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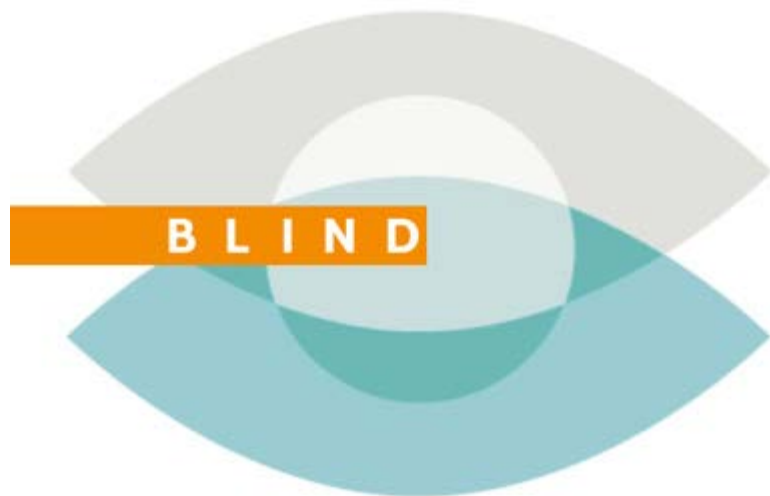
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Categories and labels in emergency governance

door Polly Pallister-Wilkins

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De media wordt op dit moment gedomineerd door de vluchtelingenproblematiek. Hoe gaan we de vluchtelingen stoppen, of hoe vangen we ze op? Hoe gaan we deze mensen in Europa verdelen en hoe verbeteren we de opvangplekken voor vluchtelingen in de regio zelf? Kortom, de vluchteling staat centraal. In dit artikel laat Polly Pallister een ander licht schijnen op dit vraagstuk. Ze gaat in op de vraag waarom, en op welke manieren, categorieën voor mensen worden toegepast in alledaagse praktijken van het besturen en controleren van crisis. Naast verschillende voorbeelden van categorisatie zet zij kritische kanttekeningen bij de onvermijdelijke labelingsprocessen. Er bestaat bijvoorbeeld een wereld van verschil tussen de labels *economic migrant* en *expatriate (expat)*, maar zijn er wel wezenlijke verschillen?

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Recently there has been a lot of political and social tumult about the growing number of people trying to enter Europe. This current crisis not only puts pressure on Mediterranean countries as they struggle to handle with the extreme numbers of newcomers, it is also a useful starting point for an examination into the ways in which different categories concerning humans are employed in everyday practices of governance. Even a cursory glance at the language used to talk about the events taking place in the Mediterranean right now, shows the different labels attached to human beings. We see discussions about refugees, migrants and asylum seekers, talk of smugglers and traffickers and differentiation between border control and search and rescue. A discussion about these different categories and their usage is not an academic discussion alone because these distinctions, these differences, have real-world consequences and come to affect people's lives—their presents and their futures. These categories come to tell us something about the world we have constructed for ourselves as it is concerned with

producing social order from the complexity and potential chaos of human experience.

Why grouping and framing in governance is so important

An exploration of these different categories uncovers the inherent problems in our cognitive- and human need to delimit and bound complexity of human experience. As said, this is done in order to make sense of the world and in addition to be able to take action (Jones, 2009). Action here relates to the ways human beings have developed over time; processes designed to govern other human beings, to ensure order and to maintain life. That categories are constructed by people is important to understand, but likewise is the fact there is no way out of processes of categorisation or labelling. Grouping and giving names to collections of things is a central human characteristic. Further categorisation is an attempt to bring sense to a reality so vast and complex that efforts to comprehend it will always involve a level of abstraction. Nonetheless, labels matter and they matter for the following reasons. Firstly, by placing people and things into particular order; they make some more worthy or powerful than others. Secondly, they are necessary for order, meaning they are necessary for the governance of people and things.

