

## Implications of tragic experiences on symbolic power: The case of displaced persons in Kenya

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### Abstract

Displacement of human populations is a common phenomenon from natural and human causes. Conflict and natural disasters such as floods, volcanic eruptions, landslides, out-breaks of diseases are among the regular culprits. Victims of displacement experience dramatic changes in their life situations a common denominator being temporary and at times permanent deprivation of crucial resources for their daily lives. This affects their place in the social hierarchy among members of their host community. The displaced persons in Kenya following the 2007-2008 post-election violence were uprooted from their homes and deprived of their property. They lived in camps and with well-wishers depending on assistance from others. How did this affect their social station in life and how did they manifest? This paper examines the effect of displacement on the perception and treatment of the affected persons by their host communities. The paper utilizes qualitative methods to analyze the discourse of the displaced persons, providing a deeper understanding of their experiences upon displacement. The paper was guided by insights from Critical Discourse Analysis and Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of capital, symbolic power and symbolic violence. It brings to light the sudden changes in the perceptions and social evaluations of the victims and their response to the undesired changes. The paper comes to the conclusion that the new life status leads to new self-evaluations as well as the evaluations by those around them and the displaced persons lose symbolic capital and symbolic power and come to the receiving end of symbolic violence. In so doing, the paper illuminates the plight of the displaced persons beyond the evident material losses and recommends interventions to address these effects.

**Key terms:** capital, discourse, internal displacement, symbolic power, symbolic violence.

## INTRODUCTION

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence to avoid the effects of armed conflict, violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border (Ghráinne, 2021). These people are distinguished from refugees in that refugees are people who are outside their country of nationality owing to a well-founded fear of persecution on grounds of *race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion and are unable or unwilling to return to their country* (UN, 2024).

*Kenya experienced election-related violence in 2007 and 2008 due to disputed presidential election results. It is estimated that at least 1,162 people were killed in the violence (Kenya National Commission for Human Rights, 2008), and 663,921 people were displaced (Kenya Human Rights Commission, 2011). There have been similar displacements in Kenya, especially since multiparty politics was adopted in 1991.*

The world has been witnessing a rise in the number of such persons. By 2018, it was estimated that one person out of every 110 people globally had been displaced internally or become a refugee (Braithwaite et al, 2019). At the end of 2023, there were 117.3 million forcibly displaced people worldwide and 31.6 million refugees, while the number of IDPs stood at 63.4 million (World Bank Group, 2024). This is the highest figure ever recorded. There were 20.5 million victims of violence and conflict, while disasters in the form of cyclones and earthquakes accounted for 26.4 million (IOM, 2023).

When people suffer displacement, they often lose their homes, communities and livelihoods and cannot rely on the 'traditional coping mechanism'. For IDPs, this loss is often downplayed by the fact that they remain within their country and, unfortunately, often fail to get the same level of support as refugees (Weiss & Korn, 2006:1).

The sudden loss of livelihood plunges the displaced persons into new conditions of life where they lack the necessities of life and have to depend on others and humanitarian organizations for assistance. This represents a significant shift in their life circumstances. The people around them also begin to look at them as victims and dependents. The new perceptions of the affected persons often affect their relations and tilt the balance of power between the various groups involved. Power relations are about the place one occupies in the social hierarchy and are subject to one's life conditions vis-à-vis those of others around them gathered through direct or indirect interactions (Redhead & Power, 2022).

Discourse is a means of reflecting social reality (Riuz, 2009). The discourse of the displaced persons and of their host communities can be potent reflections of the extant power relationships between the groups and the dynamics at play. This paper explores the discourses of Internally Displaced Persons as they describe their relationship with non-displaced persons. It examines the treatment of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Kenya's 2007-2008 post-election violence and assesses their power relations with the rest of Kenyans with whom they lived upon displacement. The focus is on the possible impact of displacement on the perception and treatment of the IDPs by their host communities.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have looked at displacement and its effects on the affected. Alirhayim (2023), using a qualitative study, examined the effect of place attachment on displacement among Syrian immigrants in Esenyurt, Istanbul, using in-depth interviews with 16 participants. He found that the immigrants suffered feelings of low esteem and low self-efficacy as well as tensions, which engendered a feeling of alienation that made it difficult for them to identify with the new neighbourhood. The United Nations, as a body that handles victims of displacement, has described displacement as a painful experience that causes enormous suffering, shatters lives for years and generations and creates severe hardship (UN, 2023). Regarding treatment of the displaced by their hosts, Haokip (2022), in a study of Kuki-Naga ethnic conflict,

found that displaced persons possessed childhood memories of stigmatisation and had suffered a great degree of obstacles to their adjustment.

