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REJECTANCE OF SELF-IDENTIFICATION WITH THE NAME ‘DISPLACED’ AND THE QUESTION OF AGENCY

Based on oral testimonies of internally displaced people from Donbas, Ukraine, the article analyses narrator’s reluctance to identify with the name ‘displaced’, and a link between agency and the category of ‘displaced’.

Key words: internally displaced, Donbas, Ukraine, narrative of displacement, agency.

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Reluctance to identify with the name pereselentsi is also closely linked to the absence of agency, implied by the name. By agency I understand ‘the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power’ [5] and ability to resist circumstances. To paraphrase something one of our narrators, Petro, said off the record after the interview: ‘I am not a displaced/re-settler, nobody displaced/re-settled me, I moved myself’ [‘Я не переселенець, ніхто мене не переселяв, я сам переїхав’]. Another interviewer, Ivan, modified the name pereselentsi (singular form of pereselentsi) into ‘a conscious pereselentsi’. When I asked him for an interview, he replied: ‘However I am quite a conscious pereselentsi’ and I don’t really have any desire to go back. So I am not sure if I fit your project. But I’d be glad to talk.’ [‘Однако я вполне сознательный переселенец и возвращаться назад как-то желания нет совершенно. Так что не знаю, подходите ли. Ну а поговорить я рад’]. When further asked about his self-identification Ivan replied:

In both cases the interviewees emphasise the absence of agency implied by the name pereselentsi, and therefore are reluctant to identify themselves with it. Even though both narrators moved with the escalation of the conflict, they reject representing themselves as victims of the situation. This decision to avoid self-victimisation and resistance to adopting a victim-identity, which is often ascribed to the displaced, is important for the interviewees who aim to move on and to integrate into new communities. Self-perception as agents helps them to adapt to new circumstances, and in fact both of the interviewees succeeded in it.

In addition to victimisation, implied in the names, the fact of naming and categorising somebody as ‘displaced’ leads to imposing on them a certain story, a frame:

Categorizing, creating boundaries, and defining someone as displaced is inherently violent because of the limits of language in fully representing any experience. When we categorize, which is ultimately violent, we routinely make the other abject simply by ordering, by categorizing, or by (violently) representing [1, p. 8].

Categorizing does not only trigger othering, but also causes the exclusion of everything and everybody that does not fit into a created frame. This exclusion is evident in Ivan’s example and his questioning whether his story fitted our project, just because he felt that his testimony did not correspond to a kind of narrative expected from a displaced person.

There was another occasion of an interviewee expressing her doubts of fitting in with the project. Natalia moved to Kyiv just a couple of months before the escalation of the conflict. We arranged to meet for the interview, and just before I started recording, she asked me whether her story suited the project, since she did not move to Kyiv because of the conflict and therefore did not witness violent events. In both cases narrators compared their experiences against narratives which they assumed were expected from them. The mismatch between the expected narratives and their own experiences led them to doubt their right to tell their stories. Thus, petrification of the identity of displaced potentially leads to silencing voices of those who could not fully recognise themselves in that identity. This in turn, creates a danger of perpetuating the circulation of a single narrative of displacement, the one that focuses on victimisation. Consequently, victimisation further propels othering of the displaced.

Powell argues that the displaced stand for ‘our fears of lack of control over land ownership and a claim to “home”’ [1, p. 189] and that is why we have a fascination with their narratives, and yet we constantly other them. Powell continues: ‘we seek the narrative of the displaced, and come to expect a particular kind of narrative from them, to know that we are not them’ [1, p. 189]. Therefore, despite the fact that it is often aimed to trigger compassion, circulation of narratives of suffering caused by displacement, further perpetuates the othering of the displaced, instead of facilitating their integration into new communities. Moreover, constantly repeating stories of suffering we petrify the narrative of victim associated with displacement, and as a consequence exclude other narratives which differ from it, or suggest different experiences.

The experience of a victim is already written into displacement narrative by the fact that it presumably begins with the involuntary abandonment of one’s home. The UNESCO definition of displaced person states:
The displacement of people refers to the forced movement of people from their locality or environment and occupational activities. It is a form of social change caused by a number of factors, the most common being armed conflict. Natural disasters, famine, development and economic changes may also be a cause of displacement [6].

