

Representing refugees in advocacy campaigns

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The representations of refugees created by advocacy and solidarity groups must be devised in partnership with those whose stories are being told.

In September 2015 something quite extraordinary transformed the global public response to the ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe. The publication of the photo of drowned toddler Alan Kurdi on a beach in Turkey had far-reaching impact, mobilising ordinary citizens to protest in solidarity with refugees under the banner of the Refugees Welcome movement. In New Zealand, refugee advocates (that is, those from non-refugee backgrounds who advocate for refugees) and media commentators called on the government to raise the country’s annual refugee quota and show a more empathetic and welcoming response.

Humanitarian representations of refugees as victims who require help, as used in the media and in advocacy campaigns, can be effective in garnering support for refugees but there are a number of ethical concerns around these representations and narratives of solidarity. First, media coverage of humanitarian crises often depicts people from the Global South as dependent on a Global North response, while ignoring the wider structural inequalities and injustices involved. Second, there is a tendency in both media and advocacy representations to depict people as passive victims rather than as individuals who have agency, which raises questions about who is doing the representing and who gets to speak.¹ While altruistic in intention, humanitarian representations can be very disempowering for those depicted, and can have negative repercussions for successful resettlement outcomes.

Implications of representation

Many of the resettled refugees that I interviewed as part of my research into the relationship between humanitarian representations of refugees and acts of solidarity felt that the mainstream media and many humanitarian organisations

reinforced a particular view of refugees as “helpless folk from war-torn countries” or “someone quite poor and destitute”. The danger with these stereotypes, one of my participants argued, is that refugees are identified “by their circumstances, rather than their own humanity”. Depictions of refugees as victims can lead to a very narrow idea of who a refugee is and what they are capable of, and can negatively influence public perceptions about refugees. Participants recounted assumptions made about them, for example that they would be unable to afford a laptop or to send money overseas to family, simply because they were once refugees. What is often missing from these stereotypes are individuals’ stories and voices. As one participant explained, while displaced people may share some similarities, focusing on only one aspect (for example, on trauma and victimhood) means “you miss that richness” of stories.

The stigmatising nature of refugee stereotypes can also hinder the ability of former refugees to develop a sense of belonging and acceptance in the country of resettlement. Many people I interviewed felt that stereotypes contributed to the perception of refugees as different from, and perhaps less capable than, other New Zealanders. In addition, continuing to be labelled as a refugee by the media, government agencies, refugee advocates and other New Zealanders, even long after they had been resettled and acquired citizenship, implies that people from refugee backgrounds are not accepted as ‘real’ New Zealanders.

A number of the participants felt that those with the loudest voices in Western refugee advocacy were not from refugee backgrounds, and questioned the legitimacy and validity of non-refugees talking about an experience they know nothing about. They felt refugee advocacy should include the voices

of refugees and former refugees who have actually experienced refuge and resettlement. One participant, Abann (the general manager of a refugee-led grassroots non-governmental organisation based in Auckland), explained that refugee advocates were well-meaning but tended to dominate the discussion and speak on behalf of refugees, which is very disempowering and frustrating for refugee and resettled communities. He went on to say that he was not trying to criticise anyone but urged, “please do it **with us**, not to us”.

Recommendations

While it is not possible to control media representations of refugees, advocates can take steps to avoid simplistic narratives and stereotypes, and include the perspectives and voices of those they seek to support. The refugee advocates and communication specialists whom I interviewed expressed a real desire to avoid stereotypes and represent refugees as ordinary people like ‘us’. At the same time, they also wanted to avoid downplaying the seriousness of forced migration, and the fact that some refugees will be vulnerable and traumatised. A real tension existed for them between avoiding victim stereotypes while at the same time getting the message out in the mainstream media in the most effective way about why the New Zealand public should care about refugees. This tension is not uncommon within humanitarian campaigning, where non-governmental organisations and refugee advocates have long experienced the challenges of how best to communicate their message without descending into disempowering stereotypes.

Recent research recommends that advocates who wish to work with refugees

take self-awareness training (building awareness of their own privilege), and that refugees are given the opportunity to get involved in advocacy campaigns.² It is important that humanitarian practitioners, advocates and other actors within the field of humanitarianism, including academic researchers, critically reflect on their positioning and privilege in relation to the work they do with refugees, remain self-reflective, work in collaboration with refugees and former refugees, and acknowledge refugees’ agency, capabilities and voice. Because, despite good intentions, those who work to support the rights of refugees can end up ‘othering’ refugees as anonymous and vulnerable recipients of aid, marginalising those whom they seek to support. Refugees may be recognised as human beings on protest banners but their

humanity and agency are undermined by others speaking for them.

Responsible advocacy seeks to empower the subjects of that advocacy, taking direction from those they wish to support. By working in partnership, listening to the people they purport to help, and avoiding stereotypes, advocacy and solidarity movements have the potential to address and transform some of the structural inequalities and injustices experienced by displaced people.

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Image from a photo exhibition organised by the Aotearoa Resettled Community Coalition as part of a campaign to break down stereotypes, from the perspective of former refugees in New Zealand.