‘Social marginality of a “community of need”: a case study of Bosnian refugees in a Perth public housing estate’

by

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Introduction
Selma arrived in Perth, WA, as a UNHCR-sponsored refugee from Bosnia in 2001. She was 72 at the time. Frail and traumatised by war, she survived the late 1990s, the aftermath of the Bosnian war, in precarious circumstances in Zagreb, Croatia, receiving reluctant help from distant relatives and some assistance from refugee organisations. Selma was hoping that by migrating to Australia, as a few of her acquaintances did before her, she could be reunited with her daughter-in-law and two teenage grandchildren who had migrated a couple of years earlier. The father of the family, Selma’s son, disappeared from the western Bosnian town of Prijedor, along with a number of male Muslim civilians taken away by Serbian paratroops in May 1992, at the very beginning of the Bosnian war. Thirty-two years old at the time, he was never seen again and was suspected dead. Selma single-handedly investigated his disappearance through the military authorities of the newly established ‘Serbian Republic’, with no success. After abandoning hope of ever finding out the truth, Selma fled to Zagreb. She also had two daughters. One was married to a Serb and, at the beginning of the Bosnian war, fled to Serbia with her family. The other daughter fled to Croatia with her husband and children.

Although barely literate, Selma procured her Australian visa from the UNCH post in Zagreb virtually on her own. When she arrived in Perth, she was disappointed to learn that her daughter-in-law was not enthusiastic about the idea of living in the same household. Selma started an independent life helped by CRSS (Community Refugee Settlement Scheme) volunteers. She was housed in a one-bedroom flat in a social housing block owned by the Uniting Church in the centre of the suburb of Subiaco, just across from a large amenities area and close to public transport. She was in regular contact with her daughter-in-law and the grandchildren, who often visited. Selma did not speak any English but was energetic and humorous and within a couple of months she developed an impressive circle of friends, mainly among other recently-arrived Bosnians who lived in the nearby public housing estate known as Wandanna.

I met Selma on an interpreting assignment shortly after she moved into her flat. I accepted her invitation to ‘drop in for a coffee’ thinking how lonely and isolated she must have been, being a recent arrival with no English skills. I was mistaken: there was barely a
day she spent all alone. She enjoyed support from the Uniting Church volunteers well beyond their call of duty; people flocked to her, appreciating her unbendable spirit, dry humour and warm hospitality. She was a nominal Muslim, but only attended a local mosque once ‘out of curiosity’. She cooked a feast for friends and family for Eid (‘Bajram’ in Bosnian), the main Muslim holiday, but she also celebrated Christmas and a host of minor Christian holidays. When the Uniting Church put the block of flats on the market, Selma was moved to Wandanna. She did not mind leaving the cosy flat in a small block and was looking forward to moving closer to her social circle.

The Wandanna public housing estate consists of several buildings, one large high-rise block and several smaller, three to five-storey buildings. It is surrounded by the quiet leafy streets of inner-city Subiaco but, unsurprisingly, rather segregated from its middle-class surroundings (cf. Gwyther 2008, Arthurson 2008). The estate itself is not dissimilar to a typical Bosnian urban environment where very few families lived in detached houses, and the large majority of people lived in publicly-owned subsidised multi-residential buildings. Therefore Wandanna was not an unfamiliar concept to the Bosnian occupants. Wandanna’s inner courtyard was spacious and green and, unlike similar spaces in more densely populated Bosnian towns, usually very quiet. Selma explained this was because no families with children lived there. A typical tenancy of Wandanna was ‘one person per flat’: mainly elderly people, and a number of people with disabilities, a great majority on welfare pensions. A smaller proportion of middle-aged and elderly couples also lived there.

