

Deserving Asylum

And Becoming ‘Good’ Refugees in Madrid

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Abstract

Subject to constant and pervasive suspicion, asylum seekers in the global north often must expend great energy to assert their moral agency and be perceived as ‘good’ refugees who are not only worthy of being granted asylum but also capable of becoming ‘good’ citizens in the future. Navigating these difficult waters requires a keen awareness of what makes an individual ‘deserving’ of asylum in the local context as well as a distinct ability to balance different modes of presentation as required. Specifically, asylum seekers must be vulnerable enough to meet the requirements of refugee status, and yet also capable enough not to be perceived as a burden on society. In this Field Notes piece, I examine these negotiations within an international NGO that operates an official refugee and asylum seeker reception site in Madrid, Spain. Drawing upon ethnographic research conducted at this site, I argue that asylum seekers assert moral agency by demonstrating that they are ‘deserving’ of asylum within the local moral economy of deservingness.

Keywords

Migration, Refugees, Asylum, Spain.

Introduction

It was finally beginning. The big night was here. The rows of chairs faced a slightly raised stage on which three upholstered chairs and a small coffee table stood. Bottles of water awaited the performers. A handful of golden letter balloons decorated the room, spelling out the name of the organisation sponsoring this event—the much-anticipated Open Day for the refugee and asylum seeker reception site where I conducted fieldwork in Madrid, Spain. This was early on in my preliminary fieldwork, as I was still getting to know the non-governmental organisation (NGO) staff members as well as the asylum seekers participating in the reception programme. In my very first meeting with the organisation, I had been told about the exciting event coming up at the end of that week. Over the course of the week, I observed staff members as they prepared the introductory videos, and asylum seekers as they visited an Arab grocery store and halal butcher to purchase food. Now, the night had finally arrived.

This Open Day event (*Jornada de Puertas Abiertas*) offers a glimpse into how asylum seekers assert moral agency, or the ability to act in a way that is perceived as ‘good’ by others (Blacksher 2002; Mattingly 2014; Myers 2015; Myers 2016). In this context, asylum seekers show that they are deserving of asylum by demonstrating both vulnerability and capacity. A number of anthropologists have described the ways in which migrants must present certain types of vulnerability, such as medical and mental health conditions, to gain legal immigration status (Cabot 2014; Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Giordano 2014; Ticktin 2011). Although gaining refugee status is critical for asylum seekers, their socioeconomic success also depends upon their ability to obtain employment, find housing, and build social networks. These are goals that necessitate the capacity to contribute to their host society and their willingness to demonstrate this capacity.

Applicants must enact both vulnerability and capacity in different ways in distinct situations—often deftly combining the two—in order to be deemed deserving of asylum by their host country, in this case Spain. For example, during an asylum interview, asylum seekers may have to emphasise their debilitation due to a trauma-related mental health condition; in a job interview, they must demonstrate their reliability and work ethic. In this Field Note I ask how the process of navigating the bureaucratic asylum procedure and participating in the reception programme teach my interlocutors how to be ‘good’ refugees in Spain, and how this in turn helps or hinders them in asserting their moral agency. I outline how the contours of moral agency are defined differently for asylum seekers from different countries of origin in the local context, and how the political climate of the host country influences the local ‘moral economy’ of deservingness (Fassin 2011). My hope is to convey the delicate balancing act that asylum seekers negotiate in their daily

lives to assert their moral agency and in doing so I detail the local moral economy of deservingness in which they must operate.

Autonomy as a locally relevant component of moral agency

The NGO where I conducted fieldwork between 2019 and 2022 received funding from the Spanish government (and often the European Union) to carry out the government reception programme for refugees and asylum seekers—one of several NGOs to fulfil this role in Madrid and other parts of Spain. The programme consisted of two distinct phases. For the first six months of the programme, asylum seekers would first live onsite in shared apartments located within the same compound as the NGO offices and activity rooms. After those six months, as the second phase of the programme began, they moved into the community, receiving continued financial assistance for rent and basic needs for an additional 12 months.¹

