

TALKING ABOUT REFUGEES: FINDING BALANCE ON THE SPECTRUM

The background of the entire page is a gradient of light blue to white. In the lower half, there is a dark silhouette of a hill. On the hill, three figures are visible: a small child on the left, a person with a backpack in the middle, and a person holding a large umbrella on the right. Several birds are scattered across the sky, appearing as dark silhouettes against the light background.

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LANGUAGE MATTERS

Conversations about refugees often take place on a spectrum. On the left end of the spectrum, there are narratives that frame refugees negatively, and on the right side, there are narratives that portray refugees positively. What even well-meaning supporters of refugees often miss, however, is that **both** ends of the spectrum can have harmful effects.

NEGATIVE

POSITIVE

In this guide, we'll take a look at four harmful narratives on the spectrum with a particular focus on two overlooked positive characterizations. We'll also talk about how to make our conversations about refugees more balanced and constructive. While the focus here is on refugees, think about how these topics can also apply to other immigrant groups.

Let's start by looking at some negative refugee narratives, which are usually the easiest to identify and receive the most attention.

NEGATIVE

VILIFICATION

PATRONIZATION

VILIFICATION

Vilification is used to depict refugees as dangerous and problematic for national security, the economy, community values, and so forth.

Rooted in longstanding myths/disinformation, xenophobia, and racism, this narrative is employed far more often by refugees' detractors than their advocates.





PATRONIZATION

Patronization occurs when there's an unequal relationship between refugees and those supporting them. This often stems from paternalism, privilege, and white saviorism. Patronization can be overt or subtle, and well-intentioned people can easily end up perpetuating it if they don't reflect on their interactions with refugees.

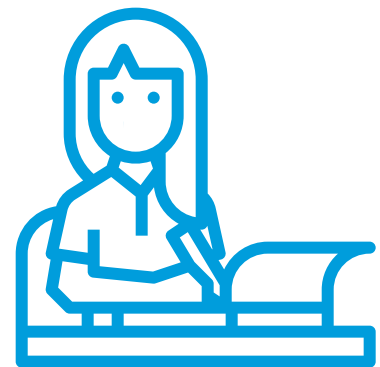
Some examples of patronization include:

- Discussing refugees disproportionately through the lens of trauma and suffering.
- Using language and imagery that depicts refugees as disempowered, weak, passive, childlike, broken, and lost.
- Failing to acknowledge that refugees bring just as much to the table as anyone else.

Discussion and deconstruction of vilification and patronization have increased in recent years, and rightly so. Let's now take a look at narratives that receive less attention because they are on the "positive" end of the spectrum.

These characterizations seem to assign positive connotations to refugees but actually perpetuate harmful notions of their own. Unfortunately, many supporters of refugees feed into these narratives in their advocacy efforts.

In *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*, Dina Nayeri (author of *The Ungrateful Refugee*) describes two interconnected and "positive" characterizations that she encountered frequently as a refugee from Iran.



POSITIVE

GRATEFULNESS

EXCEPTIONALITY

GRATEFULNESS



The gratefulness narrative depicts refugees as benevolent and positive additions to a country because they are thankful for their new lives and opportunities.

Gratefulness in and of itself is certainly not a bad thing, but what makes the gratefulness narrative so dangerous is how it makes gratefulness an expectation. In other words, refugees who are deemed insufficiently grateful are considered less deserving.

Additional layers of harm are created with how people measure gratefulness. When Dina Nayeri moved to a town in Oklahoma, she quickly saw how gratefulness was the key to her family's acceptance – and it wasn't just a state of mind, but also a set of expected behaviors:

“

...we sensed the ongoing expectation that we would shed our old skin, give up our former identities – every quirk and desire that made us us – and that we would imply at every opportunity that America was better, that we were so lucky, so humbled to be here.

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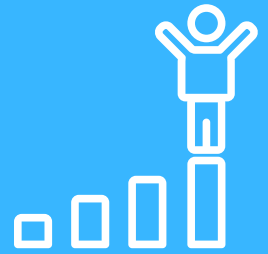
But there were unspoken conditions to our acceptance, and that was the secret we were meant to glean on our own: we had to be grateful... As refugees, we owed them our previous identity. We had to lay it at their door like an offering, and gleefully deny it to earn our place in this new country... That was the key to being embraced by the population of our town, a community that openly took credit for the fact that we were still alive, but wanted to know nothing of our past.