In the Mediterranean crisis this works in a number of ways; framing the problem in a specific way, creating categories of people that make them more manageable and often work to frame their futures. In the Mediterranean we see efforts to frame the events themselves as a crisis or an emergency. This means that the complex structural causes underpinning how thousands of people have come to drown, attempting to enter Europe, are reduced to the category of ‘crisis’ or an ‘emergency’. This helps us to limit the problem, fixing it to a space—the Mediterranean—and a time—now—even when the forces that have generated current events are found in many other places, Syria, Eritrea, Libya, the restrictive border control policies of European governments, and many have long histories. The label of ‘crisis’ is productive here. It does something to a set of events, relationships and people, producing them as something else, something more abstract and manageable, flattening diversity into what appear to be uniform groups. These uniform groups are simpler. The label or category here packs the messiness of human experience and subject hood into a neater package. Once repackaged into a neater and more manageable whole it becomes easier to take action, to think of and enact ways of alleviating problems (Jeandesboz & Pallister-Wilkens, 2014).

This is one of the key tools of government, the ability to reduce the intricacy of everyday life into something governable by grouping things together and then acting on these groups in different ways. Governments need to know what people are in simple terms in order to know what to do with them. In terms of what is happening in the Mediterranean right now this works in a number of ways. It works at this very moment the authorities—be they Italian, Maltese, Greek or one of the many other European states operating in the region currently—come into contact with those risking their lives fleeing violence and poverty. When contact is made between Europeans and those who wish for some kind of future in Europe, decisions are taken as to whether these people are a group to be intercepted and ‘policed’ as a risk group trying to cross Europe’s borders and enter European space, or are they a group at risk who need to be rescued.

The end result in this instance might be the same—groups of humans collected and processed by the authorities in ports dotted about the Mediterranean—but the reasons given for intervening in their journeys depends on processes of categorisation. Is the boat in distress, are these people in need of rescue or is the boat fine and do we need to intercept them? These are important distinctions for how we come to think about what is happening in the Mediterranean. Are the events of recent weeks to be characterized as a noble effort to save the lives of fellow humans at risk or are European efforts an attempt to staunch the flow of the unfortunate?

The migrant, the refugee and the expatriate: what’s the difference?

The labelling of those taking the boats and those who die as migrants or refugees does multiple things too. It may for example articulate a particular political agenda. Refugee—whilst a distinct legal category one can be registered as by the United

Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)—is seen as more positive and once categorised as a refugee you are believed to be much more in need of help. The label of refugee works to produce the human being as a victim who needs the intervention of others more powerful than themselves, to provide them with shelter, food and the means to live. The categorisation of refugee works to make this intervention a reality as it mobilises action. Migrant on the other hand, while a more generic label to denote someone who moves, is often associated with those less worthy and is often prefaced with the term economic, so that economic migrant comes to be seen as someone seeking to exploit resources and opportunities and not someone genuinely in need of help.

These categories of uniformity often conceal more than they illuminate, as they cannot ever come close to ably capturing the full life-world of the humans to which they are attached. That said they are important to consider, as they are not benign attributions, but words that work to produce very different outcomes for those human beings to whom they become attached. They determine who is eligible for assistance and who is not, who is allowed to stay and who is not, who is seen as a victim and who is ‘someone on the take’. These labels bring with them particular imageries, where refugee is often imagined to be the vulnerable looking mother and child in need of food and shelter, whereas migrant is often visualised as a strong looking young man who can take care of himself. This works in talking about migration when considering a number of other categories also.

Think about the term expatriate; an all-together more positive term than migrant. But what actually is the difference? The difference is often racial and coloured by class. Imagine an expatriate. Have you imagined a white, well-educated, middle class person? That’s OK. Imagine a migrant and what do you see? I myself am frequently referred to as an expatriate. As a non-Dutch person—or allochtoon—working in the Netherlands, I can avail myself of the services offered to me by the ‘Expatriate Centre’ in Amsterdam. But why am I an expatriate with a privileged tax status when—as someone who moved to the Netherlands for work, to get a better job, make more money and to avail myself of better opportunities than I had in my home country—I am also an economic migrant? This is not an unimportant observation. To be seen as an expatriate is to be accorded a different status, to be seen positively, to avoid the racism so often meted out to those who are believed to be economic migrants ‘on the take’ coming ‘here’ to exploit ‘our’ resources. It means that when discussing the issue of economic migration and declaring myself to be an economic migrant I am frequently told: “not people like you.” But if not me, then who?

