Everyday Discourses of Belonging of First-Generation Eritrean Refugees in South Africa: Lived Experience and Attachment

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Abstract

Research is scant on the everyday sense of belonging of refugees in South Africa. This paper addresses this gap by exploring the everyday discourses of belonging of Eritrean refugees in South Africa. Purposive sampling technique was used to recruit participants, and qualitative data was gathered from 11 participants in the City of Tshwane, South Africa, through open-ended interviews and focus group discussions. Analysis of data resulted in three dominant discourses: 1) 'we feel like outsiders'; 2) 'we are neither here nor there'; and 3) 'South Africa is home'. Drawing on the participants' discourses, I argue that in the South African context, refugees' sense of belonging tends to be varied mirroring multifaceted lived experiences. Participants' construction of South Africa as their home also counters previous research that portrayed foreign nationals in South Africa as 'excluded'.

Keywords: *Eritreans; belonging; South Africa; refugees; discourse.*

Introduction

Since the advent of democracy in South Africa, in 1994, increasing numbers of international migrants, the majority of whom are from the African continent, have arrived in the country (Chinomona & Maziriri 2015; Langa 2016 and Kiguwa). Currently, South Africa hosts around 88,694 refugees and 191,333 asylum seekers mostly from countries in Africa (UNHCR 2017). Within the southern African region, South Africa hosts the largest number of migrants due to its relatively strong economy and better regulated asylum system (Adjai 2013; Langa and Kiguwa 2016). The push factors behind migration to South Africa from the rest of the African continent include political instability, civil wars, and repressive regimes (Hepner 2015). Migrants in South Africa find themselves in a context where, on the one hand, a progressive Constitution guarantees them many rights and, on the other hand, there are xenophobic sentiments from some citizens towards migrants (Chinomona and Maziriri 2015; Makwembere 2015). More recently, the predominant focus of most scholars of migration in South Africa has been the phenomenon of xenophobia (e.g. Makwembere 2015; Langa and Kiguwa 2016). This is not surprising, as South Africa has witnessed recurrent xenophobic violence against migrants of African origin since the dawn of democracy in 1994 (Neocosmos 2006; Adjai 2013). Eritrean refugees form part of the many migrant groups in South Africa who have made post-apartheid South Africa their new home.

Hundreds of Eritreans started arriving between 1999 and 2001 sent by the Eritrean government to study at various South African tertiary institutions (Hepner 2015). This initial arrival was followed by other Eritrean asylum claimants escaping forced indefinite national service and

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suppression of religious, media and political rights in Eritrea (Hepner 2015). Between 2016 and 2017, there were 1,978 recognised Eritrean refugees in South Africa (UNdata 2017). When newcomer asylum seekers from Eritrea arrive in South Africa, their main destinations tend to be Johannesburg and Pretoria, the two major cities in Gauteng province with large numbers of migrant communities. Most Eritreans in South Africa are self-employed, operating clothing and grocery shops.

An important aspect that pertains to understanding the lived experiences of refugees in a host society is their sense of attachment and belonging (Spaaij 2015). In the field of international migration, the phenomenon of belonging[1] is an extensively researched topic. Scholars have studied immigrants' sense of attachment to their host societies (Lee and Brotman 2011; Spaaij 2015; Dobrowolsky 2016).

Scholars of migration studies generally agree that two structural factors inform immigrants' sense of belonging: the host society's ethos of reception and the generational status of immigrants. Regarding the ethos of reception of the host society, some scholars argue that when immigrants experience hostility, discrimination and xenophobia from the host society, immigrants tend to distance themselves from identifying with their host country (Suarez- Orozco 2004; Chinomona & Maziriri 2015; Hayduk and García-Castañon 2018). Others argue that first-generation immigrants exhibit a strong sense of belonging to their country of origin; while second-generation immigrants are viewed as identifying with both their country of birth (host society) and the homeland of their first-generation parents (Alba and Nee 2003; Alba and Waters 2010).

In the context of post-apartheid South Africa and in discussions of migrant belonging, most migration research has focused on how citizens exclude immigrants and refugees from South Africanness (Neocosmos 2006; Matsinhe 2011; Langa and Kiguwa 2016). Therefore, in relation to migrants, the phenomenon of belonging has been discussed in the context of xenophobia and from the perspectives and attitudes of South African citizens and the South African state.

