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International Migrants or Welfare Clients:  
The Selection of a Master  
Status for Indochinese Refugees  
by American Voluntary Agencies

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*Government funding of nonprofit organizations is a dominant trend in American social welfare and it has greatly influenced the voluntary agencies resettling Indochinese refugees. Some agencies identify their clients as international migrants from the Third World, but others view them primarily as welfare recipients. These distinctive master statuses lead agencies to provide different services, thus affecting the refugees' initial adaptation to American society. Religiosity, period of creation, links to the welfare state, and international activities shape the selection of a master status for Indochinese refugees.*

Voluntary agencies once aided arriving refugees without funding from the federal government. But since the 1960s, the privatization of the welfare state has restructured many social welfare organizations (Grønberg, 1982; Kamerman and Khan, 1989; Kramer, 1981), including those in the field of refugee resettlement (Bach, 1988; Rose, 1986; Zucker, 1983). The Refugee Act of 1980 codified the provision of income support and social services to recognized political migrants (Kennedy, 1981; Leibowitz, 1983; Strand and Jones, 1985). It created the Office of Refugee Resettlement in the Department of Health and Human Services: between 1980 and 1990 this office provided state governments with \$710 million for refugee social services and \$3.315 billion for public assistance and medical costs. The Act also established the Bureau for Refugee Programs in the Department of State, which provides a per capita grant of about \$500 to voluntary agencies for each refugee sponsored. These changes in the funding and organization of refugee resettlement caused a

confrontation between voluntary agencies and the welfare state (Hein, 1992).

This paper examines the response of the voluntary agencies to the increased presence of the public social-welfare system in refugee resettlement, specifically their work with refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Over 1 million Indochinese refugees have arrived to the U.S. since 1975. Some refugees, are sponsored by agencies that emphasize their status in the American public assistance system. Others find that their agency defines them as international migrants from the Third World. Each master status leads to different resettlement services and consequently different patterns of adjustment during the initial months of contact between refugee and agency. The paper concludes by suggesting structural factors that explain why voluntary agencies define refugees as international migrants or as welfare clients.

### Data Collection and Methodology

The data presented in this paper was collected through participant observation in a San Francisco voluntary agency during 1984–85. I read several hundred case files on clients, as well as some five years of correspondence with the agency's national office and state and federal refugee bureaus. In addition, I carried out field work: observing clients and caseworkers, assisting with some tasks, and then questioning caseworkers about events that transpired. During my seventh and final month I interviewed all the directors and caseworkers in the seven most active voluntary agencies: six native, white and one Indochinese agency director(s), and eighteen Indochinese caseworkers. I also obtained agency documents and then used them in interviews to determine the formal and informal procedures for resettling refugees.

Two months into the field work, all voluntary agencies adopted a technique called case management: developing an individualized employment plan for new arrivals and referring them to specialized social services depending on their needs. Prior to 1985 caseworkers had little control over a refugee's decision to seek employment, receive public assistance, or obtain

social services. The switch to the case management approach set up a "natural experiment." Agencies had to change their resettlement activities and I was able to observe them before and after the introduction of this new variable.

While conducting fieldwork I used a technique for analyzing qualitative data termed "the constant comparative method" (Glasser and Strauss, 1980). This technique requires the investigator to simultaneously gather data, code them, and make generalizations by comparing and revising coding categories. The initial comparison was between documents and caseworkers' actual practices at one agency. It then evolved into a comparison between the director's policies and the daily activities of the caseworkers. The case management project revealed the profound differences among voluntary agencies and the final comparison was between types of agency-client relations. The "grounded theory" developed with this method distinguished between voluntary agencies that treated their clients as "international migrants" or "welfare recipients." Directors, policies, caseworkers' routines, and agencies' documents all varied according to this distinction.

### Voluntary Agencies and Refugee Resettlement

Since 1975, the federal government has funded 14 voluntary agencies to resettle Indochinese refugees and there are many differences among them (see Table 1 and Glossary for identification of agencies). HIAS originated during the early 1900s in response to the settlement needs of Russian Jews, although it began work in Europe several decades earlier. The arrival of European refugees before World War Two and then displaced persons after the war produced seven other agencies. Three agencies developed in response to the Indochinese refugee crisis.