The displaced persons lose connections to their culture and social ties, negatively impacting their identity. Pecaut (2000), in a study of a displaced person in Colombia, argues that the displaced had been removed from their "social texture" and deprived of their social connections in their communities of origin. They were also 'defined' as displaced and treated with suspicion. Neef (2022) considers the phenomenon of planned relocation in the Pacific, focusing on the loss of ecological culture, cultural heritage, and generational trauma experienced by Pacific communities. He argues that the loss could be seen as a threat to their right to life with dignity.

## Theoretical Review

The paper will apply insights from Critical Discourse Analysis and Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic power and symbolic violence in examining the discourse of the IDPs. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) mainly examines 'the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context (Fairclough, 2001; van Dijk, 2015). Chilton and Lackoff (1995) in Van Dijk (1995) describe CDA as a problem- or issue-oriented, studying social problems such as racism, sexism, and other social inequalities.

According to Van Dijk (1997), CDA can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between social classes, women and men, ethnic or cultural majorities and minorities through how they represent things and position people. Fairclough describes discourse as the site of power struggles (Fairclough 2001:61), positioning discourse at the centre of expression of and contest for power. A lot of focus in CDA is on the use of discourse to enact and justify dominance as well as resistance in social relationships of class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, race, age, sex orientation, or world region. (Blommaert 2005).

Pierre Bourdieu, a French Sociologist (1930-2002), views social reality as made up of 'webs of material

and symbolic ties' in the form of sets of objective positions that persons occupy and 'mental schemata of perception and appreciation' (Wacquant, 2013 p 2). He introduced the concept of symbolic capital, symbolic power and symbolic violence.

Symbolic capital refers to 'qualities that are worthy of esteem' (Pellandini-Simányi, 2014:1). It has also been described as a trait of favourability, which is sought after due to its scarcity and makes it valuable. Individuals constantly struggle to possess it, assert it, and devalue other forms of capital (Wiegmann, 2017).

For Bourdieu, capital consists of four forms: economic capital, social capital, cultural capital and symbolic capital. Economic capital is the possession of assets and money. Social capital refers to the institutionalization of social connections and reciprocal relations to become permanent in the production and sustainability of property relations. Examples are being a member of a certain club, being an alumni, or having family relations. Cultural capital includes education, knowledge and cultural competencies (Forsyth, 2023). Symbolic capital consists of an actor's honour, reputation and respect, which determines the actor's social position and opportunities to access certain sources (Agin, 2018). Symbolic capital has its roots in all the other forms of capital, economic, cultural, and social, and can be equated to reputation (Forsyt, 2023). The different types of capital can be derived from economic capital (Pierre Bourdieu, 1986).

Symbolic power, according to Bourdieu, refers to invisible power which is not physical but is accepted as legitimate. Groups dominate the other groups and privilege their interests, discourse and actions over those of the other groups. The exercise of power through symbolic exchange is based on the shared belief that though arbitrary, the dominated group recognizes its legitimacy or the hierarchical relations of power in which they are embedded. This is based on the differential capital possessed by the groups. Capital could be economic, such as money and property; cultural, such as skills, knowledge, and other things valued in the culture; and symbolic. The capital

that one commands defines their place in the social hierarchy.

Bourdieu introduces another concept, 'doxa', which involves a practical sense of what does or does not constitute a real possibility in the world' (Lane, 2000; Myles, 2004 in Wiegmann, 2017) and which is seen as the natural order of things. When Doxa leads to unequal distribution of capital, there is, as a result, symbolic violence. This is where a lack of symbolic capital subjugates a group, and they accept their subordinate positions and blame them on themselves. The dominant group devalues what is associated with the dominated group and may describe them negatively, a phenomenon that Bourdieu terms symbolic violence. Symbolic violence is gentle, invisible violence that is unrecognized, as it is not an overt physical force (Bourdieu, 1991). Symbolic violence is difficult to challenge because even the subordinates believe they deserve that place (Wiegmann, 2017).

Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of capital, symbolic power, and symbolic violence will be applied as lenses through which the experiences of displaced persons will be viewed about power. These experiences will be analysed from the discourse of the displaced for evidence of their positions in the community following the displacement.

