

Benjamin Thomas White

University of Glasgow

Application outline - Wellcome Trust seed award
Humans and animals in refugee camps

Abstract

Since the first world war, refugee camps have been a permanent feature of the political and physical landscape worldwide. Across this period, and especially in recent years, camps and their human inhabitants have been the focus of scholarly attention across disciplines ranging from the medical sciences to geography, from political science to cultural anthropology. But their non-human inhabitants have received much less attention—even when they played a crucial role within the camp. They are occasionally studied as disease vectors, frequently mentioned (in passing) as a presence in social science fieldwork, but rarely considered in their own right.

Some examples from the Baquba refugee camp, run by the British military occupation in Mesopotamia in 1918-21, illustrate the importance of animals. Roughly one-third of Baquba's 50,000 human inhabitants were semi-nomadic pastoralists who had brought their flocks with them: Baquba included an 'animal camp' and a 300-acre forage farm. The British military authorities quickly attempted to support poultry-rearing within the camp, both to provide food and to promote commercial activity. As they subjected the camp's refugees to regimes of medical inspection, they subjected the camp's animals to veterinary inspection. Their plans to empty the camp and resettle its people elsewhere depended on assembling, feeding, and caring for a sufficiently large number of pack animals.

These historical examples have contemporary parallels, from the herds brought into Cameroon by pastoralist refugees from the Central African Republic to the chickens reared by Syrian refugees at Zaatari camp in Jordan. The latter are not just food but companion animals too—and the role of both companion animals and 'pests' in refugee camps also deserves investigation.

This application seeks seed funding to establish a cross-disciplinary scholarly network, set out a research agenda, and develop a major collaborative funding bid to investigate the relationship of humans and animals in refugee camps around the world, both in the present and in historical perspective.

Research question

The main research question for the project is this: **What roles have animals played in refugee camps, in the past and in the present, and to what effect?** Subsidiary questions include:

- What aspects of human-animal relations within refugee camps are *specific* to camps, if any, and in what ways do camps create a distinctive habitat or ecology for their non-human inhabitants?
- How do livestock animals, companion animals, and ‘pests’ influence human health and wellbeing in refugee camps?
- How have animals been taken into account, or not, in the planning and functioning of refugee camps?
- What issues of animal sickness and welfare are raised by animals in refugee camps, and what responses have refugees and camp authorities found to them?
- What are the politics of animals in refugee camps—that is, how do animals figure as a site of political contestation among refugees, or between them and the agencies running the camp?
- How do all of these issues vary across different climatic and ecological zones, and how have they varied across time?

Proposed activities

The project will run three workshops at the University of Glasgow over the course of twelve months, to bring together an international group of academic researchers and humanitarian practitioners.

- Workshop 1: network-building
 - Outcome: establishment of multi-disciplinary, international scholarly network
 - Output: blog post for Wellcome Trust blog
- Workshop 2: agenda-setting
 - Outcome: an agenda for cross-disciplinary, comparative, and historically-informed research on humans and animals in refugee camps
 - Output: working paper for UNHCR’s *New issues in refugee research*
- Workshop 3: next steps
 - Outcome: development of a project team and international advisory group for a large collaborative research project
 - Output: funding application for collaborative research grant

The project will also include six bimonthly meetings with a reference group of people who have spent time in camps as refugees, held at the Scottish Refugee Council (Glasgow), with which the lead applicant has a well-established connection.

The reference group is an essential aspect of the project, to ensure that the research agenda is shaped by refugees’ concerns as much as by the intellectual concerns of academic researchers or the institutional concerns of humanitarian agencies. The

group will be small, and its membership will vary (reflecting the complex reality of refugees' lives in Britain).¹

Follow-on plans

The main purpose of this project is to establish a research agenda and assemble the team of researchers required to pursue it. Participants in all three workshops will be asked to reflect on the best form for this future research project, and the most appropriate source of funding: this will vary, depending on disciplinary spread (eg, if medical and veterinary scientists play a greater or smaller role). The particular focus of workshop 3 will be on developing follow-on plans, and a grant application to fund them. Possible sources of funding include:

- Wellcome Trust collaborative award in humanities and social science
- Horizon 2020 social sciences and humanities funding
- European Research Council consolidator grant

My own interest, as a historian, is in the interdisciplinary history of the refugee camp: as such, I hope to develop at least one doctoral studentship or postdoctoral research project on the non-human history of the refugee camp, in collaboration with UNHCR's policy development and evaluation service. However, there is clear potential for this award to generate many future projects *within* individual disciplines across the medical and veterinary sciences as well as the humanities and social sciences, as well as collaborative cross-disciplinary research.

Lead

applicant

Benjamin Thomas White, School of Humanities (History), University of Glasgow
<http://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/humanities/staff/benjaminthomaswhite/>

The lead applicant already has a working relationship with key non-academic stakeholders, who will be invited to participate. These include:

- (i) the Scottish Refugee Council (SRC), Scotland's refugee support organization
- (ii) the policy development and evaluation service of UNHCR, the UN refugee agency
- (iii) the Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute, London

¹ Plans for the reference group have been developed with Nina Murray and Martha Harding of the Scottish Refugee Council, as well the SRC service users who participated in a small meeting I held there last year, funded by the University of Glasgow. I would be happy to discuss the practicalities of this group and the ethical and research concerns it responds to.