Agencies vary not only by their seniority but also by the degree to which they have an ethnic or religious affiliation. Three agencies (AFCR, IRC, and TR) began by assisting ethnic groups from Central Europe (Czechs, Germans, and White Russians, respectively). When the Indochinese arrived, refugees from these earlier cohorts were still represented among top executives and members of the board of trustees. The ACNS,

Table 1

*Historical Characteristics of American Voluntary Agencies*

Agency	Affiliation	Year of origin	Years Working With Indochinese	% of all Indochinese Resettled*
ACNS	Nonsectarian	1930	Since 1975	11
AFCR	Nonsectarian	1948	Since 1975	3
BCRRR	Buddhist	1979	1979-1986	1
CWS	Protestant	1946	Since 1975	9
HIAS	Jewish	1902	Since 1975	3
Idaho	Nonsectarian	1980	1980-1985	1
Iowa	Nonsectarian	1975	Since 1975	1
IRC	Nonsectarian	1933	Since 1975	12
LIRS	Lutheran	1948	Since 1975	5
PBFWR	Episcopalian	1939	Since 1982	1
TF	Nonsectarian	1939	Since 1975	2
USCC	Catholic	1936	Since 1975	43
WRRS	Evangelical	1945	Since 1975	5
YMCA	Christian	1844	1980-1983	2

\*For fiscal year 1981, the year with the second largest number of Indochinese refugee arrivals (131,000) and when all but one agency were in operation. The figure for PBFWR is for 1982. Total does not equal 100 due to rounding.

Source: Kelly, 1977, p. 152; U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1986, 1987, 1988; North, Lewin, & Wagner, 1982, p. 27.

which originated during the settlement house movement for immigrants, is the only agency that has historically lacked an ethnic or religious affiliation. The Idaho and Iowa agencies are state governments which could not legally have a religious orientation. Although eight agencies identify with a religion, they vary in their use of religious philosophy and institutions. Those that utilize church groups as sponsors (such as CWS and WRRS) carry much of their religious background into their contact with refugees. Agencies that provide services through caseworkers (such as HIAS and USCC) bring comparatively little theology to their work.

The migration of Cuban refugees to Florida during the 1960s first brought voluntary agencies into contact with the public

social welfare system (Taft, North, and Ford, 1980). In 1975, voluntary agencies received federal funds to resettle Indochinese refugees throughout the country (Kelly, 1977). Then the Refugee Act of 1980 formalized federal funding for nonprofit agencies working with political migrants, thrusting the welfare state fully into the previously privatized field of refugee resettlement (Wright, 1981). A large increase in the admission of Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians during the early 1980s set the stage for extended interaction between voluntary agencies and refugees under the auspices of federal social-welfare bureaucracies. By 1982, about two-thirds of Indochinese refugees in the U.S. less than three years were receiving public assistance (U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, 1982, 1983). Some voluntary agencies responded to these changes by emphasizing their clients' status as welfare recipients in the U.S., while others continued to emphasize their status as international migrants from the Third world.

### Agencies Select a Master Status for Refugees

In most social welfare agencies a client's "cooperation is neither actively coerced nor freely given, but, rather, it emerges from the structure of alternatives" (Lipsky, 1980, p.117). According to Lipsky, agencies tend to "obtain client cooperation with client-processing procedures." One of the most significant social control mechanisms is the ability to shape clients' identity (Miller, 1986). Making a single identity disproportionately important allows agencies to define clients' needs and then provide services on the basis of this master status.

Some voluntary agencies process refugees by defining them as international migrants from the Third World. These agencies consider them uprooted newcomers from different cultures, and might be called migration-oriented agencies. Other agencies define these refugees as welfare clients, emphasizing a status acquired in the U.S. rather than a status associated with their flight and ethnicity. These can be called welfare-oriented agencies because they derive a master status from a western institution absent from their clients' homelands: the public social welfare system. The significance of these distinctive

master statuses is that they lead to very different procedures for resettling refugees.

