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Abstract

This paper explores and evaluates the interaction between ageing and forced migration. Using evidence from in-depth interviews with older Bosnian refugees in the UK, coupled with relevant theories, I aim to understand how older people experience the ageing process from the perspective of those forced to leave their country due to conflict. Some of the issues highlighted

host country and age in place, those who return to their country of origin after a period of work, and those who undertake a 'back and forth' transnational lifestyle (Bolzman et al. 2004). Indeed, ageing migrants are diverse. Lulle and King (2016a) argue that, especially from Eastern Europe, there is a 'trend' for older-age migration due to increasing levels of poverty in old age and a lack of pension coverage. Coupled with the increase in migration in old age is an ageing population worldwide. 'Between 2015 and 2030, the number of people in the world aged 60 years or over is projected to grow by 56 per cent' (UNDESA 2015). Despite ageing being a biological process, it is also very much socially and culturally constructed (Lulle and King 2016a). Markers of ageing or what it means to be old vary according to different cultures. It can be argued that there is no universal definition of what it means to be 'old'.

However, from the literature on ageing and migration it appears that the relationship between *forced* migration and ageing has received almost no attention. This paper¹ therefore seeks to address a gap in studies of ageing and migration. There is scarce literature on older refugees and their transition into transnational agents or 'migrants' through the ageing process and this paper argues that both trajectories – that of refugee to transnational migrant and from *being young* to being 'old' – merit further research and inclusion in studies of migration.

The overarching research question of this paper is to explore and understand *the intersectionality between the process of ageing and the experiences of being a migrant* (the *intersectionality* between the process of ageing and the experiences of being a migrant).

The paper develops as follows. First, there are several background sections – on the BiH background, on methods, and then a review of relevant literature. The core of the paper is made up of three longer sections which address research questions and empirical results. The first of these presents findings from discussions on the subject of rights and citizenship. It seeks to address the question: *What languages and concepts of rights and citizenship are invoked in discussions with ageing refugees?*

As a result of the war, the mortality rate increased and the natural growth rate decreased, 'resulting in a destroyed biological reproduction of the population in BiH' (UN Human Rights Instruments 2011: 5). The 1991 census in Bosnia revealed that people aged 65 years and over represented 6 per cent of the population. According to HelpAge International's Age Watch Report Card on BiH (2016) pension coverage for people over 65 years does not exist. Furthermore there is no national policy on ageing. Age Watch predicts that by 2030, 30.6 per cent of the population will be over 60, and by 2040 this will rise further to 40.5 per cent.

Methodology

My primary research involved conducting face-to-face semi-structured interviews with six older Bosnian refugees living in the UK: three females, one aged 73 and two aged 60, and three males aged 61, 57 and 51. My use of semi-structured interviews allowed for greater flexibility and encouraged fluidity in conversations. One month prior to conducting the interviews was spent researching and contacting various individuals and mosques found on the internet. My desk-based research led me to contact one individual who then signposted me to a community event in London and there I was fortunate to meet and network with potential research participants. At this community event I met a prominent individual within the Bosnian community who helped me to identify a number of participants and he explained to them the purpose and details of my study.

The interviews took place in locations suitable for interviewees such as their homes and in a café in central London over the June-July 2016 period. Three of the participants required the assistance of an interpreter – this person was a key contact in the Bosnian community and kindly offered her services for one day of interviews. All participants had an information sheet and the study explained to them as well as the consent form in English and in Bosnian prior to the interviews. All interviews were recorded on my iPhone and ranged from 30 minutes to 90 minutes in length. Participants appeared very happy to take part in my study and thanked me for taking an interest in their community. I was warmly welcomed into their homes and offered tea and cake. A small gift was given to participants to say 'thank you' for their participation.

Ethics

In order to carry out successful interviews, I explained to participants in English and in Bosnian (through the interpreter where necessary) all about my study, my role and intention with the research findings. I had the advantage of having worked with older people in refugee settings prior to doing this research and therefore I held some experience in communicating with older people. All aspects of confidentiality were respected and carried out in accordance with the University of Sussex's Ethical Review process. I use pseudonyms to protect the identity of all six participants. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees, transcribed and I obtained their consent to use their information in my research. All interview recordings were deleted from my iPhone after the analysis.