Many of our interviewees hesitated to identify with the term ‘displaced’ or pereperešenni, because they did not claim the military conflict as their only reason for relocation. Several of the interviewees named lack of opportunities in their home cities, as the reason for moving, even if their decision was prompted by the escalation of the conflict. As an example, I provide a beginning of an interview with Mykhailo:

**Interviewer:** When did the turning point happen, when you realised that you are moving from Donetsk?

**Mykhailo:** That I am moving from Donetsk? I guess, when I was 10. Now I am 27, and when I was 10 I decided that I didn’t want to live in this city. I mean, all my conscious life I knew... I remember the other moment, I remember the first time I had a thought I could live in this city for my whole life...

In his answer Mykhailo subverts the narrative I implied in my question: that his decision to move was caused by the conflict. By answering that he was ten years old, he turns my question from the one addressed to a displaced person into a question, that could be asked of anybody who moved to another city for whatever reason. In this short fragment, Mykhailo manifests agency twice: first by changing the meaning of my question and taking control over the narrative, and second time by shifting his decision to move away from Donetsk to an earlier moment in time than I presumed. So, if we had to compare my expectation and his answer in relation to a chronological order of events, it would look like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Actual Decision</th>
<th>Expected Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Escalation of the conflict</td>
<td>Move to Kyiv</td>
<td>Move to Kyiv</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Just like Ivan in the interview I quoted earlier says that he moved because ‘the moment came a long time ago’ ['момент давно подошёл'], Mykhailo presents himself not as a victim fleeing from the conflict, but as somebody, who decided to move a while ago and finally did it. The escalation of the conflict just prompted the relocation, it was not the main cause of it. Both Mykhailo and Ivan see themselves as agents, not victims.

Another interviewee, Maria, reflecting on her experience of moving claims it being slightly joyful, in contrast to an expected narrative of trauma:

Maria subverts the expected narrative of displacement – of suffering, by saying that for her everything happened ‘with a bit of joy’ ['немножко с радостью'], thus her representation of the experience of displacement is not purely tragic, but a more complex one: the loss of home is mixed with happiness of finally deciding to move to a place with more opportunities. Therefore, just like Ivan and Mykhailo, Maria rejects self-representation as a victim and manifests agency by shifting her decision to relocate to the days long before the conflict. Here, the conflict pushed her to finally perform the action, but she had the idea before, since her husband always wanted it.

Maria’s mismatch with the expected narrative of displacement is further evident in another moment in her interview, which I quote below:
Maria: Hmm... It’s like, maybe that’s our nature that we would not like to remember... It’s that we turned away from it, and not that... But from the other hand... (we) don’t want to remember, what has passed, passed already... I also read many things on Facebook, the way things smell like home, blahbla... And my mother-in-law managed to send us some things... So she says: “What shall I send you?” And I say: “Try finding that shirt, that skirt... Even though I’ve lived without them for a year, and I think that I can continue living without them... When I came to Kyiv, I understood, that, God, it is possible to live without all, that all things that stayed there and to be OK, to be happy, because the most important thing that you brought with you – your children. And you can manage without a mascara, without a hairpin, or a skirt... That’s why...

Interviewer: Yes, many people tell me that...

Maria: And so like this... And she sent us those things, and I was so excited, I unpacked them, tried to feel the smell, but they smelled like nothing...

Interviewer: Maria: And so like this... And she sent us those things, and I was so excited, I unpacked them, tried to feel the smell, but they smelled like nothing...

Ah, like it was not mine... So it made me even more upset... I got upset, that... I lived with those things, and the smell, and will keep on living, that those memories were not there, and maybe they don’t exist, and maybe I don’t need them, I don’t know...

Interviewer: Maria: And so like this... And she sent us those things, and I was so excited, I unpacked them, tried to feel the smell, but they smelled like nothing...

It would be wrong to state that Maria or other interviewees do not express any feelings of nostalgia or separate themselves completely from the military conflict or other displacement in their narratives. All of the testimonies contain often contradictory perspectives and inconsistencies, because there is no fixed narrative that can reflect their experience. Therefore, it is important to be aware of the restrictions that the identity of an IDP or pereselents’ and the displacement narrative associated with it impose on everybody, who experienced displacement. Not only do these restrictions compel people narrate their experiences in a certain manner, they also silence the ones, whose stories do not fit into a narrow frame of a pereselents’ identity. Maybe, in order to start understanding the experience of displacement, we, as researchers and cultural agents (Donbas Odyssey), shall learn how not to overlook discrepancies between expected displacement narratives and stories told us by the displaced. This means learning to listen and interpreting with care, without trying to force our interviewees into a certain frame. Perhaps, when we stop looking for ways to victimise displaced in our representations or try to establish another petrified narrative of the experience, we can also stop othering them by projecting our own fears on their stories.

References: