on what seems to be an incredible intellectual challenge. Moreover, psychosocial workers are used to working with individuals, no matter how vulnerable, while looking not only at their vulnerability, but also at their agency and what they can bring to their environment. Doing this in the work with so-called vulnerable migrants, is not only as an act of empowerment for the migrant, but can also positively influence the communities where migrants are hosted. In fact, any single action of a psychosocial worker, any single help relation can become an act of resistance against the abjectification of migrants, and against their ultimate symbolic and long lasting exclusion. To succeed in this task, psychosocial workers need to be brave and question a solely categorical and risk management oriented approach to their work. They should be critical, and understand that their work is positioned within a series of systems. The assistance they are providing often responds to erroneous systemic approaches and priorities. Their work is to be aware of this and, whenever possible, question these approaches while continuing to assist individuals in need. They should be smart, and understand that faults within the systems of assistance and integration contribute to people's vulnerability as much as the trauma of the past, and that the focus on the latter is functional to the abjectification of migration more than to migrants' wellbeing. This is not an invitation to disregard the individual's suffering or to disrespect the painful history of some migrants. Rather, it is an invitation to read the trauma for its effects on the functionality of the individual in the present situation, and not refer all of the suffering to the past and elsewhere, out of our present symbolic order, as

this order is often the basis of the problems migrants face. Psychosocial workers should be cosmopolitan. Their skills in managing cultural diversity in a help relation, as well as in public discourses, should be built as part of their formal curriculum, because population mobility is the defining issue of our time. Translators and cultural mediators from the migrant community can help in understanding the culture of the other and can facilitate. However, first and foremost, it comes from the psychosocial worker's own understanding that the person in front of them is different from themselves, and they may place a different value on issues and supposed vulnerabilities, reasoning in a different way. It is essential that the psychosocial worker is able to manage this diversity as a value and a resource. Psychosocial workers should be contextual, because wellbeing is the product of an individual's possibility to contribute to the collective she/he is part of, but that for migrants these communities multiply, and some of them do not allow migrants any, or sufficient, space for contribution. Working on creating this space is always a two-fold matter, individual empowerment on one side, and work on the collective on the other.

Conclusions

For most psychosocial workers, these points are common sense and a given within their daily practice. They are spelled out here as a simple reminder. In a way, a simple reminder to the self, because we should work together so that migrants are no longer considered either abjects or objects, but once again considered subjects and citizens. This is the essential basis of any dignity and worth, fundamental for everyone; the migrant, the origin and the host societies. As migration is a fundamental part of today's anthropology, societies should be made resilient to migration, and as such able to redefine their symbolic order to an acceptance of migration. This is the psychosocial

workers' role, as important as helping migrants in need.

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