

**ICH 2019****International Conference on Humanities****MEANING-MAKING OF FORCED MIGRANT YOUTH IN TRANSIT IN MALAYSIA**

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***Abstract***

Environmental, economic, and geopolitical factors are resulting in rising global migration. Understanding how migration impacts youth can inform efforts to address risks and capitalize opportunities presented by mobility and transnational experience. The migration process and its associated experiences can be deeply formative for displaced youth, many of whom are born into or have spent most of their lives in transit. In such circumstances, these youth occupy a precarious space defined by both vulnerability and resilience, where statelessness, societal exclusion, and cultural disconnection necessitate a reimagining of what identity means. This paper describes an ongoing, mixed-methods program of research involving a diverse sample of forced migrant youth living temporarily in Malaysia. Using an innovative, arts-based, story board narrative approach, the research explores how forced migration impacts processes of identity formation and future aspirations of young conflict migrants. The study will generate a perspective from youth about how they navigate access to education (SDG 4), rights (SDG 10), and justice (SDG 16). The research will identify implications for youth services and policies to ensure meaningful participation of forced migrant youth in decision-making regarding assimilation, reintegration or resettlement, and to ensure equitable access to entitlements including education, protection and support services while in transit. This paper explores these themes, and introduces the concept of liminality as a way to encapsulate the circumstances that create a non-normative context for young forced migrants' psychosocial development.

Keywords: migration, youth, arts-based research, identity, Sustainable Development Goals.

## Introduction

As the migration and movement of peoples continues to be an urgent and contentious global issue, the specific plight of displaced children and youth has increasingly become a focus of concern for global policy leaders, child rights advocates, and humanitarian service organizations. Discursive and visual representations of displaced young people as the most at-risk among already vulnerable populations of people on the move, and as the innocent, collateral victims of armed conflict and violence, have awakened the Global North imaginary and spurred many in the West to join in a global rallying cry (Slovic et al., 2017). Pictures of Syrian child Aylan Kurdi's lifeless body on a Greek shore in 2015 brought in record donations and pressure on Western governments to do more for the crisis (Cole, 2017). Recent reports and photographs of migrant children held in detention centres along the United States-Mexico border has sparked condemnation from around the world, forcing U.S. authorities towards a higher standard of accountability (Taub, 2018).

In some countries, including Canada, substantive responses such as increased financial support, expanded intake quotas for asylum seekers, and government accountability are significant. However, as De Genova, Garelli, and Tazzioli (2018) warn, there are negative effects of relying on discourses of "essentialized victimhood" when working with displaced populations (pp.250-251). Wachter and Snyder (2018) echo this caution, drawing attention in particular to constructions of displaced women and children as passive victims of displacement that overlook their autonomy, agency, and individual identities and that can have detrimental impacts on these populations in the migration journey (pp.398-399). What of migrant youth's own experiences, sense of agency in negotiating their identities, circumstances, and opportunities to realize re-envisioned futures? What of their narratives of oppression and resistance? What are their stories? Some have argued that stories are all that we are as human beings (Daniel, 2019; King, 2003). If so, then to deny displaced youth the agency to tell their own stories apart from dominantly reproduced "academic and non-academic discourses" of "persecution and victimhood" (De Genova et al., 2018, p.258) is to deny them their identities and the very opportunity to exist as actors in the social world. With an increasingly polarized global landscape on issues of migration

and increasing normalization of xenophobic rhetoric, we contend that stories about displaced youth necessarily told by displaced youth themselves carry the potential to disrupt the discourse of youth as helpless victims, and “can provide insight into multiple facets of their identities, including their goals and imagined future selves” (Daniel, 2019, p.71). As Høvring (2018) explains, these stories are paramount in recognizing the agency and voice of a traditionally spoken-for population. This is the impetus for the authors’ ongoing research project situated in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

We begin by enunciating our problem statement before providing some context and history to the migration landscape in Malaysia so as to clarify the situation of displaced youth there. We then elaborate the specific research questions and aims of our program of research. Finally, we describe our use of mixed methods, centring on an arts-based and narrative approach to collect and analyze data with young conflict migrant participants.