For example, Neocosmos (2006) argues that the South African state promotes the discourse of Black South African indigeneity, as a result of denying foreigners' belonging to the South African nation. Neocosmos (2006: 19) also notes that in "post-apartheid South Africa, those emanating from beyond South Africa's borders are interpellated as foreign." Makwembere (2015) also argues that the indifference of local government institutions to incidents of xenophobic violence against foreigners indirectly exacerbates migrants' marginalisation and exclusion from South African society. Reinforcing Makwembere's (2015) argument, Mosselson (2010) contends that the politics of belonging in post-apartheid South African society are largely shaped by the exclusionary discourses and practices of the state vis-à-vis migrants.

According to some scholars, some South African nationals also act as agents in the exclusion and marginalisation of those perceived as foreigners. For example, Mngxitama (2008), Adjai (2013) and Langa and Kiguwa (2016) relate that due to their African origin, African immigrants in South Africa are denied belonging to the South African community by South African citizens. Matsinhe (2011: 304) argues that South African nationals act as "gate-keepers" to decide who belongs and who does not by using phenotypic features, "language and accent [as] crucial signifiers of imagined nativity and strangeness".

Predominantly, therefore, scholars of migration in South Africa have studied the topic of belonging through the perspectives of the South African state and citizens, and it is framed within the context of xenophobia. An overlooked topic in such literature is understanding migrants' sense

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[1] In this paper, belonging is understood as the feeling of attachment refugees have towards their country of origin or host society.

of belonging to South Africa, their new home. This paper addresses this lacuna by posing a central research question: *How do refugees in South Africa talk about their sense of belonging to their country of settlement, South Africa*?

Conceptually, this paper draws on the concept of *interpretative repertoires* which is a key analytical framework within the tradition of Potter and Wetherell (1987) discourse analysis. In line with Potter and Wetherell (1987: 149), interpretative repertoires are defined as everyday ways of talking about an experience commonly shared by a social group from which members draw upon to make sense of their lived experiences.

Method

As the aim of the study was to explore participants' sense of belonging, a qualitative methodology was adopted and interview and focus group methods of data collection used. Eleven participants were recruited from Sunnyside, a neighbourhood in the City of Tshwane, South Africa, where most Eritrean refugees reside. Purposive sampling was used to select participants. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants who were invited to complete consent forms if they were willing to participate in the study. Open-ended interviews were conducted with five participants and a focus group discussion was held with six participants. All participants were first-generation refugees. I conducted the interviews and focus group sessions in Tigrinya, a dominant language in Eritrea and the first language of the participants. The average time was 45 minutes for each interview and two hours for the focus group session. Interviews and the focus group session were tape-recorded and transcribed. My analysis of the data identified three differing interpretative repertoires. All real names of the participants were replaced with pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

Results and Discussion

Three dominant discourses were identified from the interviews and focus group discussion: 1) 'we feel like outsiders'; 2) 'we are neither here nor there'; and 3) 'South Africa is home'. The three varied interpretative repertoires reflected complex everyday experiences of participants in South Africa.

'We Feel Like Outsiders'

The participants who identified with this discourse related that they did not feel they belonged to the South African society due to societal prejudice they experienced from everyday South Africans and bureaucrats in some government departments (Harris 2002; Warner 2003; Neocosmos 2006; Mosselson 2010). The following excerpt from an interview with a participant illustrates such marginalisation and the denial of belonging:

I remember when I went to Home Affairs to apply for asylum, I felt like a sub-human. The official treated me as if I were some kind of a burden to the country. I mean, he asked me questions like 'why did you decide to come to South Africa? Why didn't you remain in your own country and fight back the government rather than deciding to come to this country?' At that moment, I felt I didn't belong here. It is a bad experience. But you know, these people shouldn't perceive us as outsiders. [Interview, Yosief, male].

In the above example, the participant positions himself as belonging outside the politics of belonging (Mosselson 2010) of South Africanness due to the unwelcoming treatment of refugees by bureaucrats in the government department. Such a feeling of alienation due to attitudes by actors in government institutions corroborates Neocosmos' (2006) and Mosselson's (2010) argument that South African government institutions and their actors tend to be key players in the marginalisation of 'foreigners'.