The reception programme was oriented toward promoting increased autonomy over time for participants, a framing that was explicit among staff members and administrators. For NGO workers, autonomy meant being able to live independently without support from the organisation or other sources. The two most important factors in becoming autonomous were Spanish language proficiency and employment. However, the path to autonomy looked quite different for each asylum seeker as linguistic, cultural, personal, and professional factors played a central role not only in their experiences in Spanish society but also in how they were counselled and advised by NGO workers to achieve this goal. Since autonomy was framed as a social and personal good in this context, the variation in paths to and perceptions of autonomy among different populations affected their ability to be perceived by others as ‘good’ refugees and future citizens of Spain. In what follows I describe ethnographically how visions of autonomy differed for asylum seekers from distinct backgrounds, and how this reflected on the local moral economy of deservingness.

Presenting as a ‘good’ refugee

By returning to the *Jornada de Puertas Abiertas* event that constitutes the ethnographic opening to this piece, I will now demonstrate how notions of vulnerability, capacity, and autonomy interact to create unique patterns of deservingness, ultimately creating distinct paths to becoming a ‘good’ refugee. The

1 This policy changed in January 2021. As a result, only those asylum seekers who had received a positive resolution of their case—that is, they were granted either subsidiary protection or refugee status—were able to move into the second phase. NGO workers have communicated to me that this policy shift has negatively impacted their ability to work effectively with asylum seekers to prepare them for independent living.

Jornada de Puertas Abiertas was a rare event that brought together asylum seekers from both phases of the programme. The organisation welcomed back those who were living outside the compound while also incorporating those who had arrived recently (and so were accommodated within it). The Open Day also gathered staff members from the central office in Madrid, including the NGO's director, who were often engaged in the organisation's other activities. There was excitement in the air as the building filled up and the crowd spilled out onto the shaded concrete area outside.

After showing a brief informational video about the programme, three people climbed up onto the stage: Fatima, a Syrian refugee; María, a social worker; and Amira, a Spanish-born cultural mediator of Syrian descent, who was acting as an interpreter. Based on pre-prepared interview questions, María asked questions, to which Fatima responded, with Amira interpreting at regular intervals for Fatima and the audience. After introducing herself and telling the audience that she has seven children, Fatima said that her husband, Hassan, was sick, and it had been hard for them to find treatment in Syria because of the war. With prompting from María, Fatima described their situation in Syria, recounting their fear of sending their children to school because they did not know if they would return home safely. She also mentioned that hospitals were not functioning in Syria and described the family's worries about Hassan accessing treatment. As Fatima spoke, she began to look upset, but she received a reassuring look from Amira who encouraged her to continue. Next, María, the social worker, asked about Fatima's life in Syria before the war. Fatima responded that they had sufficient food and shelter, but they could not speak freely or criticise the government. Just for speaking out against the government, she said, one could be put in prison or executed. Finally, María asked if there was anything else Fatima wanted to share with the audience. Fatima finished by saying that Spain was a beautiful country and she loved it. Everyone applauded, and Fatima smiled.

Next, Inma, another social worker, and Sofía, a Venezuelan asylum seeker, stepped up onto the stage. In this case, Sofía was in the second phase of the programme, living outside the compound. After introducing Sofía, Inma asked her about the worst consequences of the crisis in Venezuela. Sofía responded by stating that there was neither medicine nor food, and that daily life was not normal. She said that if you worked for a month, it was not enough to provide for basic necessities. Next, Inma asked about the media and censorship. Sofía responded that the truth about life in Venezuela was not available to the Spanish population due to widespread censorship in Venezuela. Finally, Inma asked Sofía about her life in Spain. Sofía responded that both she and her husband were working, and that her son had been going to school. She emphasised that she appreciated the

opportunities they had in Spain. After loud applause, the interview ended, and the two women left the stage.