*Caseworkers, Sponsors, and Refugees in San Francisco*

By 1980, California contained one-third of all Indochinese refugees in the U.S. and more than 20,000 lived in San Francisco, giving the city one of the highest refugee concentrations in the state. Voluntary agencies considered San Francisco an "impacted county" and the Bureau for Refuge Programs in the State Department gave it this official designation in 1982. As a result, only refugees sponsored by an immediate relative residing in San Francisco could move there from the refugee camps in Southeast Asia. Termed "the U.S. relative," this individual became responsible for the "core services" normally provided by caseworkers: picking up the new arrival at the airport, locating an apartment, registering the children in school, and obtaining Social Security cards. Voluntary agencies use a document called the "sponsor's statement of responsibility" to define the tasks refugees' kin are expected to undertake.

Voluntary agencies that emphasize their clients' status as international migrants design the sponsor's statement of responsibility with far less specificity than agencies that use the master status welfare client. At the former type of agency, the document lists few mandatory services and usually does not require the signature of the U.S. relative. The directors of the two types of agencies also have different expectations as to the actual use of the document. All four directors at migration-oriented agencies claimed they were willing to have caseworkers do some tasks if necessary, while the three directors at welfare-oriented agencies stated that the documents could not be altered. Two passages from the sponsor's statement of responsibility illustrate these differences with respect to employment:

*Migration-oriented agency:* You and [the voluntary agency] will be working together toward one goal: employment and self-sufficiency for the new arrivals as soon as possible. We ask you to set a good example by being employed, in an approved training program, or actively seeking employment.

*Welfare-oriented agency:* I also agree to the following: Help the refugee(s) locate employment within 90 days of arrival in San

Francisco, including assistance in contacting three places of business each week beginning with their date of arrival, for the purpose of applying for work.

The core services also include teaching refugees unfamiliar with urban America how to obtain food, cash checks, use public transportation, and avoid becoming a crime victim. Migration-oriented agencies allow the U.S. relative to orient their relatives, thus incorporating refugees' kin into service delivery. Conversely, in welfare-oriented agencies a caseworker conducts the orientation session. The director of a welfare-oriented agency stated: "When the U.S. relatives are on welfare we try to keep them out of things; they'll just try to put arrivals on welfare too." Another director at a welfare-oriented agency responded: "We require an in-office orientation. Arrivals meet with their caseworker to discuss our services, welfare, and employment: the client has to understand our role."

Agencies also use the per capita payment from the Department of State to provide cash grants to new arrivals. Migration-oriented agencies allocate grants by need and then give it directly to the new arrival. They consider clients' personal history and giving them the grant promotes autonomy. These agencies usually provide a longer period of support if the client is willing to seek employment. The director of a migration-oriented agency explained: "We give out money by need, but each new arrival gets the same amount in the end. If after a year there is still some of their grant left we send them a notice and they can let us know how they want it spent."

Welfare-oriented agencies give one fixed sum to the U.S. relative. These agencies treat the grant merely as material assistance and giving it to a relative presumes that a new arrival cannot be trusted to spend it wisely. Furthermore, if clients avoid finding work the money may be withheld, thus making the U.S. relative an ally of the agency in order to obtain the grant. A director at a welfare-oriented agency explained: "We give a lump sum of cash and maintenance money. For single refugees it's four weeks; for families it's ten weeks. But it starts only after the first two weeks. If they apply for welfare or refuse employment the money is suspended."



These three measures of voluntary agency services—defining sponsors' tasks, orientating new arrivals, and distributing cash grants—indicate the important differences between migration- and welfare-oriented agencies. The master status international migrant leads to greater autonomy for refugees and gives their kin a role in the resettlement process. Conversely, the master status welfare client gives more control to caseworkers and diminishes the role of refugees' kin. The affect of these master statuses became even more pronounced after 1985 when agencies adopted case management techniques for resettling refugees.