### **Problem Statement**

Malaysia hosts one of Southeast Asia’s largest documented and undocumented displaced populations including over 40,000 registered, and many more unregistered, youth under the age of 18 (UNHCR Malaysia, 2019). Specific to forced migration, compounding push and pull factors have contributed to Malaysia’s position as the highest net recipient nation of refugees in Southeast Asia, with a 3:1000 refugee-inhabitant ratio. These high numbers rank the country just outside the highest quartile of national refugee-inhabitant ratios at 48th, higher than countries including the United Kingdom and Italy (Munir-Asen, 2018, p.7-8).

Pull factors include: a sizeable labour market that prefers cheap labour from foreign and undocumented workers; religious affiliation between many Muslim refugees and Malaysia’s moderate Muslim majority; and Malaysia’s ad hoc policy approach to refugees that often makes the initial arrival of refugees ostensibly easier. For example, many nationalities to which refugees belong are not required to have an entry visa in order to enter Malaysia. As Munir-Asen (2018) points out, for those who are able to find their way to Malaysia, it is quite straightforward to “take advantage of the country’s relatively relaxed visa requirements... particularly for those coming from Muslim countries” (p.13). It is important to reiterate that this initial ease of entry does not equate to an easier existence for asylum-seekers and refugees once they are actually in Malaysian society.

Among push factors, conflict, especially domestic armed conflict and civil war, remains a predominant driver of forced migration for most refugee populations who end up in Malaysia. The International Organization for Migration (2000, as cited in Wickramasekera, 2000) defines forced migrants as individuals who “leave their countries to escape persecution, conflict, repression, natural and human-made disasters, ecological degradation, or other situations that endanger their lives, freedom or livelihood” (p.2). In Myanmar, ethnic conflict has led to mass internal and international displacement for decades. In addition to the ongoing influx of migrants displaced by multiple civil wars between ethnic groups and government forces in the region, more recent burgeoning of conflict migrants is due to the persecution and expulsion of Rohingya people, primarily from Rhakine state in Myanmar, who have fled to neighbouring Bangladesh, as well as Malaysia, Thailand and China. As Munir-Asen (2018, p. 11) notes, the Myanmar government denies Rohingya claims to citizenship or belonging in Myanmar, effectively rendering them stateless both within and outside of their country of origin.

While most of Malaysia’s refugee population originates from within Southeast Asia, especially Myanmar, there are also sizeable communities from North Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East. For example, Somalis, Iraqis, and Afghanis youth have been subjected to varying degrees of conflict over several decades, with the recent presence of the Islamic State’s (IS) in Iraq and elsewhere resulting in the displacement (both internal and forced migration) of over three million people (World Bank, 2018a, as cited in Munir-Asen, 2018, p.12). The Syrian conflict has forced the migration of approximately 5.6 million Syrians, including many to Malaysia (UNHCR, 2019). In addition to conflict, there are often other factors pushing forced displacement: “Collapse of government infrastructure, decline in security, lack of economic security, and environmental shocks are all drivers of flight and must be taken into consideration beyond a simple logic based on conflict, threat to life and subsequent flight” (Munir-Asen, 2018, p.10-12). In many cases, conflict is the underlying foundational issue upon which these other drivers of flight compound (p.12).

Despite high numbers of refugees, Malaysia is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Refugee Protocol, both of which were established by the United Nations in order to ensure access to rights for refugees and asylum-seekers. Rather, the Malaysian government has maintained an ad hoc approach to refugee policy which denies refugees and asylum-seekers a specific status accorded by Malaysian immigration law, thereby leaving them

without legal status. Because of this, members of the refugee population in Malaysia do not have rights to government-provided education, health services, or legal work on the same basis as Malaysian nationals. Migrant children and youth rely on non-formal education set up ad hoc by their own refugee communities or non-governmental organizations that specifically aim to compensate for denial of public services to refugee populations. Forced migrant children and adults are at risk of detention by immigration officials, leading to situations where bribery and exploitation of refugees have become commonplace (Chao, 2014, paras.5 & 9).

Our current research is specifically concerned with the population of displaced youth in Malaysia, as a case in point. We are exploring how forced migration from their homelands and subsequent challenges of life in their country of temporary residence (such as the lack of access to basic rights such as healthcare and education) has informed their sense of identity, belonging, and the future. While Malaysia's ad hoc approach to refugee policy has occasionally made the process of arriving in the country easier for refugees and asylum-seekers, the government's refusal to grant legal recognition to these migrants effectively renders them extremely vulnerable to persecution from immigration officials, xenophobic violence, and exploitation at the hands of the landlords, the healthcare system, informal employers, and in some cases, organized crime (Towle, 2017, para.12). Because Malaysia has not ratified the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention (Chao, 2014, para.11), displaced peoples in the country are not legally able to attend school or work, and their access to healthcare, both in the public and private systems, is severely limited by financial and structural barriers such as racism, xenophobia, and exploitation.