What is the significance of these performative interviews? In these accounts, it is possible to see the distinct contours of moral agency for these two women from different countries of origin, each needing to demonstrate that they deserved to be in Spain in particular ways. What it means to be a ‘good’ refugee seems to depend not only on legal definitions of asylum and social conceptions of autonomy, but also on how Spanish society expects individuals with different backgrounds to behave. In both accounts, the interviewees described the situation in their country of origin as dangerous and uncertain. They outlined the reasons for which they came to Spain and demonstrated gratitude for the opportunities they had been given during their time living there. Both interviewees framed themselves as doing well. There were also subtle differences between the accounts of Fatima and Sofía. Fatima largely focused on her difficulties in Syria; Sofía mentioned her success and stability in Spain. Yet Sofía also stressed that the situation in Venezuela was dire, communicating this through her mention of media censorship. Sofía seems to feel the need to assert that she really did have to leave her country of origin to survive, whereas Fatima’s account does not portray this same desire to establish credibility.

These accounts illustrate how asylum seekers from different countries of origin face distinct challenges in demonstrating vulnerability and capacity, suggesting that the ability to demonstrate deservingness is often dependent not only on individual skills and the strength of personal narrative, but also on the ‘local moral world’ (Kleinman 1999) in which they seek asylum, since each host country has its own perceptions and biases.

Between 2017–2021, there was a sharp increase in Spain in the number of asylum applications from Venezuelans, who represented the largest proportion of all asylum applicants. During this time, Syrians also continued to apply for asylum in significant numbers, and some were resettled to Spain from countries like Lebanon and Jordan². Venezuelans have a clear linguistic and cultural connection to Spain, as reflected by Spanish citizenship law, which allows any citizen of a former Spanish colony to achieve citizenship after only two years of legal residence (versus the standard 10 years).³ However, Venezuelans often have a difficult time proving that they meet the requirements of asylum due to the perception of the Venezuelan crisis as an economic one; this has resulted in an extremely low

2 Eurostat provides access to asylum application datasets by citizenship, including from Syria (2017-2021): https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR_ASYAPPCTZA_custom_4924451/default/table?lang=en. See also the UNHCR Resettlement Data Finder (RDF): <https://rsq.unhcr.org/en/#FZ3d>.

3 Article 22 of BOE-A-1889-4763: <https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-1889-4763>.

acceptance rate for Venezuelan asylum seekers.⁴ Although some have received temporary protection for humanitarian reasons, this status does not provide the same benefits as refugee status.

Syrians, on the other hand, have a high rate of acceptance for asylum and subsidiary protection due to the widespread national and international acknowledgement of Syria's civil war and humanitarian crisis. However, my fieldwork revealed that Syrians often found it difficult to adapt to life in Spanish society due to linguistic and cultural differences—a finding reached through interviews with my Syrian interlocutors, conversations with NGO workers, and observation of Syrian families over time. Given Spain's singular history with Muslim and Arab cultures⁵ as well as more recent Islamophobic sentiments seen throughout Europe, Syrians are often perceived to be clearly 'Other', while Venezuelans find it easier to seamlessly integrate. These factors are further complicated by Spain's current political climate. Since 2013, the far-right, xenophobic party Vox has claimed victories in regional, national, and EU elections and is now among the largest party with representation in the country. Vox particularly opposes migration of Muslims to Spain but has expressed support for Latin American migrants, particularly those fleeing left-leaning regimes (see e.g., Llaneras and Peinado 2018; Aamari 2022).

Asylum seekers encounter different obstacles and advantages when seeking to assert their moral agency and be perceived as 'good' people based on their culture of origin, reflecting the complexity of the local moral economy of deservingness. Additionally, these two women's accounts differ in how they address autonomy, an important aspect of moral agency for asylum seekers in this context. In her interview, Fatima does not discuss current or future plans for employment or other assertions of autonomy, whereas Sofia specifically mentions her and her husband's employment as a marker of their self-sufficiency. This reflects broader trends I observed at the NGO regarding how autonomy was approached when working with different individuals. In general, asylum seekers from Latin America, all of whom already spoke Spanish, were encouraged to pursue work and professional training courses as soon as possible. Most sought to do so, but those who did not show interest in work right away were perceived as lazy by some staff members. Asylum seekers from Syria, on the other hand, were encouraged to learn Spanish first and then ease into the job search. This was not only because of their lack of fluency in Spanish but also because NGO workers believed they would then be more likely to receive favourable resolutions of their cases, and thus continue to receive assistance in the immediate future. However, despite their lack

4 See first instance decisions by citizenship in the Eurostat database: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR_ASYDCFSTA_custom_4924459/default/table?lang=en.

