



REFUGEE AND THE POLITICS OF BELONGING: MICRO-SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION, INCLUSION, AND EXCLUSION

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Abstract

This research critically investigates the micro-social dynamics of refugee identity reconstruction, inclusion, and exclusion within the political contexts of belonging in host societies. Using an embedded approach involving a systematic critical literature review, secondary qualitative data analysis and a longitudinal, comparative case study (Netherlands, Italy, Turkey, Lebanon, Australia), the paper explores the impact of macro-level asylum policies and discourses on the realities of refugee experience across two different geopolitical arenas. An original conceptual framework is developed through the synthesis of Honneth and Fraser's theories of recognition, Agamben's biopolitics and an embodied conception of belonging. The study identifies that long-term legal liminality and a institutional lack of recognition actively deconstruct refugee identity and result in psychological distress and bodily non-belonging. However, the active retention of pre-migratory social identity coherence and the counter-narrativization of the lived refugee experience are identified as critical survival mechanisms and sources of agency re-appropriation. The article offers a more complex theoretical framework to account for the connection between macro-political institutions and micro-level phenomenology and highlights the tangible, embodied, micro-political dimensions of belonging to be more than abstract legal categories of inclusion and exclusion. Policy implications to address institutional frameworks of exclusion and ensure substantive participatory parity for refugees are discussed .

Keywords: refugee identity; politics of belonging; recognition theory; social identity continuity; embodied non-belonging.

1.Introduction

We live in a world with currently highest levels of forced displacement, of which at least 110 million had been forced from home due to persecution, conflict and systematic violence (UNHCR, 2023). This situation demands reflection over how displaced people

negotiate with the complicated politico-social environment of the host countries. The navigation takes place through the processes of what Yuval-Davis (2006) calls the 'politics of belonging', i.e. "the practices of discursively and institutionally managing the inclusionary/ exclusionary demarcation of community boundaries, of membership and civic inclusion and belonging, of legitimate entry into society". Physical displacement is for the refugees and asylum seekers only the first stage of the difficult, painful process of identity renegotiation in micro-social spheres of belonging, involving exclusion and inclusion within the legal, institutional and interactional dimension. So far research has focused more on macro-level policy regimes and their humanitarian impact (Zetter, 2007; Agamben, 1998) and less on the processes of translating such macro-regimes to daily bodily experiences of identity formation and psychosocial survival.

In each case, he argues that mainstream discourse fluctuates between viewing refugees as passive victims awaiting rescue and threatening security agents in relation to national identity and, in this way, imposes uniform identities which deny refugees agency and their interlocking intersectional position. Accordingly, the central research question of the study is: 'To what extent do macro-level asylum policies and societal discourse determine the micro-social processes of refugees' identity-reconstruction, and how do resilience, belonging and exclusion play out in different geopolitical circumstances?' Three research objectives follow from this central question: (i) to systematically and critically examine and critically assess the epistemological and methodological shortcomings within the existing theory and research on this topic; (ii) to establish an integrative conceptual framework that combines recognition theories (Honneth, 1995; Fraser, 2000), biopolitics (Agamben, 1998) and the phenomenology of embodied belonging (Mattes & Lang, 2021); and (iii) to operationalize this framework through an extensive comparative case study that compares the life experiences of refugees in the transit and in the host countries.

Its importance relies in the fact that it goes beyond the deficits and linear acculturation approach, and puts forward a dialectical relationship between structural exclusion and micrological acts of identity reconstruction and recuperation (narrative counter-construction and social identity perpetuation). Theoretically, the research proposes an eclectic approach composed of systematic critical literature review, deep second-wave critical secondary analysis of empirical data, and comparative case study design (Netherlands, Italy, Turkey, Lebanon and Australia as carefully chosen cases of comparison) in order to provide a theoretically informed, empirically driven analysis that simultaneously embraces the shared aspects of the refugee experience and the context-specific particularities of different policy frameworks. Ultimately, the paper sheds light onto the hidden mechanisms of power which organize daily life in refugee contexts, and advances the sociology of migration's knowledge about the political construction of belonging, and its lived, everyday experience, hence breaking down the structure agency divide in refugee research.

