NARRATIVES OF RESISTANCE TOWARDS STIGMATISED REFUGEE IDENTITIES IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The tendency to frame refugees as problems and threats has often fuelled negative attitudes among residents of the host countries towards refugees. This can contribute to overall hostile dominant discourses surrounding asylum seekers and refugees. Guided by narrative analysis, this article examines how refugees living in Malaysia cope with stigma through their personal narratives of the refugee experience. The topic is particularly relevant in the Malaysian context due to an increase in recent years in the visibility and the numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia, of whom about 182,780 are registered but have no legal status, leading to barriers to protection rights and assistance during their displacement. The narratives presented here provide some description of how refugees in Malaysia experience stigma and the ways in which they have navigated hostile situations. More importantly, the narratives display awareness of the stigmatised identities imposed on refugees and illustrate the range of narrative strategies available to refugees to resist and offer alternative ways of being. These strategies include blaming or rejecting the discrimination, appropriating the Malaysian identity, assuming the good citizen identity, and passing for another person.

Keywords: Refugee, stigma, identity, narrative analysis, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The tendency to frame refugees as a problem and a threat rather than as a benefit to the host country may fuel negative attitudes among residents of the host countries and can contribute to overall hostile dominant discourses surrounding asylum seekers and refugees (Mohd Don and Lee 2014; Berry et al. 2016; Vas Dev 2009). Researchers have reported that the "refugee" label is oftentimes viewed negatively in hosting communities as being economic burdens and threats to societal values (Gupte and Mehta 2007; Haines and Rosenblum 2010; Schweitzer et al. 2005; Yeoh 2013). Refugees in Malaysia have reported often feeling "looked down on", "disrespected" and viewed with suspicion by Malaysian citizens based mostly on differences in their ethnicity, religion and legal status (Allerton 2018; Hoffstaedter 2014; Zahiid 2016; The Star 2015). These hostile and unwelcoming attitudes by residents towards asylum seekers and refugees living in host countries, albeit transit or third countries, contribute to the general stigmatisation of the asylum communities, often affecting their physical, mental and emotional well-being (Quinn 2014). For example, the United Nations recently organised a workshop to train media practitioners on how to use more inclusive reporting and stigma-free language, which was complemented by a media toolkit (United Nations 2021). The workshop and toolkit were a response to the deteriorating public perception of migrants and refugees in Malaysia, which further escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Especially in the early days of the pandemic, migrants and refugees were subjected to verbal or physical assault and social or institutional exclusion (United Nations 2021). Experiences of stigmatisation and prejudicial attitudes faced by minority ethnic and migrant communities often result in creating barriers for these communities to properly seek assistance and medical treatment to the detriment of their physical and mental health (Gary 2005). Even in places or situations where refugees and migrants are allowed to live and work freely, they face significant obstacles due to double stigmatisation based on ethnicity and migration status. Hoffstaedter (2014) reported that African refugees in Malaysia faced more difficulties in obtaining support and employment opportunities than other refugees of Asian origins due to their ethnicity. In Australia, resettled Sudanese refugees were often the target of blame and exclusion in public discourse for their refusal to integrate into the "Australian way of life" largely due to biological and ethnic differences (Nolan et al. 2016). Another example of double stigmatisation is Lamb and Hoffstaedter's (2020) study amongst older Chin refugees in Malaysia, who faced challenges due to their refugee status and advanced age.

Studies from the U.K. have shown that refugees internalised the hostility found in public discourses and attributed their mental and psychological problems to problems they faced living in the U.K. (Hynes 2009; Leudar et al. 2008). Most times, the stigma refugees face have had as much to do with their nationality and ethnicity as with their refugee status. For instance, Ludwig (2016) reported that Liberian refugees resettled in the U.S. actively tried to shed their refugee identity because it caused them problems during integration into the local community, while Kumsa (2006) reported that Orome refugees in Canada refused the "refugee" label because of the stigma of being considered uneducated and ignorant. The asylum seekers and refugees living in Wales reported employing the strategy of downplaying racist encounters with the locals to avoid appearing overly critical of the host country (Parker 2018). In such situations, refugees behaved in this manner because the "refugee" identity is viewed as a "spoiled identity", a stigma that is undesirable (Iredale et al. 1997; Jupp 1994; Summerfield 1999). Stigma, therefore, is a relevant issue that affects many refugees and forms the focus of this paper.