For displaced youth who are born or brought into these circumstances, the impacts on their social development and sense of identity can be serious and long-lasting. "This condition of growing up without official recognition of one's identity and citizenship could be described as developing in a state of 'liminality.' Liminality refers to a condition of being intermediate between two or more states, conditions, or regions, or being suspended in a transitional space for an indeterminate amount of time" (Ball & Moselle, 2016, p. 114-115). Forced migrant children living in Malaysia could be said to be living liminally due to their lack of official refugee status and lack of an entry visa authorizing their temporary stay. They may lack of official identity documentation verifying their name, date of birth, and affiliation with a nation-state. In some instances, migrant youth live in social groups that are not connected with their family or community of origin, and they often live their lives perched on the territorial and social edges of

mainstream society – without access to formal schooling, law enforcement, and health clinics” (Ball & Moselle, 2016).

Displaced youth who are living and growing up in these liminal spaces are often denied a voice in decision-making about their reintegration, assimilation, or resettlement. Migrant youth are often constructed as passive victims of their displacement experiences by policy-makers, who tend to fall back on essentialized tropes of helpless and vulnerable refugee youth without agency or any semblance of empowerment (Daniel, 2019; Wachter & Snyder, 2018). What of the rights of displaced youth to be invited to have their views heard in deliberations about how to resolve their displacement? Could migrant youth be meaningfully included in policy decision-making processes that will ultimately impact them the most, as is stipulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF Canada, 2019)? Our research is premised on the conviction that in order for the world to achieve United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as universal access to quality education (SDG 4), equality (SDG 10), and justice (SDG 16), governments must provide migrants with access to basic human rights. These include formal schooling commensurate with prior learning achievement, equitable access to dignity, services, and protection, and an active role in decision-making that concerns them so as to resolve their liminal status. As expressed by the Office of the High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR, 2019), it is “increasingly recognized that human rights are essential to achieve sustainable development” (para. 1).

The urgency of this research cannot be overstated. As conflict migration numbers globally continue to grow, the impacts that forced migration have on displaced youth are stark and carry the potential for a host of lifelong difficulties. These not only include obstacles to food security, decent housing, optimal psychosocial development, timely medical intervention for health problems, academic achievement, authorized and skilled employment, but also challenges to normative notions of identity formation: “How do [migrant youth] perceive their years as migrants? Do they see themselves as having a childhood?... Has childhood ended for them? ... If they are no longer children, how do they define themselves now in terms of their development or life trajectory?”(Ball & Moselle, 2015, p.428-431). In an attempt to veer away from the aforementioned monolithic trope of refugee child as passive victim in their circumstance (Wachter & Snyder, 2018), this research actively seeks to answer these questions by

emphasizing the “resilience, resistance, and children’s capacity for identity formation” that are emphasized in the youth participants’ stories (Ball & Moselle, 2015, p.430-431).

### **Research Questions**

Three specific questions guide our data collection. First, how do migrant youth’s experiences of forced migration inform their sense of identity, belonging, home, and their prospects for the future? Second, how does living in a state of liminality impact their access to education (SDG 4), equality (SDG 10), and justice (SDG 16)? Third, what implications do migrant youth’s migration narratives, identity processes, future aspirations, and perspectives have for improved services, resources, programming, and policies pertaining to youth whose migration out of their home countries has been compelled by conflict?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The study has three main goals. In terms of scholarship, this study is positioned within the broad field of applied developmental psychology and the broad perspectives of sociocultural theory and deconstructionism. The theoretical purpose of the study is to contribute to theories of identity formation and future aspirations during adolescence by expanding the scope of theories beyond sedentary youth and beyond youth in the Global North, to include identity formation, change, and future orientations of youth on the move and in precarious, rapidly changing contexts involving high levels of uncertainty, low external resources, and a continuous demand to adapt to changing circumstances. The practical purpose of the study is to amplify the voices of forced migrant youth in understanding their service and policy needs and the kinds of political responses that will yield access to rights and social justice. The methodological purpose of the study is to demonstrate a mix-methods approach to exploring migrant youth’s experiences with a primary emphasis on a developmental, arts-based, narrative inquiry.