## METHODOLOGY

The paper examines the discourse of the displaced persons in Kenya. The data was collected through face-to-face interviews as part of a larger study (Ndiritu, 2015). The data was collected from twenty-four IDPs, twelve males and twelve females of different age groups and persons from various ethnic communities. The data was on the experiences of the displaced persons in their encounters with the non-displaced who were their hosts or who lived in their vicinity. The experiences related to how their changes in material possessions affected how they were perceived and treated. The data was analysed to determine the expression of power relations between the two groups.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The displaced persons were asked to explain how they thought the other members thought of them as IDPs. One of the informants detailed cases of exclusion as follows:

Excerpt 1

R: Reke njuge IDP-rĩ/ hingo ciothe wĩra wao ni guthii kuri-menyihitie/ na tonii nyiki/ tondu he kindu kimwe tutendaga/ kugie na ngui nini/ muDP akorwo gatagati ini / na gutuika niwe ukuruithagia/ tondu gutuikaga nakuriari,/ tuhuragwo ta ciana/ . Tukora /riu naithui notuoneke tari guka tukite kwirihiria/ kuri Gikuyu gitu/ Riu wira witu ni kwinyihia / na: ona waigua kaundu gataguka na njira njega/ wee akoruo no miario yuma hauri/ ukeyehutira/ ugatiga aria angi makiaria / ugathii/ no ningi tutiendaga muuno guikara- ii kuingira gatagati ka andu/niundu wa kwiira/ ona hinya witu ni-yaani ni ta twana/twoyaguo tari ciana /na andu matari hinya/ na iguoya/ Ona gutuika tungitwa ni kurua no turue/ no tutiendaga.

R: Let me put it this way / for IDPs, they always have to conduct themselves with humility/and it is not I alone/ since there is one thing that we do not like/ there be some mayhem somewhere/an IDP is found in it/ and it is claimed that they are the ones who caused the conflict/ because it is said that where we come from/ we are beaten up like children /then we run away/ now for us, it might look like we are trying to get even among our Kikuyu/. Therefore, our place is of humility/ and even when one hears something that does not augur well for them /if it was only talk/one just gets off/you let the others talk/you go away/and still we do not like so much – to be – that is to get so close to the people /because we despise ourselves/ even our strength is- I mean it is like children/ we are treated like children/ and like weak people and cowards/ yet if we meant to fight we would fight/ but we do not like it. (T18P5)

The respondent (T18), an elderly man, says the IDPs are treated like children and cowards. Children are associated with weakness and vulnerability since they are underdeveloped mentally and physically. The description of the IDPs as cowards stems from their inability to resist the forces that ultimately displaced

them from their dwelling places and dispossessed them of their belongings. The use of the words 'children' and 'cowards' indicates a lower evaluation of the IDPs about the non-displaced persons. This amounts to discrimination (van Dijk, 1987).

However, the IDPs have no effective means of countering the negative tags imposed on them since they are a minority and their accounts are disregarded (Foucault 1979). Therefore, the IDPs occupy a subordinate position to the non-IDPs. Violence may also be a form of exclusion perpetrated through social modes of control. It may manifest where a group is, for example, excluded from the rest of society and labelled in negative terms.

The informant further says that they, as IDPs, do not like intermingling with others because they hold themselves in low esteem, thus sort of recognizing the power of those who hold them in contempt. Bourdieu argues that in the exercise of power, the dominant group makes their actions and discourse privileged over those of the subordinated group. This is a way of legitimating the symbolic power of the dominant group (Bourdieu, 1991).

The name IDP was described as evoking the sense of a victim, as we find from the following excerpt:

Excerpt 2.

I: Na kusema IDP /kwani ni kusema ubaya?

I: And when you say IDP/ is it wrong?

R: Si ni vibaya/ kwa sababu Mkenya /sistahili kuitwa IDP/nastahili kuitwa Mwanakenya.

R: Of course, it is wrong/ because, being a Kenyan/ I should not be called an IDP/ I should be called a Kenyan.

I: Kwa hivyo ni kama unaona kuna tofauti baina ya Mkenya na IDP.

I: Therefore, do you feel there is a difference between an IDP and a Kenyan?