THE REPRESENTATION OF ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES IN MALAYSIA

In 2013, Malaysia topped the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) list of global asylum seeker arrivals with 53,600 new claims for the year (UNHCR 2014). As of October 2022, Malaysia hosts about 182,780 registered asylum seekers and refugees, not including an estimated 200,000–300,000 more unregistered displaced people (UNHCR Malaysia n.d.). Yet the Malaysian government has not ratified the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees 1951 and does not legally recognise refugees. Only those with valid work permits are recognised as legal migrants. From 2015, an estimated 2.1 million other migrants, including asylum seekers and refugees, have been considered illegal, and are treated and regulated accordingly. The Immigration Act 1959/1963, Act 153 defines an "illegal immigrant" as anyone who either enters or leaves Malaysia through irregular means, remains in Malaysia without official permission, overstays their visa/permit, or does not abide by the terms of their visa/permit. Although the government has in recent years made special allowances for a small number to work (Malay Mail 2016), no integration or resettlement options are available for them. The resettlement rate of refugees from Malaysia to third countries is extremely low, usually below 10% (The Star 2013) and as low as 2% as reported by

the UNHCR for the year 2020 (Nungsari et al. 2020). This has resulted in an ever-increasing asylum population (Yunus 2016).

Lee's (2019) analysis of the main multilateral ASEAN documentation revealed a significant lack of references to refugees or forced migration and concludes that forced migration is not a priority in the Southeast Asian region moving forward into its ASEAN Community Vision 2025 plan. This lack of official policies and legislation to properly regulate and manage asylum seekers and refugees has resulted in reactionary and inconsistent practices on the part of the Southeast Asian governments such as Malaysia, including arresting, detaining and deporting asylum seekers and refugees, with little consistency regarding the acknowledgement of their status (The Equal Rights Trust and Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies 2014; FIDH-SUARAM 2008; Human Rights Watch n.d.). Due to this "policy vacuum" (Vas Dev 2009), public statements made in the media by the UNHCR and senior government officials have become one of the main sources for understanding the Malaysian government's attitude towards asylum seekers and refugees (Hoffstaedter 2017). Media representations of refugees and asylum seekers have in the past used negative terms such as "illegal immigrants", "threats", "problems" and "burdens" on the country (Mohd Don and Lee 2014). They are categorised by *fiat* as "illegal immigrants", a consequence of the repeated assertion that Malaysia does not recognise refugees. Vas Dev (2009) found in his comparative study of Australian and Malaysian government discourses that both governments brought asylum seekers into the public realm by focusing on their illegality as a threat to national identity and therefore undeserving of citizenship or resettlement. Their representation as threatening, deviant and problematic leads to a policy that is exclusionary in nature and legitimises Malaysia's intention to keep asylum seekers and refugees out of the country. Another dominant discourse found in immigration discourses is the construction of asylum seekers and refugees around the notion of deviancy as opposed to normality, which legitimises more exclusionary policies towards this deviant population (Pickering 2001). Indeed, this representation of refugees as threatening and problematic reflects wider exclusionary media and political discourses found in Western countries (Bailey and Harindranath 2005; Charteris-Black 2006; Kampmark 2006; Leach 2003; Lynn and Lea 2003; Nordberg 2004; Sales 2002).

Research on the representation of asylum seekers and refugees in public discourse clearly indicate a general hostility to forced migrants, so research that features the voices of forced migrants themselves (albeit still only a small number) become valuable resources for better understanding

their experiences. The anxiety and tension that surrounds their "illegal" designation in Malaysia severely threatens the identities and sense of security of refugees as local residents become empowered to view them as criminals and "illegals" (Hoffstaedter and Lamb 2021). Research on second generation refugee youth in Malaysia also highlight the complex navigation between refugee and "Malaysian" identities (Lee 2020; Lee and Mohd Don 2021).

This paper, therefore, discusses how refugees respond to these hostile discourses and their stigmatised identity as the Other by analysing how these are taken up in their own narratives.

STIGMA AND NARRATIVE

Goffman (1963) describes stigma as the reduction of a person or the Other from "whole and usual" to a "tainted discounted one" that is present in social interactions as part of a way of safeguarding a sense of normality. This process of othering or stigmatisation of those considered to be social deviants through stereotyping and prejudicial attitudes often lead to dehumanising treatment on a societal level and many challenges to an individual's mental health (Goffman 1961). Stigma, at its core, relates to the concept of categorisation. This basic social process of grouping individuals into categories (Jenkins 2000) is integral for societies and institutions to function. What categorisation does is to emphasise certain qualities in individuals or groups of people and create boundaries around who are included into in- and out-groups. Building on Goffman's work, Link and Phelan (2001) identify four aspects crucial to the understanding of stigma: identifying differences, stereotyping, separating "us" from "them" and discrimination and rejection. Major and O'Brien (2005) describe how stigma affects three main outcomes for an individual's identity: self-esteem, academic achievement and health. Taking the view that identities are subjectivities available to individuals in the form of self-narratives (Giddens 1991) and internal soliloquies (Athens 1994), individuals will strive to work through or overcome stigmatised identities to maintain relatively coherent and stable conceptions of Self. Stigmatised identities can thus be understood as culturally dominant categorisations (Sacks 1995) built on largely negative characteristics (Juhila 2004). These identities may be embraced, resisted, appropriated, modified and adapted by those being confronted by stigma of any kind (Toyoki and Brown 2014). Extensive work from social psychology has contributed to our understanding on how stigmatised individuals respond to stigma. Shih (2004) identifies three psychological processes that stigmatised

individuals utilise to resist the negative effects of stigma: compensation by highlighting other non-stigmatising qualities, selective social comparison with others to protect their own self-worth and switching between multiple identities. Major and O'Brien (2005) identify other coping strategies: blaming the discrimination (rather than the Self), disengaging or devaluing domains that are the sources of negative stereotyping, and group identification with the stigmatised group.