### **Research Methods**

Participants in the study are approximately 30 forced migrant youth between the ages of 13 and 16 years old who are accessing services of MSRI. The study has recruited thirty youth aged 13 to 16-years-old from various countries of origin who are conflict migrants living temporarily in Malaysia. All the youth are accessing services offered by the Malaysian Social

Research Institute (herein referred to as MSRI). MSRI is a refugee service providing, charitable and non-profit organization in Kuala Lumpur whose mandate prioritizes refugees and asylum-seekers that are in the ethnic minority relative to Malaysia's broader migration landscape, which is largely made up of migrants from the Southeast Asia region. MSRI provides humanitarian support to its clients in three crucial areas - education, healthcare, and livelihood (MSRI, 2019).

MSRI's service recipients, referred to as clients, predominantly originate from Central Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, including Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Palestine, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. As of 2019, MSRI has over 5000 registered clients, including more than 1000 registered families. MSRI's funding comes from a combination of private donors, corporate sponsorships, and grants from companies and foreign embassies located in Kuala Lumpur. As such, MSRI's core programs include a family health program offering primary healthcare, mental health services, counselling, subsidized medicines, and health outreach, a community service program offering vocational training, English classes, livelihood support, and case management, and an education program which takes place in the MSRI school. The second author worked for this organization as a social worker in 2018, engaging directly with migrant youth and their families through interviews, conversations, and service interactions. The community connections formed and trust built established a strong starting point from which this research could begin to collect meaning-making stories from migrant youth about their lived experiences. MSRI will benefit from the study through a synopsis of findings that will deepen the organization's understanding of the youth it serves and how their lived experiences impact them, and a visual 'look book' that can be used for reporting and fundraising purposes.

The project uses a mixed methods, largely qualitative approach, including focus groups, individual interviews, record review, and centring on an arts-based, narrative inquiry. The collection of narrative accounts offers an opportunity for migrant youth to elaborate and communicate their own stories. In this way, the method recognizes young migrants as experts on their own experiences, such as described by Holmes (2017, para.7). As Guruge et al. (2015) suggest, arts-based storytelling carries the potential to capture such a "diversity and complexity of human experiences" (p.2) while also giving the youth participants a more creative and expansive outlet with which to tell their stories. Each participant is responsible for preparing a storyboard over the course of two weeks which will be their narrative interpretation of the

project's three research questions. They will have access to various art supplies and guidance from the research team in order to create their storyboard, and will then be invited to present their storyboards in focus groups of four to five youth participants. These focus groups will be facilitated by the research team and will importantly include time for peer feedback and questions. The data from these storyboards and focus groups will be the primary data for the research project. However, it is important to note that data gathered from the storyboard process will be malleable according to how the participants choose to interpret concepts of "identity," "culture," and "home."

## **Conclusion**

Of the 25.4 million refugees displaced globally in 2019, over half of them are children under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2019). However, their age does not preclude their ability to make meaning of the unique and varying ways that displacement impacts them. Indeed, their age-specific experiences suggests a "novel form of global citizenship" that transcends conventional understandings of refugee subjectivities and is vastly unknown (Ball and Moselle, 2016, pp.112-113). However, monolithic representations of displaced youth as helpless and passive subjects of their predicaments remain the dominant construction informing structural decisions on humanitarian services and resolutions of their transitory status through reintegration, resettlement or assimilation into the host country. This research project is a step towards centering the subjectivities of displaced youth (Wachter & Snyder, 2018) and ceding back agency to them to know and share their own experiences for themselves and for those seeking to respond to their self-expressed needs and goals. In doing so, we hope to gain a better understanding of how youth having voice and agency in decisions that impact them can be foundational in attempts to access education, reduced inequality, and justice. Displaced youth living in a state of liminality in Malaysia require, like all of us, the sort of empowered spaces that allow them to be contributors to achieving the SDGs, which as the OHCHR (2019) states, are a "truly universal framework" that require all people and countries to play an active role in working towards. We anticipate that our study will illustrate how displaced youth in Malaysia, in spite of being unrecognized by the country's legal and political structures, still have vital agency and power to enact global citizenship from a process of dynamic identity formation and cultural hybridity that can be developed in the in-between spaces of liminality.

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