**Method**

My initial acquaintance with Selma soon developed into a pseudo-kin relationship: I was born in the same month and year as her lost son and she virtually adopted me. I visited her regularly and assumed family obligations, which in the circumstances involved facilitating her contacts with the English-speaking people. At the time I met Selma I was starting my postdoctoral research project on the Australian resettlement of Bosnian refugees, focusing on employment and the role of community ties. Through Selma I met her Bosnian friends and neighbours housed in Wandanna, and through their ‘hyper-neighbouring’ (Gwyther 2005) I got to know some of them quite well. My visits provided abundant material for a somewhat unexpected in-depth community case study. My engagement with the Wandanna community of Bosnians, consisting of about twenty households, lasted from January 2001 until Selma’s death in February 2006. The wake after her traditional Muslim funeral at the house of her daughter-in-law was my last contact with this small community.
This paper reports a classic case of participant observation. Many events, observations and quotes I noted down over the years cannot be included in this short paper, which focuses on one aspect of the neighbourhood community: its value in the life of people who are, for whatever reason, ‘needy’. They cannot fully rely on either formal services—in Bosnia because of their scarcity and in Australia because of the language barrier—nor can they participate in an individual market exchange of their work for income to secure their livelihood, the latter mainly because of older age, but also because of the language barrier.

The rest of this paper focuses on issues of public housing, social marginality and community solidarity and cohesion as a response to the circumstances of marginality and ‘neediness’.

**Public housing: the mainstream and cross-cultural perceptions**

Most humanitarian arrivals in Australia initially receive welfare payments. Sometimes there are other issues, such as mental trauma or health problems, which also qualify them for public housing. In Perth during the 1990s, many Bosnian refugees became public tenants. Many Bosnians I spoke to during my research project—and not only the Wandanna community—saw public housing as a desirable tenure, contrary to its stigmatised nature in the Australian mainstream society (Arthurson 2008). In Bosnia, private home ownership was largely confined to rural areas and the great majority of urban dwellers lived in public housing. This was the ‘normal’, desirable and respectable tenure, whereas private renting conveyed a pariah status—it was extremely expensive as well as insecure and unregulated—and was to be avoided if at all possible. These views continued to be held by Bosnians in Australia, where an entirely different hierarchy of tenures applies.

Many younger Bosnians, who learned the language and were in paid employment, made homeownership their high priority—and a significant proportion indeed achieved this goal after a short time in Australia (Colic-Peisker 2005). The Wandanna community, however, due to their age, welfare dependency and mainly single status, considered public housing as their final solution, and a good one at that. The main grudge against Australian private renting across the Bosnian community was frequent moves. Bosnia is generally a much less mobile society than Australia and the idea of residential mobility has never been connected with ‘moving up’, but rather with some kind of undesirable life instability.

A conventional Australian view of public housing occupants associates such populations with social disadvantage and marginality. Public housing is also associated with unemployment, delinquency and deviance through a ‘moral underclass’ discourse (Arthurson 2004). In terms of community support and connectedness, however, the Bosnian community
in Wandanna appears as a paragon of communitarian virtue, especially when compared with the surrounding highly private, car-dependent and impersonal middle-class areas with their leafy but deserted streets. The Wandanna residents knew each other and engaged in small talk in the lift, in the corridors and in communal spaces, often despite the language barrier, and helped each other if help was needed. Selma soon knew the caretaker as well as her Polish, Australian and other elderly neighbours. She also found a way to be transferred from a ground floor flat next to the lift she didn’t like to a much nicer third-floor abode with a spacious balcony and a good view.

Socio-economic basis of community cohesion: a cross cultural perspective
Selma’s unwavering hospitality had made her the focal point of this small community. Whenever I visited, she shared news about the Bosnian community, which was a mixture of Muslims, Serbs and Croats. Ethnicity was never an issue: a bond of common fate—being a refugee thrown into an alien world—was much stronger than the political divisions of the Bosnian war.

The community, accommodated in the high-rise public housing building in a large Australian city, kept the mentality of a small Bosnian town: everyone’s past life, current circumstances, daily habits and problems were well known to others; the shared knowledge maintained through gossip represented a bonding force of the community. The solidarity and firm ‘moral infrastructure’ (Gwyther 2008:5) of the community meant that people helped each other in more than trivial ways: they lent money to each other; if someone was ill others would supply home-made meals and do the shopping for the temporarily incapacitated; they kept each other’s keys. The few people who owned cars helped with transport of larger items and procured cheaper bulk food from farms around Perth.