Bos et al. (2013) emphasise the value of in-depth qualitative research that increases our understanding of stigma and how it is perpetuated in society, while Rance et al. (2017) argued that the narrative approach is best suited to capturing the deeper nuances and complexities of storytelling by those who have to cope with social hostility and stigma. Stories are not only "a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life, they are the means by which identities are fashioned" (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992: 1). Bruner (1990) identified storytelling as the primary way people organise their experiences and knowledge about the social world. Consequently, the strength of narrative is its ability to enable the narrator to emotionally engage with others and allow them to enter the narrator's perspective (Riessman 2008). In the case of this study, exploring stigma narratively allows us to understand how narratives allow individuals to reassemble their lifeworld and therapeutically make sense of the disruptions or threats to their identity. Narratives usually consist of: 1) a single or multiple stories or events; 2) the recounting of experiences through imagery, reactions, feelings and ascribed meanings; and 3) semiotic or linguistic features in the telling (Cortazzi 2001). Attention is paid to details involving the plot, story world characters, and the narrator's evaluation. Furthermore, in narratives elicited via interviews, researchers also have to consider contextual elements and the presence of other interlocutors, often the researcher/interviewer, in terms of how it affects the telling of a narrative or story.

Alternative or *counter narratives* need to be considered alongside the concept of dominant or *master narratives* (Lyotard 1984), which refers to either culturally-accepted frames that guide how narrators position themselves within their stories in relation to dominant or meta narratives, which are pre-existing "sociocultural forms of interpretation" that engulf all of life (Bamberg 2004: 360). The lack of any alternatives to meta narratives surrounding refugees only serve to reinforce their hegemonic influence and cancel out discourses that exist in informal and ordinary practices (Fresia 2014). Against this narrative backdrop, narrators are confronted by the choice of consciously subjecting themselves to these narratives, subverting them in

their everyday interactions or even crafting some kind of middle ground or "third space" (Smith 2008) for themselves.

DATA AND METHOD

As part of the second phase in research on refugee representation in Malaysia, refugees living in the wider Kuala Lumpur area were recruited between August 2013 and February 2015 during the first author's visits to Myanmar, Somali and Middle Eastern refugee communities with a refugee representative, who was himself a refugee and a part of an ethnic community from Myanmar. Participants recommended by community leaders were invited to voluntarily participate after being fully briefed on the details of the study. The project received ethical clearance from the university ethics committee (UM.TNC2/ UMREC – 369) and informed consent was collected during the introduction meeting with each participant. They were also reminded during the interview of their right to refuse to answer or withdraw from the project at any time. In total, 20 Myanmar and Somali participants, 10 males and 10 females, ages between 18 and 70, agreed to be interviewed. They were first asked about their journey to Malaysia and experiences relating to living in Malaysia as refugees using "grand tour" questions (Spradley 1979). They were then invited to respond to representations of refugees frequently found in Malaysian media discourses, based on the discourse analysis findings from first phase of the research study. The questions were kept open and flexible to enable longer turns during the interactions, so that storytelling was encouraged (Mishler 1986). The interviews lasted approximately two hours and were mostly conducted in English or Malay, or through an interpreter if they could not speak either language, and interviews were then transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Informed by an interpretive narrative approach, the narratives were analysed first by employing open coding and then selected coding to identify references to stigma and similarities and/or differences between the different narratives. The narratives here, considered "accounts" (De Fina 2009), emerged as part of responses during the interviews, in which the participants recounted past experiences, thoughts and feelings in order to answer the interviewer's questions. The interpretive narrative approach views people as storytellers in their own right and the stories themselves as a means of communicating a Self that is becoming and incomplete, rather than a fixed sense of Self (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008; Koenig Kellas 2015). Two important principles guide the data analysis. First, to view narratives as

intact and as whole (Riessman 2008), instead of merely extracting excerpts to fit specific themes. Second, to privilege the direct quotes and statements of the participants to allow them to directly represent themselves or self-represent. As such, the narrative account of each respondent was assigned a "type" or in this case, a perspective towards their stigmatisation. Because the interviews were structured along a similar line of questioning, the accounts produced by the participants were largely centred around similar topics, e.g., arriving in Malaysia, finding and settling into accommodation, finding community and social networks, work, etc. Thus, these accounts could be easily compared and analysed to look for similarities and/or differences. The direct confrontation with stigmatising events and the participants' reaction to them could then be identified across all accounts. Narrative analysis of personal experience is particularly relevant for the study of disruptive life events and major identity disruption, which is the case with displaced people like refugees and asylum seekers.