In the following excerpt, another participant also felt alienated due to experiences of animosity of some South Africans towards him:

People speak to me in their local languages, and I respond to them in English saying that I did not understand what they were saying. But they pretend as if they did not understand English and continue talking to me in Zulu or some other local language. Then they laugh at me or get angry at me. I think they expect me to speak their local languages. But I don't understand why they do that. I think this is [whether one can speak a local language] the only way they can know if you are a foreigner or an outsider. Especially, if they hear you talk over the phone in another language, they can see that you are not a South African. I think this provokes them. [Focus group, Semere, male].

Semere's feeling of isolation from the South African society occurred in the context of some South Africans' prejudice towards him due to his foreign origin. Mngxitama (2008), Matsinhe (2011), Adjai (2013) and Langa and Kiguwa (2016) argue that in everyday life, South Africans may exhibit prejudice towards those they define as non-South Africans. International literature on immigration and belonging also supports migrants' sense of 'separation' (Berry 1997: 9-10), in xenophobic and hostile host societies. Suarez-Orozco (2004) also argues that migrants' experiences of hostility from members of a host society prompt migrants to feel alienated.

'We Are Neither Here Nor There'

Other participants expressed an ambivalent sense of belonging in which they felt attached to both their host country, South Africa and their country of origin, Eritrea. A discourse of 'we are neither here nor there' was constructed to make sense of participants' sense of in-betweenness. When asked to what extent they considered South Africa home, Nebiy felt a sense of belonging to both South Africa and Eritrea:

You know, I somehow consider this country home because I have lived here for almost five years and I am used to this country. For example, if I left South Africa for another country, I think, I would feel attached to Pretoria. Especially, I would miss Sunnyside because I consider Sunnyside to be my permanent neighbourhood. I have developed this sense of belonging to this country because of my prolonged stay in South Africa, you know. But since I was born and grew up in Eritrea, and have a lot of memories about Eritrea, I miss my relatives, my neighbors, my friends, the city, Asmara; I grew up in. You know, I miss everything about Eritrea. Sometimes I feel like I am lost here. Sometimes I dream about going back to Eritrea. I miss my country, but I am far away from my own country, and I cannot go back there. [Focus Group, Nebiy, male]

Here, Nebiy constructs an ambivalent sense of attachment to South Africa, where he current resides and to Eritrea through memories of his past life in Eritrea. The participant referred to 'place attachment' to South Africa to rationalise his sense of belonging to the country. Cuba and Hammond (1993:8) argue that people draw on physical locations "to forge a sense of attachment or home". Regarding the relationship between place attachment and belonging, a study by Rishbeth and Powell (2013) on immigrants in the UK found that the immigrants developed a strong sense of attachment and belonging "at the local scale". The struggle for belonging is corroborated by Kebede's (2010) study of Ethiopian-American refugees, in which their sense of belonging was divided between being American and being Ethiopian "because of the multiplicity of places that they could call home."

Another participant, Haile, also constructed an ambivalent sense of belonging by indicating that he felt a sense of belonging and attachment to both South Africa and Eritrea:

> *I always feel I am in Asmara [the capital city of Eritrea]. Here in Sunnyside, we have everything that reminds me of Eritrea. I mean, we have many Eritrean restaurants here in Sunnyside; we go there to eat Injera[2] and listen to Tigrinya songs. I mean, you feel like you are in Eritrea when you are at the restaurants. We also go to our coffee shops, our women make coffee for us, and we drink coffee the whole day, on weekends especially. You know you feel as if you were still living in Asmara. We also have a church here. I mean, every Sunday all of us [Eritreans] assemble there at the church, and it is also a meeting place [for us] there. I mean, Sunnyside is like home. But you know, it [Sunnyside] cannot be the same us back home. I mean, not everything that you find in Eritrea is here, you know. We are just trying to recreate Eritrea here in South Africa. But at the end of the day, you realise that Eritrea is very far away from South Africa because you look around and you begin to realise that you are surrounded by everything South African. We are physically in South Africa. So when you realise this, you do not have any other option but to accept South Africa as your permanent home, because we do not know when we will be returning home [to Eritrea]. [Focus Group, Haile, male].*

This excerpt also presents another illustration of the ambivalence to belonging felt by participants. Haile's sense of attachment to his country of origin was based on his daily interactions with the Eritrean community in Tshwane, ethnic food, traditional Eritrean music and Eritrean churches in Sunnyside. However, parallel to feeling a sense of belonging to Eritrea, a sense of attachment to South Africa, as a new home, was constructed by the participant. Hiruy's (2009) study of refugees from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone and Sudan in Australia also found that some of the refugees developed "emotional place attachment" to their countries of origin with "the creation and recreation of places and identities" of their homeland in their neighbourhoods in Australia. Hiruy argues that the refugees also developed a sense of belonging to their host country, Australia, as they considered Australia their new home.