5 For instance, this includes the history of Al-Andalus, the Muslim-ruled kingdom that administered over most of the Iberian Peninsula between the 7th and 15th centuries.

of Spanish fluency, many young men from African countries participating in the programme, were encouraged to consider lines of work that did not require language fluency, such as food delivery, Uber driving, and forklift operation. As one NGO worker explained to me, this pragmatic advice was necessitated by the likelihood that most of these young men would receive negative resolutions of their cases and would therefore need to find work quickly once the material support provided by the NGO ended. It is important to note that country of origin was not the only factor that influenced these differential visions of autonomy; perceptions of class, socioeconomic status, gender, and educational attainment all created unique patterns of expectations for different groups and individuals.

Everyday performances and moral agency

Admittedly, these interviews represent highly curated performances arranged by asylum seekers and NGO staff members in preparation for this event. Given the level of curation, these interviews raise an important question: Can these performances tell us anything about the types of everyday performances that support moral agency among asylum seekers? Indeed, my fieldwork revealed that these performances were also representative of what went on in everyday life at the reception centre, as well as elsewhere, for asylum seekers. Asylum seekers communicated with their lawyers to build their asylum cases, repetitively working on their narratives to formulate a coherent and credible narrative for the Spanish asylum system. Sometimes they also met with psychologists who not only provided mental health treatment but also coordinated with lawyers to build cases that were likely to be successful. By working with these professionals and others, these refugees and asylum seekers participated in a collaborative process by which they learned how to behave in morally recognisable ways in Spanish society, while also retaining and contributing their own narratives and characters. In doing so, they were developing the knowledge and skills that were necessary to assert moral agency in a new society.

These presentations did not revolve solely around the asylum process. Outside of the asylum context, I observed several instances of asylum seekers asserting their strong work ethic or their ability to learn languages easily. I also observed NGO professionals encouraging asylum seekers to portray various types of capacity. For example, a cooking class instructor told asylum seeker students to always be ready to work hard at their upcoming, unpaid internships at restaurants. He wanted them to understand that they should not be looking down at their phones all the time. 'Once you finish taking out the trash', he said, 'you start sweeping the floor or ask your boss, "What can I do now?"' During team meetings, staff members often expressed concern over asylum seekers who did not demonstrate the initiative they felt was necessary to succeed, such as in learning Spanish or

following up on additional resources they recommended. These concerns were especially dire when they felt that the person's case was unlikely to receive a favourable resolution, as they worried what would happen if they suddenly had to leave the programme. For example, during one meeting, a social worker expressed concern about a man with a young son who was not taking the initiative to reach out to the organisations she had suggested may be able to provide him with additional resources—despite having been advised that his asylum case had little chance of success. The social worker described the man as 'not having his feet on the ground', expressing her perception that he was not being realistic or practical because he did not understand, or was unwilling to accept, the gravity of his situation, which led him to disregard her advice to pursue other resources. By advising asylum seekers on how to be autonomous, they were striving to help them lead successful and self-sufficient lives in Spain, but they were also communicating what was expected of them by the local moral economy of deservingness. There was an expectation for asylum seekers to build their moral agency across each social setting, resulting in the constant need to behave in a certain way to demonstrate that they were 'good' people.

Conclusion

While navigating the asylum bureaucracy and reception programme in Spain, asylum seekers became subject to the local moral economy of deservingness. This offered opportunities to assert moral agency and be perceived as a 'good' person; however, it also constrained such opportunities by expecting the demonstration of certain characteristics—especially vulnerability and capacity—across different domains of everyday life. By means of a collaborative learning process with NGO professionals, asylum seekers were able to assert some level of moral agency despite the constraints presented by the local moral economy of deservingness.

Authorship statement

This Field Note is the sole work of the author.

Ethics statement

The research that contributed to this piece received ethics approval from the Washington University in St. Louis Institutional Review Board (IRB ID: 202006186).

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