While stigma was not an initial focus of the study, evidence of it emerged in a number of participants' narratives when their interviews were analysed. The specific ways in which the participants responded to stigma are presented here through the narratives of seven participants. They were all UNHCR-registered refugees, who had been living in Malaysia for at least three years, and therefore had some experience living amongst Malaysians. All of them lived in Klang Valley, and the names used here are pseudonyms. Somali refugee, Farta (30 years old), was a male teacher at a Somali refugee school, Hsu (35) was the principal at a Chin refugee school and May (70) was also a teacher at two Burmese refugee schools. Francis (34) and Khai Pu (33) worked as refugee representatives for a non-governmental organisation but were also part of the Myanmar refugee community themselves. The final two participants, John and Prince, both 18, were secondary school students born in Malaysia to Myanmar refugee parents.

ANALYSIS

Four types of narratives were identified with regards to stories on stigma: 1) blaming or rejecting the discrimination; 2) we are like Malaysians; 3) the good citizen; and 4) passing for another person. The examples presented below were selected for illustrative purposes.

Blaming or Rejecting the Discrimination

As mentioned, narratives about refugees in Malaysia are dominated by two related master narratives that centre around their illegality and deviancy. Hsu and Farta talk about being aware of the stigma of being "illegal". They describe being confronted with what Goffman (1963) referred to as "tribal stigma", which confers stigma based on characteristics such as religion, race, or nationality, as well as stigma based on physical attributes. Hsu, a 35-year-old from Myanmar, explained how Malaysians "looked down" on refugees because of their unpleasant odour, encounters that affect the self-esteem of refugees:

> So, (when) some my people are working, (their) uniform has very bad smell. (Malaysian people think) that why you before taking a bath, you go on the bus like that? (But) our people need to work. We have no our own car, NOT under the office, not under the air-con. So, our people are working at construction, under the sun. After that, they go back home. (Hsu, Myanmar)

Hsu presented a chronicle (De Fina 2003) of the collective refugee community in Malaysia here, as seen through the use of "my people" and the plural pronoun "we". Chronicles are shared narratives of group, often told to construct and maintain a specific collective identity. Two voices were brought in here, the collective refugee and Malaysian people, to establish two opposing perspectives. On the one hand, he voiced what he thought Malaysians were thinking when they encountered the refugees' "bad smell" on the bus. The collective refugee voice is brought in to challenge this stereotype through explanations of the circumstances in which refugees must live and the nature of the work refugees have to take up that may cause this unpleasant odour. He also discussed experiencing stigma due to the refugees' perceived low economic status by the local people:

> Sometimes refugees are go into the shopping also, if the high price shopping, we can go in. So, the boss, the owner also don't care. So, it means (the owners) look down as they (refugees) have no money, cannot buy, because of that the boss also not welcome too much. (Hsu, Myanmar)

Here, Hsu assumes a God perspective when describing the shop owners' behaviour and thought process as means of explaining why the discrimination exists. In other words, the refugees' low economic status becomes the reason

for the cold treatment from shop owners. Hsu was an example of refugees in the larger study, who were acutely aware of their official "illegal" status, not only because this is repeatedly expressed publicly by the government but also because they cannot gain access to what Nyers defines of citizenship as "modern claims to liberty, equality, rights, autonomy, self-determination, individualism, and human agency" (2004: 203), including money. This includes access to jobs as described by 30-year-old Farta from Somalia, who argues that he is refused job opportunities due to his refugee status:

> Staying here somehow is not…good. Yea, why? Because for me, I have a degree and what I'm doing now must have a line (indicates a diagonal line going upwards with his hand). You see? I'd like it to just to get a job here. No one is not interested. So, I have problem of working here because I don't have any access to the job. (Farta, Somalia)

Farta's narrative illustrates the opposing views on the value and self-worth of refugees by local employers and refugees themselves. Describing himself as a degree-holder, he sets up the expectation of social and economic mobility for himself due to his educational status. This is emphasised by the imaginary upward "line" he draws with his hand, which is a metaphor for upward mobility. Yet, his efforts are met with disinterested due to his refugee status, thus, contradicting the expectations he had for himself and hindering his expected upward mobility. Farta's concerns are real and valid as prolonged time spent as a refugee has been reported to affect a refugee's employment chances and social mobility (Codell et al. 2011). The use of metaphors here is also significant as an important tool in refugees accounts that enables them to define and organise their experiences (Fuertes 2010) as it is a significant means of conveying a depth of emotion that exceeds the "ordinary capabilities of language" (Hartman 1982).

