

## BEYOND VICTIMHOOD AND STIGMATIZATION

Trauma, Ruptured Memories and Agency  
in the Context of Global MigrationGetting their trauma recognized: a form of  
refugees' agency?

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**Subject / Abstract**

While being a “refugee” fleeing persecution may, almost by definition, imply the notion of trauma, this relationship has been evolving and changing overtime, sometimes even strongly criticized for its medicalization of the social and political experiences, turning people who escaped war or torture into “patients, specifically with a quintessential fin de siècle disorder: PTSD”<sup>1</sup>.

Nowadays, with asylum policies and discourses shifting their focus from the individuals seeking asylum and their suffering to the host countries borders and to a “crisis” of refugees numbers and a migration of masses<sup>2</sup>, trauma and individual stories of the people forced into exile are almost absent from the public and political discourse, in the exception of few organisations using trauma to mobilize empathy, volunteers or advocate for open borders.

One of the refugees' struggle is rather to get their individuality, and their sufferings recognized. For that, they are, among others, mobilizing trauma.

**Theoretical approach / analytical framework with regard to trauma**

It is through the lenses of the triade of subjection, resistance and resignification (from Butler's work<sup>3</sup>, that is based on Foucault's) that I would look at the mobilization of trauma by the exiled themselves.

In fact, while trauma may indeed constitute a discourse producing victims, whom social and political suffering is translated into a diagnosis, we may also be witnessing how it is being reinvested by the people themselves, who would re-appropriate it, and invest it by new meanings, as a form of resistance, and agency.



The way for recognition? © Mayssa Rekhis

**Empirical findings / observations**

*“Life in Sweden is difficult, because I am not psychologically well. I am not ready for what I am going through, the language is difficult, I don't have the mental space for it. Here they don't take that into consideration, you feel they don't believe you. I try to explain, and they tell you: it is the past, forget! You need to study, work... I am going out from a war, with fear,... my nerves are completely destroyed, I want to rest a bit, to feel safety with my children, I am a human after all”, Halima, 32.*

While trauma is becoming a very common concept in modern Western societies, and is mobilized for their whole populations (after a terrorist attack for example), it is not the case for refugees, nor it is taken into account in designing the services targeting them. Halima, like many others, mobilizes trauma to get her suffering and humanity recognized, and to ask for her right to get adequate support rather than a “regular integration plan”. Trauma becomes part of a “counter-discourse”.

**(Research) Questions with regard to trauma & migration**

How is “trauma” mobilized for and by people forced into exile?

Is trauma, in addition to being, possibly, a “victimizing” or “medicalizing” discourse, becoming a category mobilized by the refugees themselves, in a proof of their own agency, to get their suffering, and humanity recognized?

Is trauma becoming a resistance-discourse against a “re-traumatizing” host society?

**Methods**

This research is based on an ethnographic study conducted in a trauma-therapy center in Stockholm, specialized in refugees, between 2018 and 2019. It was based on participant observation, coupled with in-depth interviews with “patients”, therapists, other staff members and interpreters.

**Motivation, Input, Thoughts and Questions**

- How are the conditions of being a refugee and of being traumatized inter-acting in the subjectivation and resistance processes?
- Can we consider resistance a form of life for refugees?
- Some would say that agency, extends beyond being a mere resistance. Would an “independent” agency exist? And if yes, which forms is it taking in the context of exile?
- What role(s) and responsibilities do we have as researchers towards our informants, in respect to their agency and to the discourse they produce?

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**Bio**

Researcher, educator, writer and activist. Pursuing a PhD in anthropology, exploring the experiences, discourses and practices related to trauma in articulation with forced migration in Stockholm. My research interests encompass trauma, suffering, psychotherapies, and processes of subjectivation. Elected board member of the ENPA since July 2020.

**References:**

1. Kleinman, A., Das, V. & Lock, M. M. *Social suffering*. (University of California Press, 1997).
2. Vacchelli, N. D., Nicola Montagna, Elena. *Beyond Crisis Talk: Interrogating Migration and Crises in Europe*. *Sociology* (2018).
3. Butler, J. *The psychic life of power: theories in subjection* (Stanford University Press, 1997).