2.Literature Review

A critical examination of existing theories and research points to an incomplete but vivid debate concerning refugees' sense of self, their strength and the politics of belonging. Classic social-psychological theories, such as Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner 1979) suggest that people gain sense of self from their membership in groups, and that such membership cannot but be disrupted during the violent experience of exile. This disruption, the theory argues, leads to reevaluation of the self; the classic conception of SIT fails to grasp the asymmetry of power and constraints that prevents refugee from forming positive identities in their host countries. Similarly to this, Berry's (1997) theory of acculturation (assimilation, integration, separation and marginalisation) rests on a premise of free choice, which the situation of the refugees facing long legal limbo denies them. Although all the theories provide a good starting point, they seem to miss key issues that require more critical political and theoretically developed approach.

More radically, the biopolitical turn in migration studies drawing on the work of Agamben (1998) has further extended these debates. Through the notion of 'bare life' Agamben explains the situation of refugees as excluded by the nation state's sovereignty from political life and reduced to a biological entity. He discusses how asylum systems in countries like the Netherlands and Italy can 'create states of exception' where a body is present but non-existent and limbo is created. Agamben's analysis has been criticized for a complete pessimism that may not make space for agency on the part of refugees or the acts of micro-political resistance taking place within the spaces of abandonment.

Recognition theory-popularized by Honneth (1995) and then refined by Fraser (2000) -offers a more dialectical approach. For Honneth, self-realization can only take place through recognition in love, rights and solidarity and misrecognition by the host society – in legal terms of non-identification and cultural stigmatization – causes harm that prevents the construction of a coherent identity. Fraser's principle of participatory parity adds a critical redistributive element and stresses that recognition and resources must be distributed equitably. These theoretical insights have been taken up empirically by Webb et al. (2021) and Costantini and El-Serafy (2025) who analyze educational policies in Australia and Lebanon respectively to show how asylum-seeking students and refugee students with disabilities are structurally misrecognized by being relegated to 'super-disadvantaged' categories and thus denied the conditions necessary for full societal integration.

In addition to structural accounts of belonging, there is the phenomenology of corporeal belonging as discussed by Mattes and Lang (2021), who argue that the categories of included and excluded are not simply discursive, but inscribed onto the body through the "epidemiological vulnerabilities, spaces of confinement, and sensory deprivation" (Mattes and Lang 2021, X). The in-between-ness of the asylum-seeker centres is thus not simply a temporary stasis, but a physical condition in which psychological stress, "mental fatigue" and

affective incongruence can become corporeal experiences of political non-belonging (De Leo et al., 2022; Sleijpen et al., 2017).

The empirically developed story above is added to with further evidence. Sleijpen et al. (2017) described the application of resilience behaviors in young refugees (acting independently and excelling academically) and showed how these are undermined by the long waits associated with the residency permit process. Rommes and Chaer (2024) found how young Syrian refugees negotiated two contradictory societal discourses-'vulnerable victims' and 'threatening terrorists'-through the reconstruction of "strong," capable images of themselves as well as the use of selection in remembrance/forgetting to "restore dignity." For young Syrians in Turkey, Smeekes et al. (2017) demonstrated quantitatively that maintenance of pre-migration group memberships is highly associated with good mental health and is also associated with "cultural bereavement" after a break in memberships. De Leo et al. (2022) observed that different psychosocial profiles (from "persecutory" to "integrated") of asylum seekers in Italy could be discriminated, such that "hostility" perceptions toward the asylum procedure lead to differentiated pathways of identity.

A critical integration of these works has pointed out three shortcomings:

i) policies at the macro-level and experience at the micro-level have been kept separate and the links through which policies get to be lived remain untraceable;

ii) there has been a continued "singularization" of the refugee subject, in which intersectional dimensions such as disability (Costantini & El-Serafy, 2025), gender and class position have been ignored;

iii) resilience and agency have been praised and "congratulated" in ways which tend to ignore the structural constraints in which they occur, and could consequently be co-opted into a neoliberal discourse where the burden of the "self-integration" is placed on refugees. We argue that a new approach is needed that takes the politics of belonging as its core element and brings into sharp focus the embodied, relational, and resistant dimensions of identity renewal.