One way refugees rejected the discrimination they faced was by differentiating themselves from the stigmatised identity of the "illegal immigrant" (in the eyes of the state), who enter Malaysia irregularly to find work. Khai Pu, a 33-year-old from Myanmar, was one of several participants who emphasised the difference between refugees and illegal immigrants:

> …those who are from like a neighbouring country they come here with the… overstay. They overstay and stay. They want to continue staying here without a passport or without the permit. It is their decision that they stay here. But then as refugee, we have no decision. We are being

put into that situation so it is totally different. That's why sometimes if for those who are illegal they can be legalised, they can go back. But refugee cannot be legalised. We stay also don't have passport, we don't have IC, nothing. (Khai Pu, Myanmar)

Khai Pu had been living in Malaysia for four years at the time of the interview and was working for a local NGO, which had an ongoing working relationship with both the UNHCR and the government, as a liaison for the refugee communities. He frequently drew on the narrative of the legality of refugees, which was in line with his organisation's and the UNHCR's values and principles. The "illegal", who actively decides to "overstay", was directly compared here with refugees, who cannot decide for themselves. He also claimed that illegals could be legalised, whereas refugees could not and do not even possess legal documentation. Shih (2004) noted that the comparison of the Self with another group with more apparent negative qualities or a lower status was a compensation strategy used by some individuals to mitigate stigma and this response can also be found amongst migrant groups (Moroșanu and Fox 2013).

One narrative template (Wertsch 2002) or canonical form (Bruner 2004) that has been appropriated by refugee aid organisations and many refugees, including Khai Pu, depicts refugees as powerless and helpless victims (Clark-Kazak 2009; Johnson 2011; Marlowe 2010; Musarò 2011; Pupavac 2008; Rajaram 2002), which Malkki (1996: 1) critiqued depoliticised and historicised refugees as a tragic "sea of humanity". Stein (1981) argued that this "helplessness" has become a pre-requisite for any kind of humanitarian aid in a cyclic manner, refugees are helped because they are helpless, but they must also exhibit helplessness. The problem with this view is its focus on the inherent deviancy or abnormal character of the refugees' position (Fresia 2014).

We are Like Malaysians

John, an 18-year-old born in Malaysia to Burmese refugee parents from Myanmar, responded to potentially stigmatising situations by drawing on his outward appearance, knowledge of local cultures and linguistic abilities. This allowed him to avoid being identified as a refugee, a stigmatised identity. His narratives were filled with references and examples of how he was unlike other Myanmar refugees, ironically reinforcing the stigma placed on refugees. For him, it was important to emphasise his place of birth:

> If someone asked me where I'm from, I would say I was born in Malaysia… my parents are Myanmar. I wouldn't say (I'm from Myanmar), yes. 'Cause… it would give them a complete different idea if I say (that). I will always emphasise I was born in Malaysia. Yea, that Malaysia part I would really emphasise because it would give them the wrong idea, I mean if you say, "I'm from Myanmar", then they'll be like, "Ohh… so, do you… (laughs) Do you know *nasi lemak*, do you know *teh tarik*". Like, "Yes, I know this stuff you know". (John, Myanmar)

This narrative is presented as a hypothetical story, John emphasised the need to distinguish first-generation refugees like his parents from second-generation refugees like himself, who having been born in Malaysia, were not foreigners. The conjunction "cause" here provided a causal link to a scenario John wanted to avoid, namely the "wrong idea" that he was from Myanmar. He then illustrated his point by describing a common reaction Malaysians had, whenever they assumed he was from Myanmar. He would be asked about local food ("nasi lemak") and beverage ("teh tarik") as if he were a foreigner, but he asserted that he definitely knew "this stuff". John also went further by claiming that he was even more Malaysian than some Malaysians:

> In FACT, I think I'm more Malaysian than some people in my school. Like for example, in terms of speaking Malay right, my class particularly, there's this one guy who has been to international (school) his whole life. His whole life just been in Suasana[1] for his whole life… so, when he speaks Malay right… he speaks as if it was written. Like, (speaking slowly) *"Saya… mau… beli….* (laughs) *goreng pisang"* (I want to buy banana fritters). I would say I'm better than him in Malay definitely. (John, Myanmar)

John contrasted himself with "this one guy", a Malaysian, who had been attending a private school in Malaysia his whole life and imitated this student's poor command of the official language, Malay. Laughing at the prospect of a Malaysian, who spoke Malay badly, he asserted by comparison that his Malay was much better, implying that "Malaysianness" could be defined by proficiency in Malay, something that John used to claim the Malaysian identity as his own. In both examples, John differentiated himself from other identities, namely refugee from Myanmar and foreigner, as a means to appropriate stigmatised identities that may be externally imposed on him. He is not denying that he is a refugee or a foreigner, but he does not align with the stigmatised versions of those identities.

John's mother, 70-year-old May from Myanmar, had been living in Malaysia for 23 years at the time of the interview and no longer regarded herself as a Burmese or an outsider due to the duration of her residence in Malaysia and her successful integration into the local neighbourhood:

> Now Malaysia is like my country because compared to Myanmar people, I know many Malaysian people. Because my clothes are like the Malays'. Even food is *nasi lemak* (a coconut rice dish), spicy fried fish, I already know how to eat Malay food like fried noodles and so on, I know. Sometimes I forget how Myanmar food tastes like. What's more, I know Eid al-Fitr, I don't know my own festival. Forget already. (May, Myanmar)

Here, May clearly compares "Myanmar people" to "Malaysian people"/"Malays", identifying with latter group based on outward appearance and cultural practices. Just as John attributed much of his identity to his place of birth, May was leaving behind her place of origin and claiming belonging to her place of residence by assimilating into Malaysian society and "forgetting" her past life.

