

An Analysis of Refugee Resilience: Evidence from the
Lived Experiences of Resettled Syrian Refugees in Canada

by

STEWART Jennifer Leanne

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Approved by the Dissertation Committee:

Francis PEDDIE (Chairperson)

Sanae ITO

Takeshi HIGASHIMURA

Approved by the GSID Committee: March 4, 2020

Abstract

This dissertation looks at refugee resilience and the ways people reconstruct their lives after adversity, displacement, and resettlement. Participants in the study were 26 former Syrian refugees who were interviewed in British Columbia, Canada. This was a phenomenological study that used thematic analysis to distinguish the dimensions and depth of resilience in people. Rather than objective measures or policy analysis, the research values the subjective lived experiences of former refugees and their narratives of adversity and resilience. The purpose of the study was to bring attention to the personal experiences of refugees and their capacity in developing resilience. Findings suggest resilience can be developed due to individual characteristics, through interpersonal relationships, and with help from the wider society. Dimensions of resilience, include personality factors, interpersonal relationships, family, social networks, and environmental support. The research discusses the ways people construct a positive future for themselves after resettlement, the consequences of resilience, and how this contributes to greater well-being. It also encourages us to rethink refugee acceptance as a positive contribution in the context of international cooperation.

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Abbreviations

BC	British Columbia
BVOR	Blended Visa Office-Referred
CAF	Canadian Armed Forces
FSR	Free Syrian Army
GAR	Government-assisted Refugees
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ISSofBC	Immigrant Services Society of BC
PSR	Privately Sponsored Refugees
PTSD	Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
RAP	Resettlement Assistance Program
RHRP	Refugee and Humanitarian Resettlement Program
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
US	United States
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

“All you need to know is that when you go through that kind of experience, there are often two extremes: Either you lose hope completely and you shatter and break into pieces, or you become so resilient that no one can break you anymore.”

Malala Yousafzai

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1 Introducing the Study and Its Importance

1.1 Introduction

The topic of this PhD dissertation is the themes of resilience among former Syrian refugees in British Columbia (BC). The purpose of the research is to reconceptualise the way we study refugees that puts the focus back on individuals, their stories, and their subjective experiences as they adjust to a new life in Canada. Current studies of Syrian refugees in Canada are predominantly focused on negative experiences and challenges (e.g. for physical health, see Hansen et al., 2016; for education inclusion of youths, see Brewer, 2016; for housing instability and insecurity, see Wilkinson et al., 2017; and for private sponsorship, see Hynie et al., 2019). These issues should not be ignored; but while we should not disregard the struggles Syrians face, we should also not forget to notice the ways they demonstrate resilience while striving to achieve a prosperous life. There are three primary ways of discussing refugees and refugee policy: voluntary repatriation to the origin country, integration into a country of asylum, and third-country resettlement. This research is positioned only in resettlement in a third country. Thus, the following dissertation analyses the subjective lived experiences of Syrian refugees during resettlement to identify areas of resilience while highlighting the voices and strengths of refugees. It is qualitative and uses a phenomenological approach and thematic analysis to find meaning in the lived experiences of participants and interpret resilience.

The research questions for this study were,

Research question 1: What are the lived experiences of former Syrian refugees in BC?

Research question 2: What factors contribute to resilience?

Research question 3: What challenges to resilience do refugees face

Research question 4: How does resilience contribute to well-being during integration?

The research objectives were to,

Objective 1: Identify themes of resilience among resettled Syrian refugees

Objective 2: Explore the depth of resilience

Objective 3: Recognise the ways resilience contributes to well-being

Objective 4: Relate findings to the broader issue of refugee resettlement and international cooperation.

Findings indicate that there are three areas of analysis where evidence of resilience can be found: society, including physical spaces in the environment and new rights and opportunities; interpersonal relationships, including family, Syrians and other Arabs, and immigrants and Canadians; and personal characteristics, including optimism, openness to change, growth, creativity, and expression. Consequences of resilience in refugees is a greater sense of self, including self-confidence, independence, and autonomy; a sense of purpose, which comes through increased empathy and compassion and helping others in need; and a sense of mastery, the feeling that one has overcome a difficult situation and is confident that they can overcome future challenges and achieve difficult goals.

The research offers conceptual and methodological contributions that value the subjective experiences of refugees and their resilience. By letting the voices of individuals be heard, researchers, policy makers, and Canadians can better understand the strengths of refugees, the struggles they continue to face, and how we can help them thrive in their new life. It adds to the phenomenon and growing body of literature on Syrian refugee resettlement in Canada by providing awareness of refugees' strengths when faced with the trials of resettlement. It values the subjective lived experiences as an interpretation of reality. Thus, this dissertation argues that the narratives told by Syrian refugees about their subjective lived experiences of resettlement illustrate that they are capable of developing resilience through societal elements

(physical places, new opportunities), interpersonal relationships (with family, Syrians and Arabs, non-Arab immigrants and Canadians), and individual factors (personal characteristics, creative sense-making activities), which ultimately help them overcome hardship and create a positive future for themselves in Canada.