3.Synthesized Conceptual Framework

To address these gaps this research introduces a composite theoretical framework that integrates the recognition frameworks of Honneth and Fraser, Agamben's biopolitics and embodied belonging. It argues that identity recovery for refugees is a processual and non-linear encounter within three forces operating:

1) the structural politics of belonging: including legal status recognition, institutions and policy and mainstream discourses determining the limits of legitimate presence,

2) the embodied nature of liminality and misrecognition in which these macro-processes are embodied and expressed in distress, bodies and emotions,

3) the active strategies employed to reclaim identity (counter-narrative, intentional social identity continuation and micro-political actions).

Different from linear acculturation frameworks, it defines inclusion and exclusion not as states of ends but continuous, negotiated struggles in which refugees interpret, resist and re-negotiate subjectivities.

It thus allows a comparison which takes into account structural determination and human agency and is therefore particularly well adapted to studying differing effects between different geo-political situations.

4.Methodology

In order to enact the framework outlined above, this paper employs a mixed-methods approach which incorporates a critical systematic review, secondary qualitative data analysis and a comparative case study approach with an extended timeframe. This initial part of the research involved a critical systematic review of peer-reviewed literature published between 2015 and 2025 to ensure currency; sources came from Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Key search terms included 'refugee identity', 'politics of belonging', 'asylum policy', 'resilience', 'social inclusion' and 'embodied belonging'. Included studies were required to offer empirically qualitative or mixed-methods data on the micro-social experiences of adult or youth refugees in the chosen host countries, whereas exclusion criteria removed exclusively economic analysis or large-N survey studies devoid of qualitative detail as well as purely voluntary migrants. The studies were thematically and critically assessed for their theoretical contribution, rigor of methodological approach and acknowledgment of power, thus compiling the final selected literature that constitutes the core corpus upon which this study builds.

In the second stage, a broad comparative case study design was developed. I selected five case studies that fit my theoretically justified selection criteria and represent positions on each extreme of the spectrum of asylum politics: the Netherlands and Italy as the two EU settlement countries, characterized by relatively bureaucratic, and thus often long asylum processes; the two states as major receiving countries for refugees from the Global South, Turkey and Lebanon, based on a strongly temporary protection regime; and Australia as a developed country and proponent of an exclusionary offshore processing and deterrence policy. This selection makes it possible to compare institutional configurations and cultural frames on how the politics of belonging is shaped. Units of analysis were identified as the qualitative narratives present in selected empirical texts, with the support of relevant policy documents and reports from UNHCR, as it provides an overview of the legal framework.

For comparison purposes, a matrix was built with the 3 dimensions of the conceptual framework: structural politics, embodied experience, and agency strategy, linked to operational indicators (duration of asylum processes, access to education and healthcare, experiencing discriminatory discourses, perceived psychological discomfort, having produced counter-narratives and a sense of identity continuity). This matrix served to structure data extraction and classification.

In the third step, the secondary data was analyzed rigorously by performing reflexive thematic analysis as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006). All the collected text was repeatedly coded, and themes emerged inductively but were tested against the conceptual framework deductively through initial coding, searching, reviewing and defining of themes. Robustness was achieved through triangulation of qualitative data against policy analyses and theoretical claims. The validity and reliability were promoted through the use of a comparative matrix and through the provision of an audit trail recording coding decisions. Although there was no primary data collected in this study, its methodological rigor based on systematic use of various secondary data sources across different situations offers a believable and transferable account of the phenomenon studied. The analytic rigor of the study is additionally strengthened by independent and dependent variables clear in their conceptual distinction: macro level asylum policy (dependent variable), duration of legal insecurity (independent variable) and societal discourse (independent variable); well-being (dependent variable), strategies for reconstruction of self-identity (independent variable), perceived belonging (dependent variable).

5.Results and Analysis

When secondary data was collected and themed, five themes, often disturbing, about the disintegration of identity, the body, and resistance, emerged across the five cases. Even though the context varied, these five cases have three key themes; "the devastating effects of extended liminality", "institutions that don't recognize", and the "micro politics of agency".

The state of liminality enforced by protracted periods in Asylum Seeker Centers (ASCs) in the Netherlands, in particular, re-forms the social ecology for young refugee children. The liminal condition is characterized by what Sleijpen et al. (2017, p. 353) describe as lives that are 'put on hold'; people report feeling that life is simply suspended, unable to be 'moving forward' due to a feeling of stasis in their lives (Sleijpen et al., 2017, p. 355). As one participant described; "I can't move forward because I don't know if I will be sent back" (Sleijpen et al., 2017, p. 355). The researcher terms this temporal deferment 'metal fatigue', which refers to the slow depletion of hope and resilience, counteracting precisely those strategies refugees seek to uphold. Even pursuit of agency through education becomes futile if legal status remains pending for years. The physical reality of this liminality is described through reports of sleep disturbance, sustained anxiety, and general

feelings of not belonging. The ASC itself, with its regimented daily life and physically confined space, is a sensorium of social exclusion that makes body the site for political disenfranchisement.

The fragmented and regionalized Italian asylum system generates similar pathological effects but on different psychosocial configurations. De Leo et al. (2022, p. 1233) identifies three prevailing profile types among asylum seekers: the persecutory profile, the ambivalent profile, and the integrated profile. The persecutory profile (characterized by torment, fear and the sense of being persecutory of the institution meant to give protection) arises when asylum process is understood as offensive and irrational. Members of the persecutory profile recount "disrespectful system practices such as long waits without communication, undignified conditions in the receiving structure, and the persistent fear 'to be sent back to die'" (De Leo et al., 2022, p. 1236). Disintegration happens as direct result of politics of belonging, where asylum seeker is treated not as a subject, but as a suspect to be excluded and dehumanized. The Italian case perfectly demonstrates how misrecognition is materialized into a persecutory subject identity through the means of Kafkaesque bureaucracy.

This stands in such contrast, and is, in a way, even more instructive than the Turkish data as it highlight the protective nature of social identity continuity. Smeeke et al. (2017, p.1320) showed that pre-migration multiple group memberships was positively associated with post-migration continuation of some social memberships and post-migration continuation was positively associated with life satisfaction and negatively with depression. Importantly, however, multiple prior group memberships was also positively associated with depression, suggesting that, while social identity continuity helps alleviate suffering from displacement, the loss of multiple meaningful social memberships itself imposes significant psychological costs akin to cultural bereavement (Smeeke et al., 2017, p.1322). This dual pathways demonstrates that social identity continuity is the double-edged sword of coping; a necessary tool that is also part of the painful, grief laden, cost of losing much meaningful and binding community: This work further demonstrates how policies allowing for maintenance of social ties can prevent the deeply atomising consequences seen in many European asylum centres and offer an important counterpoint to the situation in Turkey where its temporary protection regime has not prevented some forms of community life from developing.

Through the example of education, the Australian and Lebanese cases help us to illustrate the institutionalization of misrecognition. In the case of Australia, Webb et al. (2021, p. 876) describe how "an institutionalised, deliberate policy misframing is taking asylum-seeking higher education students and classing them as 'international students', who pay exorbitant tuition fees and are barred from receiving equity support". The classification acts to effectively ban them from the moral community of the nation and from participation in its economic life. The story that these students tell reveals "their experience of profound

injustice and cognitive dissonance" due to their admission to the community as people "smart and qualified... But denied participatory parity" and who felt like they were "committing a crime" just for trying to get educated (Webb et al., 2021, p. 885). It has had an embodied effect: "financial precarity, social exclusion and everyday stress" resulted for students, illustrating the Australian case of Webb et al.'s (2000) theory on the connection between misrecognition and maldistribution and leading to "a class of the super-disadvantaged" "unable to participate in both the sphere of distribution and the sphere of esteem" (2000).

In Lebanon, the neoliberal and securitized approaches to education of refugees contribute to the perpetuation of exclusionary policies, particularly towards the most marginalized individuals. According to Costantini and El-Serafy (2025, p. 306), humanitarian programming based on cost-efficiency and employability scales sidelines refugee children with disabilities; in contrast, the reliance on a 'vulnerability' concept further disempowers this group, reducing inclusion to symbolic inclusionism, and transforming 'inclusion' into 'a tool for containment rather than empowerment' (Costantini & El-Serafy, 2025, p. 308) creating an implied hierarchy of desirability amongst the refugee population. This reveals the unintended consequences of good intentions, and shows how belonging politics can operate within the framework of aid.

To resist these structural pressures, refugees in all case studies construct agentic counter-narratives that reclaim agency over identity. One exemplary instance is the counter-narrative construction illustrated by Rommes & Chaer (2024, p. 77) in their research on Syrian youth in the Netherlands. To overcome the victim narratives and 'bad Muslim' identities that frame them from outside society, youth actively remake their identities as competent and normal. The research highlights how they call on memories of pre-war lives to build a narrative that grounds their identities while discarding narratives of oppression or victimhood. Forcing a distance from such narratives constitutes not simply psychology coping, but a politics of refusal, resisting externally imposed subjectivities. As one mother claims, 'I want my children to be seen as strong, not as poor victims' (Rommes & Chaer, 2024, p. 81). Such self-narratives directly counteract the meta-narratives that buttress politics of exclusion and seek to establish a sense of honorable selfhood.

In conclusion, an identical narrative emerges where the politics of belonging, implemented through the legal liminality and the institutional misrecognition of refugee, systematically produces the de-individuation of refugee selves and the creation of embodied non-belonging. Under such conditions, the preservation of pre-migration social selves and the conscious creation of alternative discourses appear to be essential strategies for survival. This process illustrates the necessity of examining refugee identities as contested terrain between imposed structure and self-fashioning.

6. Discussion

By situating these findings within the framework of the newly synthesized concept, interesting theoretical insights can be gained which question previous notions of migration research. In summary, the finding clearly corroborates with the first hypothesis; length of legal liminality and institutional misrecognition are the leading cause of fragmentation of the self. The findings from the Netherlands and Italy show that in the context of asylum, prolonged existence in limbo not only stalls integration but contributes to psychological disintegration itself. This goes beyond Agamben's (1998) concept of bare life in that it shows that the creation of bare life is not one final totalising process but a continuous, administrative, bureaucratic process which slowly but surely drains the person; the 'metal fatigue' and 'persecutory profiles' represent biopolitical control at the micro-level, the body is the place where the ultimate expression of sovereignty takes place.

However, Fraser's (2000) theory of participatory parity is perhaps the most compelling in articulating the processes of institutional misrecognition in both Australia and Lebanon. The misframing of policies that define asylum seekers as 'international students' or deny disabled refugees access to general education, is not a mistake of administrative procedure but rather the very constitution of injustice itself, "This is a denial of participatory parity along two dimensions, that of the distribution of material resources and that of the recognition of worth" (Fraser 2000:60), i.e., economic deprivation and cultural misrecognition. The reported psychological suffering among these students, thus, reflects neither a mental disorder nor individual malfunction, but rather the predictable result of structural violence, while Honneth's (1995) analysis of the moral grammar of social conflicts provides insight into the reason behind this misrecognition being felt as so devastating-"the realm of self-respect is where an individual's integrity of being is guaranteed" (Honneth 1995: 182).

Social identity continuity and counter-narrative work contradict a mainstream view of refugees as passively vulnerable and challenge assimilationist visions of integration. Smeekes et al.'s (2017) revelation of two paths of social identity continuity-protection and grieving-underscores the fluid and non-linear nature of reconstruction. This implies that successful integration must be understood not as the disengagement of prior attachments, as some theories of acculturation may imply, but as the survival and restructuring of pre-migration social identities. Policies that encourage diaspora communities to flourish and support the retention of existing cultural practices may therefore be more helpful for refugee psychosocial well-being than policies which aim to assimilate refugees quickly. Moreover, the construction of counter-narrative as presented by Rommes and Chaer (2024) illustrates that refugee individuals are more than passive subjects to societal identities but can work with and manipulate these identities strategically. These agency can occur under severely limited conditions, and the requirement of continuously embodying a non-threatening identity for survival under oppressive conditions themselves constitutes an ongoing psychobiological workload.

Mattes and Lang's idea of embodied belonging (2021) is crucial in making sense of the psychological and corporeal aspects of these findings. Mental fatigue, lack of sleep and emotional dissonance were not just psychic suffering, but an embodied experience of political marginalization. The physical restrictions of detention centers, the threat of deportation and the bombard of sensory experience within urban spaces are felt and mediated in the body itself, a visceral and physical manifestation of non-belonging. Such framework can serve to counter cognitive or discourse based understandings of migration; future research and policy will need to consider its material and corporeal dimensions to understanding integration.

The theoretical intervention in this article is therefore about demonstrating that politics of belonging happens at structural, intersubjective, and embodied level simultaneously, and that identity reconstruction is best analyzed as a dialectical process constituted through these levels. The framework presented here also addresses the enduring dichotomy between structural-macro level policy analysis and micro-level phenomenological enquiry, and lays down a useful framework for comparative research in the future. However, there are also limitations to this work. Because it relies on secondary material, the ability to analyze real-time experiences in its full depth, through primary field research conducted longitudinally over time, is compromised, although its reach is widened in a comparative scope. The case selections, though a variety, mainly represent the contexts of the West and Middle East and hence their relevance to, for example, Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, where a large part of the refugee populations are, remains limited. Lastly, despite having a strong qualitative basis, the lack of macro-level quantitative statistics makes it difficult to generalize statistically. Longitudinally conducted multi-sited ethnographic researches are ideal to examine identity in the process and explore its dialectical constitution over time.

7. Conclusion

This thesis has been an attempt to scrutinize the micro-social workings of the reconstruction of refugees' identity under the framework of politics of belonging, by way of integrating the gap between macro-level structures and micro-level practices. The comparative analysis between the Netherlands, Italy, Turkey, Lebanon, and Australia demonstrates that prolonged liminality, institutional misrecognition and exclusionary narratives work in systemic and systematic fashion to break down the fragmentation of refugee identities and to produce embodied non-belonging. Meanwhile, the preservation of continuity of the social identity, along with creation of counternarratives to challenge the politics of belonging, represent the strategies of psychosocial survival and regain of control. The comprehensive concept, the merger of recognition, biopolitics, and embodied belonging provides us with an adequate model in understanding the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion. The results put into question the theory of assimilationist integration, while promoting policies that both take into account the structural basis of identity construction

and respect refugees' Agency and social continuity. Although we rely on secondary data and our limitations, it presents an excellent basis for the future empirical studies and policy implementation.

▪ Recommendations

1. Overhaul the national asylum policy to radically shorten legal liminality, provide swift status determination and guarantee humane conditions of reception to respect dignity and psychological wholeness of the asylum seekers.

2. Deconstruct the institutional misframing in education and social services to reframe the asylum seekers as co-nationals of the host nation, thereby offering equal opportunities and enabling the establishment of parity of participation without any super-disadvantaged groups.

3. Develop community-based programs to actively promote the sustenance of pre-migration identities and diasporic relations, acknowledging the mental health protective capacity of enduring social identity.

4. Counteract deficit-centric "vulnerability" model in humanitarian interventions by embracing strengths-based perspective which acknowledges agency, heterogeneous resources and intersectional identities of all refugees including those with disability.

5. Launch a counter-public narrative to resist narratives of victimhood and threats, to promote mutual recognition and solidarity.

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