John and May were examples of how their "invisibility" in a host society facilitated their positive assimilation into the local community (Colic-Peisker 2005; Colic-Peisker and Walker 2003). They presented an alternative type of refugee, Malaysian and in John's case, Malaysian-born, which allowed them to align with a new in-group and resist the label of being an outsider (Žmegač 2005). This refugee is set apart through cultural practices, linguistic abilities, outward appearance and their ease in moving between different social networks. John used his proficiency of Malaysian culture to strategically assert his Malaysianness, while May found it easy to assimilate into the local community, emphasising the common ground she shared with Malaysians and her neighbours. Place identity (Proshansky et al. 1983) or community-based identity (Hummon 1992) is predicated on continuity, distinctiveness, self-esteem and self-efficacy, and is an important component in establishing a sense of belonging. Massey (1995) argued that belonging to a place provided the individual with a source of stability and an unproblematic identity. Furthermore, she asserted that identity to a place for an individual is not tied to its acknowledged history but rather to a combination of factors at a particular point in time, which are of significance to the individual. John also equated his sense of belonging and national identity with place of birth instead of citizenship. This link between place attachment and increased levels of integration was also noted by Spicer (2008) in his study among asylum seeker children in the U.K.

John and May's sense of place and identity differed from Hoffstaedter's (2014) study on the liminal or in-between experience of Myanmar refugees in Malaysia. Instead of viewing their life as being lived in a "liminal non-place" (Turner 1967) that goes nowhere, John and May positioned themselves in their narratives as actively making Malaysia their home, whether it be through cultural practices, language choice, social networks or place identity. Their experiences also differed from the findings from Hoffstaedter's study in that they did not position themselves as excluded or marginalised by the local people. Instead, John and May positioned themselves as having genuine and warm relationships with different social groups in Malaysia. Ultimately, belonging is tied to emotional attachment to that which ties a person to the feeling of being at home (Yuval-Davis 2016).

The Good Citizen

Some participants resisted the stereotypes associated with refugees in Malaysia by highlighting the positive qualities that present them as responsible members of society. Despite not having any official status that could afford them access to basic services and infrastructures, some participants drew on practices that reflected "good citizenship" or an awareness of the moral dimension. Common features of good citizenship include public participation (often in the democratic process), acceptance of the authority of the state, and social citizenship (Dalton 2016). In refugee narratives, the positioning as a good citizen through employment, self-enhancement, volunteering and helping others is a means by which refugees can resist hostility and negative representations (Azis 2014; Yap et al. 2011). This behaviour has been identified in social psychology as compensation, in which the focus is on developing skills and personal qualities that enable them overcome disadvantages associated with the stigma (Shih 2004; Miller and Major 2000). Such efforts are an attempt to present the Self as a moral and essentially "good" being, worthy of respect and fair treatment. May, who was formerly a headmistress in Yangon, relates that this is a role she continually assumes, not only among refugees as she is the headmistress of a Burmese refugee school but also among Malaysians:

> Malay school children, like form one, standard two, standard three, standard six like that…If they don't understand English, I will give tuition. Free tuition. Yea, their (Malay people) kids. So, Malay kids, I also already friendly (with them). So, I love them. (May, Myanmar)

For May, this desire to help the local children was not only one borne of need but also of her love for them. In her case, this love extended beyond mere emotions but to her attachment to Malaysia and sense of belonging in the local community.

Francis, a 34-year-old from Myanmar established himself within his narratives by foregrounding his leadership skills and concern for the rights of refugees, contradicting the depiction of refugees as violent and threatening. He related events that occurred during a riot at the Lenggeng detention centre in 2008 (Singh 2008):

> So, I was one of them. So, that night (a) Pakistan guy was badly beaten because he was smoking. So, everybody not happy. He even cannot walk. So, everybody's thinking about doing something. So, they ask me to represent the whole Myanmar people and then I was one of the victims last night. So, I stand so I talk to the immigration officer. "We are not happy what you did, what your people did yesterday, last night, so we want to see the Myanmar embassy or the UNHCR to come and solve this problem". One of the Indonesian guy ask that the top immigration officer to come and solve this problem because you treat us like animals. We ask them to come before 12 o'clock but nobody show up. (Francis, Myanmar)

In the narrative, Francis moved from being a part of the collective "we" to being chosen to speak on behalf of the rest of the detainees and his agency was reflected in the use of verbal phrases that subscribed authority to his words, e.g., "we are not happy", "we want to see", and "we ask them to come". The camp authorities were positioned as dehumanising the detainees, seen through the ventriloquation (Bakhtin 1981) of the Indonesian detainee, who used the metaphor "animals". Ventriloquation is a strategic narrative resource that narrators can use to communicate intent by speaking as another character. The effect of this voicing is reinforcing Francis' representation of the camp authorities by presenting another person's opinion. Francis' narrative then goes on to describe how it was only after the authorities ignored their repeated requests for mediation that the upset detainees started rioting.