R: Ee iko tofauti/ juu IDP ni mwenye amehangaika/ na Mkenya ni wa kawaida/

R: Yes/ there is a difference because /an IDP has suffered /and a Kenyan is an ordinary person / (TP4PG5)

The informant, a young lady who was displaced from Nakuru, is pained to have the name 'IDP' used on the displaced persons and says, using a strong modal 'I should not be called an IDP'. The meaning of an IDP is seen as one who has suffered, contrasting with that of a Kenyan. A Kenyan, by implication, lives comfortably, unlike an IDP. The IDP has been subjected to violence and has lost their property. The displaced persons are uncomfortable being associated with this negative experience, and they feel it negates their Kenyan identity. Pecaut (2000) similarly found that displaced persons in Colombia were labelled as 'displaced' and treated with suspicion.

This resistance to labels given to displaced persons by the non-displaced is a manifestation of the struggle to assert oneself through language (Fairclough, 2001). The displaced persons contest the inferior status that the non-IDPs have put them in.

TC3 says that the society does not value IDPs in excerpt 3

Excerpt 3

I: Kwa hivyo hudhani kama wale wengine wanachukulia kwamba IDP hawana shida nyingi ama?

I: So you don't think that the others feel IDPs have serious problems?

R: IDP si watu wa maana kwao (XXX)

R: IDPs are not important people to them (XXX)

I: Linashusha mtu ehe? Hilo Jina

I: So, does the name reduce one's status?

R: Linakuweka chini sana/ Lakini kama wewe si IDP utapata kazi kila mahali unataka kwenda/. huyu mume wangu juzi alimaliza shule 2004 four/ anakuja hapa akaapply kazi/ amemaliza shule amepata B, B-/ kukuja hapa akaambiwa A! hatuajiri kijana wa kambi /tafuta kijana amemaliza juzi juzi na sio wa kambi.

R: It places you in a very low station/ but if you are not an IDP/ you will find a job wherever you want to go/ this husband of mine completed his form four course

recently/he completed his course in 2004/ he came here and applied for a job/he got a mean grade of B, B- / when he came here he was told 'OH we do not employ young people from the camp/look for a young man who has completed school recently but not one from the camp'/(TC3P4).

The informant says that to the rest of Kenyans, IDPs are not people of any worth. They are not given the jobs that the other Kenyans with similar qualifications get. This denial of opportunities manifests discrimination. Zea (2011) similarly found that displaced persons in Colombia experienced discrimination. The respondent quotes the actual words used to dismiss her husband's quest for the job to demonstrate that her husband was denied the job for the simple reason that he was an IDP.

In terms of Bourdieu, it amounts to devaluing the IDPs' capital in form of labour skills. Such treatment resonates with the idea of symbolic violence on the IDPs (Wiegmann, 2017).

The term IDP was ordinarily demeaning, as TC4 says. Being called an IDP makes one lose one's face, as the following excerpt indicates.

Excerpt 4

R: *Jina IDP linadharauliwa sana/ kwa sababu unaweza kuwa unapita unasukia ati yule ni IDP/ saa unaona jina inaenda kama inaharibika?*

R: The name IDP is really despised because you could be passing by and hear that it is an IDP. Now you see the reputation is gradually lost? (TC4P5).

R: [...] *watu huwa wanatudharau/ akikutana na wewe kwa barabara atakwambia tu hawa ni malDP wanapita/ hana aibu /lakini kwa sisi tunaona ni kama wamama wenzetu*

R[...] *people look down upon us / if they met you on the road they will just simply say these are IDPs who are passing/ they have no feelings/ but for us we look at them as our fellow ladies (TC4P11)*

From the foregoing, the name IDP had acquired negative connotations that required no elaboration. The informant says the name 'IDP' is despised, using the intensifier 'really' to show the severity of the

situation. The use of the name by the non-IDPs to distinguish them is, therefore, a furtherance of the symbolic violence against the displaced persons.

This experience is consistent with Inglis et al (2022), who view poverty and dehumanizing conditions as causes of stigma and that such stigma involves labelling, stereotyping, and discrimination.

As the informant says, the displaced persons do not try to label the non-IDPs but see them in terms of their individuality, as ladies, for example.

An elderly man displaced from Nyanza explains this Excerpt 5

I: *Riu-ri, ungenicmania na mundu ta riu guki-ri /mundu utakui-ri / na mutuaranite nongi-ri /mundu agwete uyu ni IDP/ Ni uiguaga...*

I: Now, if you happen to meet someone/ for example, here, somebody who doesn't know you and as you walk together with another person, somebody happens to call you an IDP. Do you feel . . .