Relatively segregated and immobile, Bosnians in Wandanna only marginally acculturated into an ‘Australian way of life’. Generally, this is considered problematic, but in this particular case it was of little consequence. Due to a high level of internal community cohesion, or strong ‘bonding ties’, enabling them to meet their practical and emotional needs, a lack of ‘bridging’ social networks in the mainstream community (Korac 2005), or what Granovetter (1974) called ‘weak ties’, was not felt as a disadvantage.

Australian ethnic studies literature recognises that in the culture of many non-English-speaking-background (NESB) migrant groups the collective aspect of living is more salient than in the individualistic culture of Anglo-Australia (Tisay 1985; Thomas 1999; Colic-Peisker and Walker 2003). There are at least two immediate reasons for the strong community cohesion among Bosnians. The first is a socio-psychological tendency of people to stick
together in times of hardship. Leaving the homeland is more difficult for older people and those with limited human capital (English proficiency and formal skills). Communitarian tendencies—residential concentration and various forms of community support—are shown to be generally more pronounced in migrants from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Gans 1962; Morawska 2004; Colic-Peisker 2008).

The second reason is that in Bosnia, a cohesive and supportive local community, which includes extended family, neighbours and friends, is necessary for everyday functioning and economic survival. People tend to rely on help from their densely-knit local community for things as varied as finding employment, painting a house, fixing a car, baby-sitting or borrowing money for larger expenses, as both government-funded social services and the private service sector (trade and professional services) are less developed, and the latter is also unaffordable for people on average incomes. In the highly urbanised affluent Australia these services take a form of commercial transactions performed by employment agencies, banks, real estate agencies, trades people etc. Recent Bosnian arrivals retained the old cultural practices of exchanging services within their local community, which saved their scarce financial resources and strengthened their community at the same time.

From a mainstream Australian perspective, such densely-knit communities are usually perceived as a residue of the traditional lifestyle at odds with the modern, or ‘postmodern’, lifestyle—which is basically true. Bypassing professional services has a two-fold effect: on the one hand (in the case of refugees who are eligible for many publicly-funded services) it treads lightly on social services and thus curiously aligns with a neo-liberal emphasis on under-funding social services and emphasising self-reliance of individuals and communities (Hulse and Stone 2007; Gwyther 2008:3). On the other hand, community self-help and exchange of free labour does not support the mainstream economy: patently, these people are not good tax payers and good consumers who make the wheels of capitalism turning. The political economy of the ‘community of need’ is non-market-based and non-capitalist. Its members are also outsiders: people on the margins of cultural, social and economic systems of mainstream Australia. Their community’s social capital is reflected in the density of internal ties and the strength of the obligation to assist, while the economic success and status of the community in the context of larger society is secondary.

**Coping with marginality: the impact of gender and age**

There was a gender dimension to this community of need. Women were the main care providers—in cooking and sharing meals and caring for the unwell, for example. While
women worked more, and men could be considered privileged in this respect, women’s community labour provided them with a sense of purpose, while men seemed to adjust to their new environment with more difficulty. Men often regretted their loss of status upon leaving their original communities and complained about the pressures of adjusting to a new life, although in the Wandanna community only one man was younger than 55 and therefore exposed to the stress of looking for paid work. Following migration to a culturally distant environment, and especially in forced migration, it seems that women tend to adjust better because their private caring roles are more easily transferable to the new environment, while typical male roles (breadwinning, fixing cars, maintaining the house) are taken away from them. Therefore, in this case patriarchy may have worked for the advantage of women. Several women from the Bosnian Wandanna community were also helping their employed children by babysitting their grandchildren and even helped them financially, notwithstanding their own low incomes.