Limitations

An obvious limitation is the size of the sample of research participants. Ideally, more people would have been interviewed for this study – however it was not possible given the time constraints and challenges encountered in locating participants. Many older people return to

contexts ageing people are rarely addressed as full citizens with their attendant rights, practices and aspirations

Migration theory is therefore ‘age-blind’ and labour mobility is mostly concentrated on youth (Lulle and King 2016a). Thus, my research is crucial to the debates around ‘valued citizens’ and the negation of older person’s rights, duties and contributions to society.

The notion of well-being (Wright 2012) is used to nuance its relevance and importance for older refugees. Wright’s study of Peruvian women in London revealed that well-being is multiple, functional and subjective. As Lulle and King (2016a) evidence:

The key functional needs are those which are important for the well-being of all working-age migrants: legal papers, language knowledge, stable income, adequate dwelling space, and being able to manage time and money. Among the subjective needs, among the most important a

Britishness, belonging and 'valued' citizens

Respect for human rights

Research participants were asked what they liked most about living in the UK and the collective agreement was that the respect for human rights was one of the things they appreciated most. The majority of participants talked overwhelmingly about the important and valuable role that human rights play in UK society. They mentioned the values of 'respect' and 'equality' present in the UK, that were absent back in Bosnia. Melisa, the oldest participant, mentioned that 'no one is bothering me. I feel I have freedom to walk in the town'. When asked what he liked most about the UK, Petar responded by saying:

First of all honestly, I like human rights. It's for everyone the same.... human rights are stronger here than anywhere else in the world.

The same opinion was echoed by Lana who talked about 'equality' as an important element of what she enjoyed most about the UK. She said, 'I love it in this country where everybody is equal. When I came here, nobody asked me, who are you? What is your religion?'

One participant described how this respect for rights contrasted greatly with the human rights situation in Bosnia. All participants during their interviews mentioned the high levels of economic and social poverty present in Bosnia and how this also contributed to a lack of social protection policies, in particular for older people. One participant mentioned the ongoing tensions between the different ethnicities still prevalent and fuelled by the ongoing negative political discourse.

Interestingly, Marko's response to the question of what participants did not like about the UK alluded to a different view of social security. According to Marko, 51, the British 'system' (alluding to social security) was somehow inadequate and those who abused it were in the wrong. He said 'I don't like injustice, don't like abuse of the system'.

The right to remain in the UK

In order to understand better the ageing experience of older refugees, it was important to ask why participants had decided in later life to remain in the UK. What were the 'pull' factors? The responses were overwhelmingly a mixture of a profound desire to stay close to family and because future life prospects were much better in the UK than in Bosnia.

Family ties and looking after grandchildren were very important for wanting to stay in the UK. According to Petar, he said: 'Probably my children will stay here forever and my grandchildren. They'll never go back'. Lana was also very vocal about staying close to her children. She said:

.... the kids make your life...I can't leave my kids here and be back in the Bosnia. Probably I will be happier there... most of friends are there, but I like to be with my kids and grandchildren.

Whilst being close to family was an important aspect of wanting to remain, so too was the issue of lack of opportunities and the minimal social security back in Bosnia. David and Ana described how difficult it was to survive back in Bosnia. 'We don't have means of supporting

home will probably be in a village in the West Balkans (other than Bosnia) because that's what I'm aiming to do for my retirement'.

Similarly, Petar was confident that he would not go back to Bosnia permanently, but instead he envisaged spending more holiday time there in the future. This was because his grandchildren were settled in the UK and he did not want to be far away from them. He was also feeling 'a little bit' nostalgic.

Maybe when I'm retired I will spend more time there, but forever in Bosnia I not plan forever. Maybe I spend a lot of time there than now but I want to be staying with my children and my grandchildren. I'm not planning to go back in the Bosnia forever – Petar, 57.

In her study of returned Bosnian refugees from Sweden, Porobić (2017) discovered that the desire for return also included a sense of 'nostalgia'. Her findings revealed that participants held a 'double life' – their dual citizenship allowed them to move back and forth when they wanted. It allowed them to navigate the poor socio-political context in BiH, keeping the option to re-emigrate open as they had access to better educational and public services in Sweden. In other words, they experienced what Porobić calls 'enabling citizenship' – making use of Sweden's residence rights to allow them to engage in transnational activities. In this study we also see the same 'enabling citizenship' being used by the research participants.

