“I Will Impress You!”: Status-Oriented Aspiration, Discourse, and Decision-Making Among Refugee Youth

Shawna Shapiro
Middlebury College
AAAL 2014
My goals

- Understand the aspirations and decisions of refugee-background students
- Understand why school policies and practices might conflict with student/family expectations
- Promote dialogue and negotiation around representation and educational opportunity
“Refugee” Discourse

- Past experience
  - Victimization
  - Suffering

- Current situation
  - Neediness
  - Trauma/PTSD
  - Education “gaps”

- Rhetorical effect
  - Sympathy
  - Pity
  - “Othering”

e.g., Bigelow, 2010; Butler, 2005; Keddie, 2012; Kumsa, 2006; McPhereson, 2010; Roy & Roxas, 2011
What stories do RB* students want to tell?

WE ARE...

- Humanitarians
- Community leaders
- Intellectuals
- Multilinguals
- Global citizens
- Opportunity-seekers
- Change-makers
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISCOURSE OF NEED</th>
<th>DISCOURSE OF STATUS</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do you lack? (deficit)</td>
<td>What do you bring? (potential)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Where have you been?</td>
<td>Where are you going?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victimization/Trauma</td>
<td>Agency/Resilience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Survival</td>
<td>Success/Thriving</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pity/Sympathy</td>
<td>Pride/Dignity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being helped</td>
<td>Helping others</td>
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</tbody>
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e.g., Bigelow, 2010, Kumsa, 2006; Keddie, 2012, MacDonald, 2013
Data Sources

- Scholarly literature
- Local media (community of “Laketown”)
- Student interviews
- Faculty/staff interviews at “New England State College”
- Participant observation and community engagement
Status orientation in the resettlement process

**Selectivity**
Being in “the 1%” that are chosen for resettlement (USCRI)

**Persistence/Ingenuity**
Survival by navigating the system and using social networks
Pursuing the best opportunity (often through secondary migration)

**Investment**
Parents giving up careers, social connections, etc. for children

**Social mobility**
Seeking political, social, economic capital
Pursuing citizenship status (green card, U.S. citizen, etc.)

(e.g., Butler, 2005; Mortland, 1987; Zeus, 2005)
### What happens in schools?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student/Family Expectations</th>
<th>School Practices</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ESL/ELL label as stigma</td>
<td>ESL/ELL label as support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus on the future</td>
<td>Focus on the past and present</td>
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<td>(“moving ahead”)</td>
<td>(“getting through”)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Push (intensive/immersive classes)</td>
<td>Protectionism (“sheltered” classes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades = achievement</td>
<td>Grades = effort and growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success= college/career prep</td>
<td>Success= graduation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bigelow, 2010; Callahan, 2012; Fritzen, 2010; Keddie, 2012; Mitchell, 2012; Pinson & Arnot, 2010; Roy & Roxas, Shapiro, forthcoming; Shapiro, in progress; Sharkey & Layzer, 2012
How does this play out in “Laketown”?

Problems with lack of rigor, grade inflation, and social promotion

• “I can’t even read [my earlier essays]. How did I get an A?” (Najib)
• We were encouraged to take “easy” classes (student interviewees)
• “I got frustrated sometimes… maybe I should get pushed a little harder” (student interviewee)
• They don’t want to push them….but you have to push them” (parent)

ESL/ELL classes seen as barrier to educational opportunity

• “If you put kids from the same country in the same class, what are you hoping for them to gain?” (student protester)
• “You don’t need to separate us. We are all equal” (student protester)

Students not prepared for college/career paths

• Our graduates can’t even fill out a job application! (participants and community)
• “The SAT test-- I was like ‘What is that?’ I never learned it from them. Nobody taught me.” (Najib)
Case study: Najib as status-seeker in HS

Family placed high value on education
- Mom said: “We don’t need anything from you. You just educate yourself as much as you want to.”

Placed in low-level classes
- In Math, “I was, like acing it all the time”
- “I talked about a lot of teachers that I don’t want to be in ESL class, but they always tell me that ‘Your English is not ready to go to a high level.’”

Supported but under-challenged
- “Teachers don’t want to discourage their students. Pretty much they’ll give you good feedback. They’ll say ‘You did a great job’ even though you know you didn’t do a great job. You don’t know, but they know.”

Aware of social stigma
- “Give [students] awards at the end of the year ….They want to be something, be at a good level. But nobody cares.”
- “They’re not talking to you about academics—they’re talking about cleanness.”
Najib’s experience in college

• Recruited to “NESC” through soccer team
  – “Star” athlete

• Found academics challenging, but developed close relationships with faculty/staff and peers
  – Social capital

• Perceived by faculty/staff as “lost potential”
  – Why did he “drop out” after 2 years?
  – Why is he back at the same job he had in high school?
Najib as life-long status-seeker

- Entrepreneur (soccer ball business in refugee camp)
- Family of musicians and community leaders
- Star athlete (in HS/college as well as in community; player and coach)
- Cook at pricey French restaurant where “everybody knows me”
- Author of a personal memoir (interviewed on public radio)
- College graduate—“I wanted to be the first in my family”
  - Hoping to transfer to R1 university with better soccer and academics
- Now a husband and father (and community leader?)
Lingering questions

What are the dangers of a status orientation?

• Students aspiring to unrealistic goals
  – Transferring to R1 school (e.g., Najib)
  – Majoring in pre-med (vs. other health sciences program)
• Expecting high grades; resisting critical feedback

How can an awareness of status-oriented discourse inform educational policy and pedagogy?

• Honest but encouraging conversations about students’ hopes and dreams (“critical caring” - Valenzuela, 1999)
  – “I’m gonna just say, this is about making family…. [B]ring all kids together and [tell] them ‘…We’ll be working hard on you…’” (Najib)
• Opportunities for students to serve and to lead
  – “Give me one minute, and I’ll impress you. Just one minute!” (student protester)
Possibilities for future research

**Longitudinal:**

• How do RB students interpret the value of their education in the short term? In the long-term?
  – (e.g. What will Najib say in another 5 years?)

**Pedagogical:**

• How can we draw on RB students’ “funds of knowledge” to promote cultural competency and global citizenship for all students?

**Theoretical:**

• What are the affordances (and pitfalls?) of an increased focus on “status-orientation” among RB students and other groups?
Thank you!!

These slides will be available on my website:

http://shawnashapiro.com/

Or email: sshapiro@middlebury.edu