Another participant also constructed a feeling of belonging to more than one country: Eritrea and South Africa.

> *We are already far away from our country of birth,; however, we still feel attached to our country of origin. We also realise that we are here [physically] in South Africa, and South Africa is the only place we call home now. [Interview, Mikiele, male]*

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[2] Injera is a sour, spongy and white flatbread eaten in Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Multiple attachments and a sense of belonging to both the country of origin and settlement are also illustrated in Mikiele's account.

'South Africa Is Home'

Other participants developed a feeling of belonging to South Africa, their host society. Participants constructed South Africa as their permanent home and the South African society as their community. Participants also constructed South Africans as accommodating of foreigners. Participants referred to factors, such as having a South African spouse, having South African friends, speaking indigenous South African languages and their prolonged length of stay as reasons to feel a sense of belonging to South Africa.

I have a South African partner, she lives with me, and she is a South African from Limpopo. I have one child with her, you know. Therefore, I belong here. I also speak two South African languages. I can easily communicate in Zulu; I don't feel like a stranger. I feel at home in South Africa. Here in South Africa, I am a free person. I mean, you are free here — [Focus Group, Bereket, male].

Another participant also expressed belonging to South Africa citing freedom.

Here in South Africa, we live in peace and we are protected [by the Constitution]. We are treated like South African citizens in this country. I feel comfortable being in this country. And I have plenty of local South African friends and they like me and accept me as their own. So I feel I belong here. I feel at home here. [Focus Group, Kibrom, male]

A third participant, Gebray, constructed a sense of belonging to the host country, South Africa:

"I belong here. I have lived here long enough and I am used to the South African way of life." [Interview, Gebray, male].

Scholars argue that the more immigrants are acculturated to the host society, the more they tend to identify with the host country (Berry 1997). Polzer (2004) found that Mozambican refugees in South Africa felt a sense of attachment and belonging to South Africa even though they were refugees and did not have formal South African citizenship. Furthermore, this finding illustrates that formal citizenship is not necessarily a condition for claiming a sense of belonging to a host country. For the Eritrean refugees, their sense of attachment and belonging was shaped by their level of acculturation in the country. However, the findings in this study suggest that participants' sense of belonging to the host country is influenced by several factors, This finding highlights the need for a more nuanced analysis to the literature on immigrant belonging that maintains that first-generation immigrants primarily identify with their country of origin (Alba and Nee 2003; Alba and Waters 2010).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explore Eritrean refugees' different ways of talking about belonging. The central research question that guided the paper focused on the extent to which Eritrean refugees in Pretoria, South Africa, talk about their belonging to the host country, South

Africa. Three dominant and varied discourses were identified. Some participants felt marginalised from the South African society. Others constructed multiple attachments to their country of origin and the host society. Participants also expressed a sense of belonging to South Africa as their new home. Although all participants belonged to the same country of origin, their feelings of belonging varied. This paper contributes to the scholarship on migration and belonging in the South African context. In light of the findings of this study, this paper urges scholars of migration in South Africa to not only focus on xenophobia when examining inclusion/exclusion of migrants but also explore claims of belonging by refugee/migrant communities. We can learn from the participants' experiences that by conceptualising refugees/immigrants only as excluded and marginalised communities in South Africa, we overlook their perspectives, their voice, and their everyday discourses of belonging. Refugees are capable social actors possessing agency. This paper has brought to the surface refugees' agency by exploring the everyday discourses that circulate among Eritrean refugees in Pretoria, South Africa. We also learn from the everyday discourse of the participants that a sense of belonging and attachment vis-à-vis a host society tends to be shaped by their complex and multifaceted experiences in the host society. Varied experiences tend to produce varied feelings of belonging within the same migrant group. Furthermore, participants' construction of South Africa as their home counters previous research that portrayed foreign nationals in South Africa s 'excluded'.

It is encouraging to see refugees feel a sense of belonging to South Africa in light of some anti-immigrant sentiment in the country; therefore, more effort is needed by the government to encourage pro-refugee attitudes among South Africans so that all refugees feel accepted in their new home.

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