### *Implementing Case Management in Refugee Resettlement*

The case management project introduced the public assistance system's comparatively harsher methods of job placement into the work of San Francisco's voluntary agencies. Agencies began evaluating refugees' employment readiness using a point system derived from the variables age, English level, work history, number of months in the U.S., and level of motivation. Case managers started scheduling clients for Employment Search Activities workshops modeled on the county's Work Incentive Program for non-refugee public assistance cases. And case managers and caseworkers could now withhold public assistance from a refugee who did not cooperate, a process termed "sanctioning."

Voluntary agency directors began recruiting case managers and the hiring process forced them to define the position. If directors wanted the case manager to be a job developer interacting with American employers then, given the applicant pool, they would have to hire a native with administrative skills. But a refugee was clearly needed if the position was to be an employment counselor who would help clients with no work experience in the U.S. become work oriented.

Directors at migration-oriented agencies preferred hiring refugees because, as one stated, "they have an ability to relate to clients, particularly about the case management project and problems of motivation. A close relationship is a key part of mainstreaming people." A director at a welfare-oriented agency conceived of ethnic staff quite differently. He remarked: "The

ideal situation is enough money for professional staff and complementary staff for language—two for each position. But we don't have the funds so it's professional skills versus language. I hired for professional skills." Of the eight case managers hired by migration-oriented agencies, seven were Indochinese and one was a white, native. On the other hand, the welfare-oriented agencies hired two Indochinese and two native, whites.

While directors wrestled with the roles of new staff, Indochinese caseworkers and case managers had to come to terms with their new power to sanction clients' public assistance. Caseworkers at migration-oriented agencies viewed sanctions as appropriate when a client broke the relationship of trust caseworkers believed they had established. One caseworker stated: "You have to have a good reason for sanctioning someone, not just because you have the power. But clients do play games with us, like not showing up for appointments and pretending to be sick." A director of a migration-oriented agency expressed a similar view: "We shouldn't really apply sanctions, that's welfare's job. It mitigates our advocacy role."

Conversely, caseworkers at welfare-oriented agencies described the sanctioning process in legalistic terms: "If clients don't attend a training program I've referred them to, then sanctions will give them a lesson: otherwise they won't care." Another took an even more punitive view of sanctions' effect: "If we sanction some clients then we will have a rumor in the refugee community." A director of a welfare-oriented agency echoed this view: "Sanctions are necessary; many people will not cooperate unless there is a penalty."

Five months into the case management project all agencies had found some clients to be noncompliant. However, only one migration-oriented agency had applied sanctions while all three welfare-oriented agencies had done so. Yet the most frequent "noncompliant behavior" was clients not following the referral process or routinely filing out job-search forms, rather than refusing to take a job. Caseworkers termed this new tension with clients "the problem of motivation." Those at migration-oriented agencies tried to obtain refugees' cooperation by interesting them in improving their English, getting job skills, and earning money. One caseworker explained: "Usually lack

of English is the problem. I send my clients to school and for training. Later they will get a job. That's the main point of the case management project." Caseworkers at welfare-oriented agencies tried to change clients' attitudes more directly. They reported going back to the initial orientation session, explaining to clients that refugee policy was now less permissive, and finally pointing out that clients really had little choice. One caseworker reported: "I try very hard to motivate clients but it's up to them: sooner or later welfare will refer them back to me if they don't cooperate."

Caseworkers at both types of agencies frequently used the term "counseling" when discussing how they motivated clients. For caseworkers at migration-oriented agencies, counseling meant determining clients' interests and helping them attain their goals. This definition included providing information and showing refugees how to use the social service system. One caseworker summarized this approach as "teaching them to solve problems by themselves, especially explaining their problems so that Americans will understand." Such caseworkers avoid the conflict over employment between agencies and clients by directing their services to the comparatively easier problem of providing therapy to clients (Gold, 1987).