”

THE GRATEFULNESS NARRATIVE HAS THE FOLLOWING EFFECTS:

- It pressures refugees to adopt a palatable American identity while putting away (and putting down) their existing identity and home country.
- It imposes the biases, expectations, and emotions of longstanding Americans on newcomers.
- It leaves no room for rightful criticism of systems and situations that harm refugees. Some examples of harm include xenophobia in America and American policies that contribute to displacement.
- It places refugees in a position of continual debt to their new country, which is a burden that isn't placed on other Americans.
- It feeds the notion that only those who profess and demonstrate gratitude are worthy of resettlement, safety, and decent treatment.

EXCEPTIONALITY



The exceptionalism narrative frames refugees as an asset to their new country because of their positive qualities and accomplishments.

You might be thinking, But refugees are exceptional! I know lots of refugees who have overcome extremely difficult circumstances and achieved so much!

And yes, there are many remarkable and resilient refugees as well as a wealth of evidence showing their many contributions to the countries they settle in. There's no reason to downplay the real successes of refugees, especially when countering disinformation. However, there are dangers in making exceptionalism the focus of advocacy.

Let's turn once again to Dina Nayeri's words on the matter:

“My accomplishments should belong only to me. There should be no question of earning my place, of showing that I was a good bet. My family and I were once humans in danger, and we knocked on the doors of every embassy we came across... It is the obligation of every person born in a safer room to open the door when someone in danger knocks. It is your duty to answer us, even if we don't give you sugary success stories.

“But isn't glorifying the refugees who thrive according to Western standards just another way to endorse this same gratitude politics? Isn't it akin to holing up the most acquiescent as examples of what a refugee should be, instead of offering each person the same options that are granted to the native-born citizen? Is the life of the happy mediocrity a privilege reserved for those who never stray from home?”

THE EXCEPTIONALITY NARRATIVE HAS THE FOLLOWING EFFECTS:

- It places an undue expectation on refugees to prove their worth, which is not an expectation other Americans have to face.
- It reinforces the idea that humans' value comes from what they produce (often in an economic sense) and not their innate worth.
- It leaves little room for the struggle, trauma, and pain that often come with refugee experiences. It also implies that ordinary lives are inadequate.
- It feeds the gratefulness narrative since exceptionalism is seen as a sign of gratitude.
- It can feed the vilification narrative if refugees' success comes to be seen as a threat to other Americans (and a threat to the gratefulness narrative).

REFLECTION

Spend some time thinking through how you talk about refugees:

- Can you think of any other negative or positive narratives that can be included on this spectrum?
- Where have you noticed these four narratives show up?
- Do you find yourself contributing to any of the four narratives? If so, why is that the case?
- How do your values and/or faith shape how you think and talk about refugees?
- How do your experiences and/or work shape how you talk about refugees?
- If left unchanged, what impact do you think your rhetoric about refugees could have on how others perceive them?

Now you might be wondering, what's in the middle of the spectrum?
How can we avoid feeding into harmful narratives about refugees?

The key is to approach refugees through a lens of common humanity. They're not villains, they're not people to be patronized, and they're not saints on account of their gratitude or exceptionalism. Refugees are ordinary people who faced (and often continue to face) difficult circumstances.



NEGATIVE

COMMON HUMANITY

POSITIVE

APPLICATION

How can we talk about refugees in a way that honors their humanity and avoids feeding harmful narratives? Here's a few ideas to put into practice:

- Make refugees' inherent value and rights the the foundation of your conversations.
- To counter vilification, be active in addressing disinformation and prejudice, but be careful to not rely on appeals to gratefulness or exceptionalism.
- To counter patronization, talk less about aiding refugees and more about forming mutually transformative relationships.
- To counter the gratefulness and exceptionalism narratives, resist any pressure to place expectations on refugees that are not placed on others.
- Center refugee voices. Refugees are the experts on their own experiences, and their perspectives should ground our conversations about them.