Access to services and language

To further comprehend what it was like for participants to exercise elements of citizenship such as the right to healthcare, it was deemed crucial to ask if language was a barrier or not to accessing services. Half of all research participants interviewed did not speak English and the other half had a very good level of English. For the former group, the language barrier had a considerable impact on their day-to-day lives, and meant that they were not able to be fully independent. They relied on family and friends to help them pay bills and understand their finances and other matters.² For participants who had a good level of English, taking care of personal matters was done alone and with little support from family members. It was clear that those participants who had good levels of English led more active and independent lives.

For Melisa, her lack of English meant that she was unable to communicate with non-Bosnian people her age and this could possibly account for an underlying feeling of isolation and loneliness.

in the interview talked about how growing older made her feel 'more dependent' on her family. 'Every year it's harder. The older you get, you become more dependent, the older you get, you feel like you are burdening your children'.

Both Lana and Petar spoke English to a high level but described how they struggled at the beginning of their English language journey. Petar talked about how poor health had affected his ability to learn. '.... First year I didn't went for the college because I couldn't.

Actually my annual leave I spending in the Bosnia. Usually in March, two weeks. In July and August, three weeks. Yes I have a brother there.... He looking after my place there.

All participants talked with great enthusiasm about how much they enjoyed going back to Bosnia for holidays and that this was seen as a very important time to spend with family and friends. For most it was also a time to meet up with friends who were also returning from other countries around the world. For some it meant spending time with brothers and sisters. For Melisa, going back was crucial so that she could spend time with her identical twin sister. For David and Ana, travelling to Bosnia was seen as part of a 'normal' routine and that, once there, it was as if they had never left. For example,

We go to visit our family. There is something you know, like a wedding or something so you know things that would normally happen in Bosnia that we would be invited to. Normal things.

Doing 'normal' things whilst back in Bosnia can be attributed to a strong desire to be back and feel like nothing much has changed. Their strong feelings for nostalgia and return become apparent when they talked about how they felt when they had to return to the UK. They said 'we not really happy when we come back, we are sad, we

the UK through watching Bosnian news on television. Therefore the media, such as TV, also plays a role in providing a better understanding in the mother tongue of events going on around the world. For Lana and Petar, they mentioned that they had 'very little' time for watching Bosnian TV as their active lifestyles did not allow them sufficient time and they were engaged in other activities. Lana, in particular, mentioned that she did not like watching Bosnian news.

Charitable work

Another type of transnational activity mentioned by a research participant was that of charity work. Al-Ali et al. (2001b: 581) argue that, in order to be able to engage in transnational activities, migrants need to identify with the 'social, economic or political processes' in their country of origin first. Lana does exactly that. She spends some of her time during the day working for a UK-registered charity that supports disadvantaged children in Bosnia. Her time at the organisation was normally spent in between doing the school run (dropping off the grandchildren) and some shopping in late afternoon. Her work with the charity continues when she is on holiday in Bosnia, further expanding her links and relationships with individuals in the country.

Summary

It is evident that the research participants were highly engaged in transnational activities. As mentioned earlier, migrants who are forced to leave their country are similar to labour migrants in that they do maintain links with their country of origin, dispelling any myths that they cut off all ties. It can be argued that, for my participants, engaging in transnational activities promotes a greater sense of 'well-being'. Some participants felt happiest when they were on holiday in Bosnia, whilst for Lana, her charitable work allows her to keep abreast of the socio-economic situation in the country and also contribute to a sense of satisfaction and well-being. We can also observe that social media was a popular form of keeping in touch with family and friends back home, and it can be argued that technologies such as Skype and Viber have made the task of communication a lot simpler for the older generation. The findings from this section

surrounded by friends and family was crucial to a good sense of well-being. For the majority of participants, seeing friends happens less frequently than spending time with family and grandchildren. Most family members worked during the day and so this prevented participants seeing them more frequently. It was observed that those participants whose level of English was good were more likely to be active socially and therefore less likely to feel lonely. In addition, some participants in their 50s and 60s combated isolation by doing sports as social activities, providing their health was good.

For Ana, having a visitor come by the house everyday made her feel surrounded by friends and family. Her free time is mostly spent in the home and with the grandchildren. Often on walks, she and her husband will bump into friends. However, they do not engage in more 'active' activities as such due to health issues. Socialising also takes place once a week at a local school as many grandparents bring along their grandchildren and socialise there. For Melisa, her mood is a factor when deciding whether to go out or not. She feels that when her spirit is good then she can accomplish many things. Sometimes, 'there is a will to go out and be sociable and then other times there is a need to be still and quiet', she said.

Melisa's need for quietness contrasts with that of other participants. Most notably, Petar, described in great detail how he must keep busy. 'I can't just sitting nothing to do. If nothing on telly I must find to do something. I just can't stay without anything'. For Petar, being active and being engaged in his job were important factors in combating isolation and post-war trauma. It was his life-line. In this regard we observe socialising and being active as a way to improve one's mental health. Lana, like Petar, is active and rarely spends time alone. She enjoys the company of friends with whom she goes to the theatre, and she spends time with her grandchildren on a daily basis. 'I'm never alone. I have kids or friends. I don't like to be alone', she said. Indeed, a full and active social calendar is again observed here as a pleasure and requirement for well-being in older age. This finding resonates with the argument by scholars such as King et al. (2014) who suggest that older people are in fact active and express agency in their migration and through giving care and support to their grandchildren. It also underpins the reasons why some scholars have called for the more explicit inclusion of older people in migration research (Lulle and King 2016a).

Concerns and fears

If we are to examine how participants keep themselves active and free from isolation, then we must also examine if and how they express feelings of isolation and fear as they go through the ageing process. This more negative dimension of well-being allows us to understand the 'down' side of ageing in the UK. One participant talked about the challenges in maintaining friendships, which is common in today's modern,

everything could suddenly change was somewhat mirrored by another participant, Lana. She talked about her dislike for people questioning her status in the UK. She was unhappy when people asked her if she was a 'foreigner'.

Family and grandchildren

But what I want to say, I love my children but grandchildren are something special. This is really special. I can't explain – Petar, 57.

Another dimension of well-being is the relationship with children and grandchildren. Participants described how spending time with and looking after grandchildren was an important factor in supporting their well-being. Extended family members such as aunts, uncles and cousins were also important people to spend time with. Participants gave a strong sense of a Bosnian family 'unit' in the UK – one that is close and which helps each other out.

The majority of participants spent a great deal of time looking after their grandchildren and helping with tasks such as picking them up from school, cooking meals and generally caring for them whilst parents were at work. It was evident that this role brought about the strongest feelings of happiness and well-being. Ana said, 'I'm the happiest when they (friends) come and when my children come'. Petar described how being with his grandchildren made him feel better: 'we (my wife and I) forget everything. We feel much better. It's the best medication – grandchildren'. Lana said that she spends every day with her grandchildren and described how, for some of her British colleagues, this was seen as unusual. She said 'my colleagues think I am mad doing things with the kids, but I want to do this, that is my opinion. My mother-in-law did it for me too'.

Here we observe a particular social norm: older people enjoying the role of care-giver. Interestingly, in the Bosnian tradition, it is common for children to support their elderly parents financially in later life (Huttunen 2010). In addition, in some cases, state welfare agencies would refer older people to their children in order that they fulfil their responsibility. This was widely accepted.

Physical well-being: healthcare

One of the most important dimensions of well-being amongst older people in general is healthcare. Healthcare and personal health were considered extremely important for all research participants. Overall, participants were very happy with the level of healthcare they received in the UK and felt that they were treated fairly and equally by medical professionals. Some participants expressed a few issues, such as the difficulty in getting an appointment and frustrations with certain GPs whom they felt were not as good as others, but overall there was a great sense of satisfaction with the level of service provided in the UK. There was no mention