Passing for Another Person

The final type of narrative account that addressed stigma was avoiding stigma by passing for a less threatening person or taking up multiple identities. Prince began this hypothetical narrative that was based on prior experiences when asked if he ever disclosed his refugee identity to anyone:

> I feel isolated when I reveal my true self, my true identity to others to say, when I say that I'm a Rohingya and they start to think like, "Rohingyas? You know, these Rohingyas are this and that". When I go to a cab, they'll start saying, "You know, these Burmese…", when I was like coming back from Selayang (an area in Kuala Lumpur), "You know these Burmese people, these Rohingyas are troublesome people". (Prince, Myanmar)

The connection between Burmese and Rohingya refugees and stigma was clearly established in Prince's account of his experiences with the local cab drivers. This alludes to the established hostility towards Rohingyas generally in Malaysia but particularly in certain areas in Kuala Lumpur. His reaction to being labelled with the stigmatised Rohingya or Burmese identity was to assume different and less threatening identities, such as being Punjabi, Malay or Indian:

> So, whenever you are in Selayang and you are like taking the cab, they will assume that you are a Rohingya or assume that you are Burmese. So, when they ask me, "Are you Rohingya? Are you Burmese?", then I will say, "No, no, no". Sometimes I say I'm Indian, sometimes I say I'm Punjabi, sometimes I say I'm Malay. So, whenever when, sometimes I ask them to guess then they guess that I am Malay. "Yeah, yeah, absolutely right". And I say, "Yeah, I'm Malay". And I, I just like make a fake identity of myself. (Prince, Myanmar)

He describes not being upfront from the start of his interaction with the cab driver, giving the driver a say in determining this identity. Replaying the dialogue, Prince shows how he is able to conceal his Rohingya identity as becoming someone else enabled him to resist being identified within what he perceived to be the dominant narrative amongst the local community that refugees were "troublesome" people and gained acceptance. Apart from avoiding potentially hostile situations, Prince took particular pride in his multilingualism and ability to blend in:

> For me personally, I have Sri Lankan friends, I have Italian friends since I'm here. I have Malay, Indian, Chinese – I have all. And they don't discriminate me. I mean they don't say, "Prince, your colour is different. Prince, you're Rohingya, you're different. You cannot be our friend". And when I go out also, I'm a very sociable person so, when I go out, I can make friends easily. I can speak in their language. I just camouflage with them. (Prince, Myanmar)

What "camouflaging" with people from different cultures afforded Prince was the chance to be treated like a normal person, who did not face discrimination. Much like John, Prince's social and linguistic abilities helped him gain an insider status in a plethora of social groups and contested the narratives that assert that refugees only bring social problems. Prince foregrounded his ability to take up multiple ethnic identities to mitigate the negative effects of the stigmatised refugee and Rohingya identity. Gubrium and Holstein (2001) have noted that it is common for people to take up more socially recognisable albeit less accurate identities to align themselves with the expectations of others. Stigmatised identities are often viewed as problematic and identifying with such identities implies being problematic to oneself. Those confronted with difficult and stigmatised identities often differentiate themselves from others to avoid being identified with the negative characteristics (Juhila 2004; Colic-Peisker 2005). Their attempts to take up other less problematic identities or conceal their refugee identities enabled them to resist being characterised as problematic by those around them.

Prince's attempts to distance himself away from the "troublesome" and criminalised Rohingya identity corresponded to face saving strategies (Goffman 1955), a behaviour which was consistent with the findings in studies among Rohingya refugees living in Malaysia and refugees in Scotland (Stewart and Mulvey 2014), as well as studies on disengagement and disidentification with stigmatised identities (Bos et al. 2013; Crocker et al. 1998; Kaiser and Miller 2001; Major and O'Brien 2005). The practice of concealment or attempting to be invisible amongst migrants was also commonplace in Marconi's (2010) study among transit migrants in Istanbul and Tijuana. At times, this strategy is one borne of necessity especially in places where the label "refugee" has resulted in asylum seekers and refugees being the target of racist campaigns (Schuster and Solomos 2004).

CONCLUSION

The narratives presented here consist of accounts of refugees drawing on social as well as personal dimensions of narrative (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2011) to navigate the effects of stigma on their everyday lives. Narrators often have to balance the construction of the collective or group identities and their individually oriented identities. The former is driven by the desire to be "culture conforming" (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2011: 149) and manifests itself in the presence of dominant narratives. Yet, narrators also find

they sometimes need to resist or even violate dominant narrative expectancies so that their stories remain tellable (Bruner 1991). The narratives presented here illustrated the weaving of both these dimensions. For example, refugees like Hsu, Farta, John and Prince acknowledged the stigma that arose from dominant societal perceptions about refugees being somehow less valued or problematic compared to local Malaysians. Their responses ranged from begrudging acceptance of these perceptions with minimal narrative resistance to more evasive strategies, such as for John and Prince. For the latter, capitalising on linguistic capital is a way for migrants to minimise the stigmatising effects of certain qualities of speech that may make their "out-of-place-ness" or even foreignness visible (Carruthers 2017). As seen in the analysis, John emphasised his Malaysianness, while Prince took up other identities. Others like May and Francis presented more desirable, alternative refugee identities that involved resisting the stigmatised identities and drawing on other positive qualities. Providing alternative accounts of an incident is also a strategic resource for some refugees like Francis when they are confronted with stigma that they know challenge the accepted social order (Goffman 1963). What these endeavours have in common is an alternative narrative to the illegality and deviancy that refugees are assumed to represent.