On the other hand, caseworkers at welfare-oriented agencies used the power of their position to orient clients to American customs, laws, and work habits. Many drew upon linguistic expertise, socioeconomic status, and access to resources to present themselves as authorities to clients (Moon and Tashima, 1982). For example, one caseworker defined counseling as "advising clients about the reality of life in the U.S.," which presumed that he was in a position to explain that reality.

These three measures of voluntary agencies' responses to the case management project—hiring ethnic or native staff, using sanctions, and method of motivating clients—demonstrate that their reactions were closely linked to their migration- or welfare-orientations. Agencies which organized relations with refugees through the master status international migrant modified the case management approach because it was inconsistent with their view of clients as political migrants from the Third World. Their directors tended to hire refugees for new staff positions,

while their caseworkers avoided using sanctions and worked to help clients develop and attain goals through case management. Conversely, agencies which had previously used the master status welfare client readily adopted the new approach to refugee resettlement because they had long defined refugees in relation to American social welfare institutions. Directors at these agencies tended to hire white, natives for the new jobs, and caseworkers applied sanctions with less reluctance, often by invoking the authority of their job to obtain cooperation. The reproduction of agencies' migration- or welfare-orientations reveals that there is much variation in the response of nonprofit organizations to privatization of the welfare state.

### Discussion: Explaining Differences Between Agencies

Table 2 presents national-level data on the voluntary agencies and distinguishes among migration-oriented agencies, welfare-oriented agencies, and all voluntary agencies (the latter category includes five that did not have offices in San Francisco and thus might have a migration or a welfare orientation). These data are averages for types of agencies and assume that local offices can be aggregated into a national agency. Given this assumption—that the offices in San Francisco are representative of their sister offices in other parts of the country—the structural factors in Table 2 provide descriptions of macro-historical differences among agencies.

Migration-oriented agencies tend to be secular, older, have stronger ties to the welfare state, and are engaged in international activities. Conversely, welfare-oriented agencies are sectarian, younger, have weaker ties to the welfare state, and are less active in refugee work overseas. The geographic location of refugees and agency offices, and the ethnicity of refugees resettled, do not show meaningful differences between the two types of agencies. The proportion of all Indochinese refugees resettled also is not an important factor because the percentage for the welfare-oriented agencies is an artifact of one large agency and two very small agencies. The same is true for the proportion of all voluntary agency income: it is an average of both large and small agencies. Thus national agencies' geographic scope

Table 2

*Structure of American Voluntary Agencies (1981)*

Structural Factors	Agency Orientation		All Agencies
	Migration	Welfare	
Total Number	3	3	11
Number Secular	2	1	4
Number Sectarian	1	2	7
Number Created Before 1939	2	1	6
Source of Federal Funds			
Health and Human Services	32	11	31
State Department	68	89	69
Expenditure of Funds			
Domestic Activities	65	75	63
International Activities	35	25	37
Refugees Resettled			
In California	35	32	32
In States Without Agency Office	1.4	5.9	3.4
NonIndochinese	7	9	18
Proportion of			
All Indochinese Resettled	9	17	10
All Voluntary Agency Income	12	10	11

Note: Values represent mean percents unless otherwise noted. One migration-oriented agency in San Francisco is an Indochinese mutual assistance association not affiliated with a national organization and data on its structure is not available. Two voluntary agencies operated by state governments are excluded from the column on all national agencies.

Source: Table 1 and North et al., 1982.

and organizational size probably have little affect on relations with refugees at the local level, particularly the selection of a master status.

A religious or nonreligious orientation is likely to affect agencies' selection of a master status because Christian agencies evince a strong aversion to public assistance (Fein, 1987). Such concerns lead them to emphasize refugees' position in the labor force and minimize their experience as newcomers from the

Third World. This generalization is obviously qualified by the limited number of agencies in Table 2.