Different emergencies ask for different ways of categorisation

There are other ways in which categorisation works to place people into particular orders in emergency settings. When dealing with people in need and when resources are limited, decisions have to be taken in a variety of ways. The processes known collectively as ‘triage’, seek to make quick decisions about a person’s needs whereupon that person is categorised and then treated accordingly. Here the category given during triage works to determine what treatment the person receives, what they are entitled to and where they go. Most commonly associated with the medical world and developed historically in military hospitals, triage is a form of sorting and works to maximise efficiency in emergency settings. In a hospital, patients are assessed according to the level of their injuries and sent to the appropriate places to receive treatment or in the worse cases are categorised as being beyond help (Redfield, 2013). Think of your local emergency room where those with severe injuries—the traffic accident victim—or life threatening conditions—the person having a heart attack—are prioritised and receive treatment before the patient with the broken arm.

We have seen such practices put to use recently in the governance of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, where specialist Ebola Treatment Centres instituted elaborate processes of triage to sort and prioritise Ebola patients according to risk categories. Here triage had two principle logics, one to channel medical care most effectively and two, to keep the risk of transmission to a minimum. To do this, Ebola Treatment Centres enacted systems of triage spatially, channelling and controlling different spaces and movements throughout the Centres according to processes of prioritisation and risk.

Sorting bodies for treatment also works in systems designed to govern the distribution of scarce provisions, such as medicine or food, in times of conflict, severe medical emergencies, such as Ebola or AIDS or in times of famine. Here pragmatic decisions are taken to save the most number of people in the most efficient ways possible, prioritising those who have the most chance to survive while ‘black-stickering’ those with the least chance of survival. Here emergency workers can literally make themselves the arbiters over life and death. If this seems ethically problematic it can also be seen as ethically problematic when faced with limited resources not to try and prioritise the best use of those resources. In taking these decisions humanitarian workers have developed a whole host of systems and tools that aim to rationalise the process.

MUAC: the bracelet of life

One such development is a simple tool designed to determine on a case-by-case basis, which children are malnourished enough to receive special treatment. The Mid-Upper Arm Circumference (MUAC) Band is a piece of plastic used for measuring the extent of malnutrition in children aged between six months and five years. As the name suggests it is wrapped around the mid-upper arm, halfway between the elbow and the shoulder. It is colour coded from green through yellow to orange and then finally red. The different colours are used to determine the level of malnutrition, with green indicating ‘normal’ and an acceptable level of nourishment, yellow suggesting moderate malnourishment, orange considerable malnourishment and red indicates severe malnourishment. In different contexts decisions are then made based on these colours regarding which children get special ‘super-food’, and specially tailored therapeutic feeding programmes.

(Note: For more on the specifics of Ebola Treatment Centres see [Médecins Sans Frontières interactive guide](#).)

Importantly the MUAC Band removes the measuring of malnutrition from the sphere of expert decision making. Specialist medical doctors with the requisite knowledge are no longer needed to assess the nutrition of children. Anyone who can read and interpret the meanings of the different colours can use it. The MUAC Band has come to replace a combination of scales, various measurements and complex calculations based on height and weight. As a result the Band can be read even by those who lack basic literacy skills as the colours used are designed to universally articulate the level of risk: green for go/safety and red for stop/danger.

Furthermore the humanitarian is no longer expected to make what could be considered a subjective decision over malnutrition and subsequently life or death. It removes the decision over which child gets special, often life saving intervention and gives that power to the Band that effectively makes the decision of categorisation for the worker. The decision is taken by the band in a way akin to that well known meme: ‘computer says no’. It removes the difficulty of decision making from the individual and gives it over to an object that can then be made responsible for any subsequent decisions. This displacement of technocratic decision making is designed to reduce the ethical controversies around life saving decisions from those involved in managing humanitarian emergencies, placing decisions over life and death onto a piece of plastic as opposed to leaving it with an individual who then has to carry around the weight of that decision. As such the MUAC Band has earned the nickname ‘Bracelet of Life’ not without reason (Scott-Smith, 2013).

These are just some illustrations of the ways in which categorisation and labelling work in emergency settings and humanitarian practices. The actions being performed in the Mediterranean right now are part of a genealogy of government with long roots that extend far beyond the specifics of drowning migrants and involve rationalities of government that are employed far beyond the shores. Categorisation also forms a central part of governing life in a range of other settings. It is often empirically easier to see the productive power of categorisation in emergency settings such as in famines and to politically uncover what categorisation does through the use of various objects of technologies such as the MUAC Band. Still it is important to remember that these processes are also performed in our daily lives in everyday forms of government and come to shape the societies that we know so well and in many cases take for granted as somehow natural.

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