Ultimately, the question is why are such narratives important? Dominant narratives or discourses from elite voices, such as governments and the media, have a trickle-down hegemonizing effect, whether in producing positive or negative social realities for vulnerable groups such as refugees. As an outcome of the social process of categorisation, stigma inevitably makes certain people either visible or invisible. Polzer (2008) identifies some elements of categorisation that creates (in)visibility - partiality, functionality, conflation, immutability, self-confirmation and negotiability. Taking conflation as an example, we can see the pervasive effect this has on vulnerable groups. In the case of Malaysia, refugees are often conflated into the larger "illegal immigrant" category, the preferred term used by the government (Lee 2016) along with PATI, *pendatang asing tanpa izin* (foreign immigrants without permission). *Migrant* includes various types of movements of people and can commonly be divided into *sojourners*, who do not stay anywhere permanently and *immigrants*, who enter another country with the intention of staying permanently (Matsaganis et al. 2011). I argue that the choice to use "immigrant" over "migrant" in Malaysian public discourse is strategic as it presupposes the migrant's intention to stay before their claims have been made or, in some cases, before the migrant even enters the country. The widespread use of "illegal immigrant" or PATI by government bodies and the

media is normalised in Malaysian society and has been internalised by asylum seekers and refugees (Hoffstaedter 2017; Hoffstaedter and Lamb 2021). This puts refugees in the difficult situation of not having an accurate official status but yet needing one to fully operate in society. They are often forced to accept identities or labels that would enable them to fit into existing ones and suffer the consequences of such choices. Accepting the "illegal immigrant" label implies that they risk being on the receiving end of punitive actions usually carried out by the authorities. This explains why the negotiation of (il)legality and its effects feature heavily in the narratives of refugees in Malaysia as seen here.

One obvious implication of the lack of alternative representations of refugees in public narratives is that asylum seekers and refugees will not only continue to be excluded from national policies and basic welfare, but their continued demonisation will also lead to more punitive action against them and general societal hostility. Alternative narratives will also help prevent perpetuating hostile dominant narratives and allow refugees the space to establish themselves through the narrative of normalcy, thus, facilitating better assimilation into the larger community during their prolonged displacement in Malaysia. The use of narratives also provides an insight into the way the refugees made sense of specific incidents that marginalised and excluded them, and proves a valuable and useful approach within qualitative research to study stigma and the perpetuation of stigma at the societal level (Parker and Aggleton 2003). The narratives presented here also provide a way to restore "speaking rights" to people such as refugees who are marginalised in our societies. Because of its focus on a small number of refugee narratives, this article is not attempting to generalise the experience of refugees or ignore other sociocultural factors that may impact the way these refugees respond to stigma. Rather it seeks to understand the ways in which stigma affects refugees struggling to find a sense of Self during an uncertain period of prolonged displacement on a more personal level.

A better understanding of the alternative ways of being that refugees craft for themselves, such as what it means to be (il)legal, can help social workers and counsellors involved with refugees to guide them more effectively through the internal difficulties and contradictions they may face. Alternative narratives on the (il)legality of refugees in Malaysia should also be brought more into public discourses, so that Malaysian society may, in confronting the struggles of refugees, understand the need to avoid falling into the easy trap of labelling refugees in binary ways. One such effort has been the theatrical experience through productions such as Life Sdn Bhd by The Actor's Studio and

the many productions by Parastoo Theatre (a theatre company founded by an Afghan refugee) that feature real-life stories of refugees. Research endeavours can continue to focus on finding ways of talking about "refugees" and their experiences in more empowering ways. The issue of labels, another name for categorisation, has long been a major concern in refugee studies (Bakewell 2007) but research must continue to focus on finding ways to fraction the refugee label and "de-label" refugees (Zetter 2007). As Cole (2018) argues, words such as "refugee" is insufficient to truly capture the nuances of how people experience forced migration and displacement and can accrue and lose meaning over time. This of course applies to other stigmatising labels and identities imposed on refugees. More research is needed to unpack situations such as in Malaysia, where the word "refugee" or "forced migrant" does not appear on any legislation but yet embodied refugees exist and struggle to find their place in a place that does not acknowledge them.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Interview data were collected through informed consent of respondents in accordance with procedures standard at Universiti Malaya, Malaysia.

NOTES

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[1]   The private school John attends has been anonymised.

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