Clearly, the social exclusion of the Bosnian Wandanna community on two important levels—from paid work and from mainstream social networks—did not result in widespread deviance (as externalised dissatisfaction) or depression (an internalised dissatisfaction), apart from a couple of men having an alcohol problem. The relative satisfaction of Bosnians in spite of their objective social exclusion can be credited largely to the densely-knit and supportive neighbourhood community. Some general psycho-sociological factors may also have been at play: for example, Tran and Nguyen (1994:335) argued that ‘immigration seems to exert different social and psychological effects on people from different age groups’ and found a significantly lower sense of life satisfaction in younger men (<40) compared to that of older refugee men (>50). While this is not likely to reflect the objectively better life situation of older refugees, it may reflect higher expectations of younger people and consequent dissatisfaction. In fact older refugees had poorer English and a higher risk of being unemployed, but showed higher satisfaction with housing condition, neighbourhood and were generally more satisfied (Tran and Nguyen 1994:332). Older people are also less affected by acculturation stress and dissonant acculturation of parents and children that may lead to intergenerational conflict within a migrant family.

Conclusion

Bosnians at Wandanna were by any official measure a marginal community: they arrived in Australia as refugees, were largely welfare-dependent and most of them spoke little or no English. They lived in a stigmatised type of housing and they remained almost totally isolated from mainstream society. However, an unexpected opportunity for participant observation
afforded to the researcher revealed the community’s impressive resilience and vitality. Their community solidarity clearly grew out of shared disadvantage and a lack of social and spatial mobility. The fact that back in Bosnia they had lived in a similar local community setup made this self-help framework ‘natural’ and easily rebuilt. This face-to-face place-based community was far removed from the postmodern trend of disengagement with local community and stretching social interactions to multiple locations and life settings, but was not dysfunctional within its wider social context.

Unmistakably, the sense of exclusion from the mainstream society was present, expressed through an ‘us (Bosnians) and them (Australians)’ discourse. However, the exclusion was accepted as ‘natural’ and, as it was not coupled with a sense of social entitlement or status aspirations, it did not produce dissatisfaction, resistance or anger. According to official classifications, these Bosnians lived below the poverty line, but this did not match their own perception of their circumstances.

Community is normally conceived as providing practical and emotional support. In mainstream Australian society, practical support is relegated to formal services and the only ‘task’ of informal friendly networks is emotional bonding and support. However, communities and friends whose interaction is limited to leisure pursuits spend very little time together. In a society where life-work balance is seriously skewed towards overwork, leisure activities are time-limited and rarely create firm emotional and moral attachments between people. In a competitive individualistic society these interactions are more often marked by status contest than by genuine affection. ‘Communities of need’ are clearly different: they bind people through daily activities through which they help each other and exchange skills and labour. This allows stronger multi-dimensional and ‘moral’ bonds to develop.

It is known that in a time of need, or when sudden adversity strikes, community bonds flourish and people get to know and appreciate one another. On the contrary, and somewhat paradoxically, the stable, affluent and services-rich society we live inherently diminishes community bonds: the opportunity for spontaneous human cooperation and development of attachments through helping each other is simply not there. If there is no practical need for a strong community, it is hard to develop community attachments. If community is indeed ‘lost’ in modern society (Gwyther 2008), there are compelling structural reasons for it.

People on the margins of society need each other more and in the process of managing their lives they may develop strong communities. A society driven by the economic ‘bottom line’ may perceive the marginal as a ‘moral underclass’. However, upon closer examination,
one can discover functional socio-cultural elements that are missing in the mainstream community. While avoiding unduly romanticising this small marginal community of elderly refugees, one cannot escape the feeling that in some sense they can be considered exemplars of communitarian virtue rather than a moral underclass of welfare-dependent public housing tenants. The mainstream view often rigidly stereotypes out-of-the-mainstream communities and subcultures and a cross-cultural view is needed to understand their inner workings. This applies not only to recent migrants and refugees but also to various marginalised subcultures usually viewed with suspicion.

References


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