Comparison of ageing in the UK with Bosnia

All research participants agreed that the situation for older people in Bosnia was precarious. They described how older people in Bosnia were 'not secure' compared to older people in the UK. As they stated, this was due to the country's lack of a systematic social security policy meaning that the elderly have to pay for everything and therefore healthcare comes at a cost. Participants mentioned more than once that there is no state support or pension for older people above 60 years old living in Bosnia. The poor socio-economic situation facing Bosnia was very much an issue that participants felt some sadness about. According to David, some families remain close and support each other, however there is also poverty and neglect towards some older people. This is not widespread but does exist. He said: 'There are a lot of people who won't, you know, go to visit their old mother, they won't send her money, they won't help their own mother'. Interestingly, David also mentioned that he would feel 'ungrateful' if he was not happy with his life in the UK. We can observe here that a comparison is being made, and that David feels decidedly 'better off' than older people back in Bosnia. Wright (2012) also argues the case that migrants can reconstruct negative feelings into positive ones by comparing them with those in the country of origin, and thereby contribute to the feeling of 'living well'.

As previously mentioned, in traditional Bosnian culture the youngest son of the family looks after the ageing parents. However, participants agreed that this was changing now, especially since the war. For example, Petar said: 'That was the culture, probably the culture but now in newest time in Bosnia as well it's losing this system. Everybody going to separated'.

For Lana, however, she observed differently and said that English families are not as close as Bosnians. According to her, the bond between Bosnian grandparents and children is still very tight.

Summary

From the evidence above we can conclude that the main priorities for the well-being of participants were healthcare and being with family and grandchildren. These priorities supported a greater sense of well-being and brought much happiness to participants. Wright argues that the literature on international migration has tended to focus on 'material deficits or

Conclusion

This paper has sought to understand the dynamic between being a refugee and the ageing process. The findings from the interviews with older Bosnian refugees in the UK reveal that the ‘forced migration and ageing interaction’ exists and to a certain extent does conform to some of the debates already consistent with migration studies. For example, the participants demonstrated that they challenge traditional assumptions of ageing and do not conform to the stereotype of ‘poor pensioner’ (Lulle and King 2016b). Participants showed clear signs of independence and being active. Social activities and relationships with family and grandchildren were strong and healthcare was a priority need. Indeed, good healthcare, good health and being with family promoted the greatest feelings of ‘well-being’ amongst participants. In addition, the findings reveal that refugees do maintain links with the homeland, as argued by Al Ali et al. (2016a). Participants evidenced ‘enabling citizenship’ (Porobić 2017) which allowed them to move back and forth between the UK and Bosnia. Indeed, the participants were highly ‘transnational’ and engaged in certain socio-economic processes taking place in Bosnia.

Participants felt overall very happy with their lives in the UK. The majority felt better off in the UK than in Bosnia, yet some felt a strong sense of ‘nostalgia’ and desire to be back in the country of origin. All participants spent some time in Bosnia each year visiting friends and family and this desire to keep ‘one foot in the country’ was very important, especially as it enabled them to immerse their children and grandchildren in their ‘culture’.

Whilst some of the findings might resonate with existing literature on studies of ageing and migration, it must be argued that some findings strengthen this paper’s call for further research. For example, older refugees demonstrated that they were engaged in non-remunerated work such as caring for grandchildren on a daily basis. This paper argues that older people must be viewed as ‘valued citizens’ given that they contribute to the economy. Also, participants alluded to the challenges of having poor English language skills as well as mental health issues. Increased awareness for policy-makers in ageing and refugee fora is needed to address these issues and support older people better.

Implicit in studies of ageing migrants is the notion that ‘well-being’ is both ‘subjective’ and ‘functional’ (Wright 2012). However, Wright pays insufficient attention to transnationalism as an important element of well-being. Indeed, the participants valued their connection to home so much that it gave them an enormous sense of happiness. One way to describe the participant’s interaction between the dimensions of well-being, transnationalism and rights/citizenship is in Figure 1.

In this pyramid diagram, we see how rights and citizenship form the foundation of the participants’ happiness. Having access to ‘enabling citizenship’, safety and security, a British passport and human rights such as equality and respect allows participants to engage in transnational activities with Bosnia. This in turn provides a great sense of well-being because it enables them to enjoy time with family and friends in their country of origin. Ultimately, both transnational activities and rights/citizenship contribute to an overarching sense of ‘living well’.

Amnesty International (2009) Bosnia & Herzegovina: Whose justice? The women of Bosnia
and