Two of the three migration-oriented agencies were created before the beginning of World War Two, but only one welfare-oriented agency (again the small number of agencies must be noted). The 1930s was a formative period for American voluntary agencies: they coped with rising numbers of refugees fleeing fascist governments in Europe during a world depression (Marrus, 1985; Wyman, 1968). Agencies which developed following World War Two did aid large numbers of displaced persons (Dinnerstein, 1982). But their birth occurred after the major crisis of the twentieth century and during a period when the American government took a more favorable view of refugees, especially those fleeing communist countries (Loescher and Scanlin, 1986). The international dimension of refugee crises is not easily forgotten by agencies formed during the 1930s, and this orientation appears to influence agencies' relationship with refugees at the local level. Despite the intervention of the American welfare state since the 1970s, older agencies treat refugees as international migrants rather than welfare clients.

Linked to origins is the agency's contemporary role in working with refugees overseas. Migration-oriented agencies use a larger proportion of their funds for international relief. These activities include maintaining offices in Europe, Africa, Asia, or Latin American, as well as supplying aid to refugees waiting to return to their homeland or resettle overseas. Agencies working with refugees in the Third World carry this international orientation back to their relations with refugees once they arrive in the U.S. Conversely, the welfare-oriented agencies use a greater proportion of their funds for domestic activities and this appears to narrow their focus to employment and public assistance.

The most unusual finding in Table 2 is that migration-oriented agencies receive a larger proportion of their federal funds from the Office of Refugee Resettlement in the Department of Health and Human Services. Indeed, two of the three welfare-oriented agencies received no funds from H.H.S. in the year the data was collected. Funding from the Bureau for Refugee Programs in the State Department is a per capita grant for each refugee sponsored. It covers basic administrative costs

and the immediate needs of refugees, such as housing, clothing, and food. On the other hand, H.H.S. funds long-run needs, such as employment and language training. This counterintuitive finding—agencies that emphasize refugees' status as welfare clients have weaker links to the welfare state—is likely due to how agencies come to terms with refugees' temporary reliance on public assistance.

Approximately 80 percent of Vietnamese households rely solely on cash assistance for their income during their first year in the U.S., but the rate drops to about 25 percent after three and one-half years (Caplan, Whitmore, and Choy, 1989). Other studies indicate that only about 65 percent of Indochinese refugee households receive public assistance within one year of arrival, but that more than 45 percent still do after three years (U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, 1985, 1986). Indochinese refugees' household income is closely tied to the public assistance system for about two years, and voluntary agencies must respond to this economic fact.

It appears that migration-oriented agencies, which supply social services, focus beyond this period of high public assistance use. Welfare-oriented agencies, which primarily supply reception services, become preoccupied with refugees' entry into the temporary status welfare client. Agencies with greater ties to the welfare state view refugees' first few years in the U.S. as part of the adjustment process rather than a sign of "welfare dependency." These agencies expand the transition from international migrant to welfare client to include the final stage, working American resident. Thus voluntary agencies can retain their original relationship with refugees and receive funds from the welfare state only when they supply social services beyond those required to receive refugees and meet their immediate needs.

However, entering the labor force does not end Indochinese refugees' socioeconomic problems. Employment at or near minimum wage, often without health benefits, leads to high poverty rates. After three and one-half years in the U.S., Vietnamese refugees reach the poverty level of African Americans and Hispanics, about thirty percent (Caplan, et al., 1989). Other studies indicate that even after five years, the poverty rate among

Indochinese refugees is three times that of whites (Rumbaut and Weeks, 1986). These socioeconomic problems are beyond the purview of voluntary agencies, and they indicate that Indochinese refugees will remain an important concern for the American welfare state.

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### *Glossary of Voluntary Agency Acronyms*

ACNS	American Council for Nationalities Service
AFCR	American Fund for Czechoslovak Refugees
BCRRR	Buddhist Council for Refugee Rescue and Resettlement
CWS	Church World Service
HIAS	Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society
Idaho	Idaho State Voluntary Agency
Iowa	Iowa Refugee Service Center
IRC	International Rescue Committee
LIRS	Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service
PBFWR	Presiding Bishop's Fund for World Relief
TF	Tolstoy Foundation
USCC	United States Catholic Conference
WRRS	World Relief Refugee Services
YMCA	Young Mens' Christian Association