R: *=Ni njiguaga ndi very hurted / tondu mundu oi IDP/ ritwa riu nitakwonia ni mundu utari kwao / ni mundu utari kindu giake / Riu automatically ukona urorimwe mundu/ arora akona riu ona witiyari kumuhoya / kana ni ugutuma akuhe kindu / riu undu-ni njiguaga ndi very hurted /*

R: =I feel very hurt because /that person knows that the name IDP seems to show that one is homeless/somebody who has nothing of their own/Now automatically you find that at once/ that person is expecting you to be ready to borrow from him/and you will make them give you something/ Now that makes me feel very hurt/ (T20P5)

The informant was at pains to contest the possible revelation that he was an IDP, and as is seen from the interview, he cut the interviewer short upon the mention of being said to be an IDP. He says the name seemed to depict them as homeless people who owned nothing. His introduction as an IDP was, therefore, like broaching the subject of a beggar and bringing to the fore their dependency. This was hurtful to him, considering that he had led a life of economic independence and self-respect before the displacement, where he owned a thriving business.

This point resonates with the finding made by Sulava (2010), who, in a study of IDPs in Georgia, found that IDPs were believed to be dependent on others and in need of assistance. Similarly, Malkki (1992) found that refugees in Tanzania were seen as beggars. According to Lusigi (2022), conditions of poverty affect one's capability to live in dignity.

## Discussions

The data from the informants who were displaced persons indicates the use of discourse to establish the place of the IDPs. The non-displaced would use the term 'IDPs' on them, which was regarded as degrading as it is thought to distinguish them from other Kenyans. The name has gathered negative associations among them as a victim, one who is inclined to beg and one who lives in a camp and cannot be trusted to work.

The non-IDPs have created narratives that malign the displaced persons, describing them as cowards who were subdued like children at the time of the attacks leading to their displacement. They, at the same time, associate the IDPs with violence and are eager to blame them for any conflict between the IDPs and the non-IDPs.

The above descriptions give a negative assessment of the IDPs by the non-displaced persons. The use of discourse conveys this through use labels that demean the IDPs, such as the name IDP, instead of naming them by their individual names. The non-displaced also spread false imaginary accounts of the displacement experience, calling them cowards and comparing them to children. This denigrates the displaced and attributes negative character traits to them. They also treat them suspiciously and deny them jobs they have qualified for.

The use of discourse to name and make evaluations on the IDPs is a case of the use of language to establish and maintain power relations where the IDPs are treated as underdogs. The IDPs, on the other hand, try to resist negative evaluations by use of discourse. They argue that they should not be seen as beggars and should not be discriminated against in job selection.

This demonstrates the use of discourse to establish and resist power relations (Fairclough, 2001).

Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic power, symbolic capital, and symbolic violence are useful lenses for comprehending the experiences described by the displaced persons.

The displaced were uprooted from their homes and deprived of their economic capital in the form of land and other property, such as business stock. It lends itself to conversion into other forms of capital, such as culturally valued goods, tastes or preferences (Redhead & Power, 2022: 3). Their cultural capital in the form of educational achievements is also mistrusted by denial of jobs for which one has qualified. They suffered the loss of social capital in the form of the social connections and social support partners they had in their communities which would be a support system for them (Redhead & Power 2022). Support systems in the form of interpersonal relationships, family members, neighbours, religious groups and friends offer psychological care and financial support (Sambu, 2015). Their situation as displaced persons who live with the help of others strips them of their honour and symbolic capital.

The low place in which the displaced persons occupy in their new communities makes them the object of disrespect and discrimination, as revealed through the name IDP used on them. They are suspected and associated with cowardice and being infantilised without justification. These are instances of the perpetration of symbolic violence on the IDPs (Wiegmann, 2017).

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

**Conclusions:** The above discussions have revealed the power of discourse in constituting and contesting power relations between displaced persons and the non-displaced. They have demonstrated that the displaced persons are marked and held in dim view by the non-displaced. The displaced persons described cases of exclusion, negative description, negative perception, and imposition of a feeling of worthlessness. These were expressed and resisted by discourse (Fairclough, 2001). The discourse reveals the exercise of and resistance to symbolic power.

**Recommendation:** Given the loss of symbolic power evident among displaced persons, state organs must deliberate efforts to address its effect. Host communities can also be sensitized by the negative power of discourse when used to express negative perceptions among the displaced since these are victims of forces beyond their control.

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