1.2 Background and Context of the Research

In Syria

The Syrian Civil War that has caused a mass exodus of people is an ongoing and multi-sided armed conflict. Its major players are the government of President Bashar al-Assad and a multitude of forces in opposition. Social unrest started during the time of the Arab Spring protests in March 2011 and developed out of dissatisfaction with the long-ruling Assad regime. What began as peaceful protests was followed by the detainment and torture of young boys who wrote graffiti on their school walls in solidarity with the movement behind the Arab Spring (Tarabay, 2018). In retaliation to the protests, President Assad killed hundreds of demonstrators and imprisoned many more. Insurgency intensified into armed conflict after calls for Assad's removal from government were violently suppressed. By the summer of 2012 the country was in a full-blown civil war when the Free Syrian Army (FSA) attempted to overthrow Assad. Although primarily between the Assad government and the FSA, several religious and political factions have piggybacked on division to bring support to their individual causes. Major players in the war include various Sunni rebel groups, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) who are mostly Kurdish, Salafi jihadist groups (e.g. Jabhat al-Nusra), and ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Alliances and factions are ever-changing, constantly altering the political setting on the ground. As for outside powers, Russia and Hezbollah in Lebanon are backing the Syrian government, while the United States supports the FSA. Although hesitating to become deeply

involved in the conflict, in 2017 the United States carried out a direct military attack against Assad and his forces. Syria has become a battleground for proxy wars, making it difficult to pinpoint the exact cause of conflict, and Carpenter (2013) explains that the situation in Syria is extremely convoluted and murky.

As Middle East historian, Williams (2017), and Syrian scholar, Moubayed (2015) both claim, Syria's pluralism is a key element in the current story. Before the war, Syria was a rich tapestry of religions and ethnicities. Prior to fighting, 74 percent of the Syrian population was Sunni Muslims, 13 percent was Alawites and other Muslim minorities, 10 percent Christian, and 3 percent Druze (Williams, 2017). Syria has been ruled for a collective 47 years by president Bashar al-Assad and his father and former president, Hafez al-Assad. Both are members of the minority Alawite sect, which also dominates government positions. The Assad government has carefully monitored the activities of these religious groups, and though it has committed serious violations of human and political rights, disputes and disagreements between religious groups generally did not erupt into violence (Smith, 2013). However, tensions are high, and the current conflict has pitted groups against each other in such a way that a future Syria is likely to be much less pluralistic. Regarding this plurality, Melia (2103, p. 4) states, "Syria looks disturbingly different today than it did at the start of the revolution," as violence, unrest, depopulation strategies, and economic hardship continue to influence forced emigration. The Assad regime has attempted to divide the Sunni Muslim majority and the remaining minorities and has targeted faith groups through killings, detention, and harassment and destruction of mosques; large populations have been displaced by artillery, air power, bulldozers, targeted massacres, and ballistic missiles, deepening the sectarian division among Syrians; this strategy ensures rebel groups win towns and neighbourhoods but not people (Holliday, 2013). These

depopulation strategies have resulted in large-scale displacement and an intensifying humanitarian crisis.

The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) have not become involved on the ground in Syria. In a contradictory stance, Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan has stated that the situation is a tragedy, yet Canada has no plans for military involvement in Syria (Pugliese, 2016). While not involved directly on the ground in Syria, the CAF have joined the Global Coalition against ISIS: Operation IMPACT in Iraq is Canada's effort to help achieve long-term safety and security of the territory and people of Iraq; operation IMPACT allows a maximum of 830 CAF staff to be deployed who train, instruct, and support the Iraqi security forces (Government of Canada, 2014). In April 2017, the Trudeau government has said to have been informed of and in support of the United States missile strike against Syria, and although the country's own armed involvement in the region will not change, Canada will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to Syrians and join forces against terrorism (Zimonjik & Tasker, 2017). In the almost nine years after the initial protests began in 2011, the ongoing violence and conflict have caused more than half of the Syria's prewar population of over 22 million to be forcefully evacuated from their homes. 5.6 million have left Syria on foot with most requesting safety in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey (UNHCR, 2018). While most people reside in refugee camps in nearby countries, about 1 million have fled to Europe while another 100,000 have primarily settled in North America (Connor, 2018).

In Canada

Canada is a self-proclaimed multicultural country, with many faces of diversity: indigenous people (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis), Québécois, and countless ethnic groups of first, second, third, fourth, and fifth generation immigrants. Immigration has been an important nation-

building tool in Canada, and immigration to Canada includes the right to reside in Canada on a permanent and temporary basis. The country recognizes three categories of permanent residents: economic, family, and humanitarian; and in 2015, the country endorsed over 271,000 permanent residents, the most since 2010 (Government of Canada, 2016). Immigration to Canada is based on non-discriminatory principles concerning race, ethnic origin, nationality, skin colour, religion or beliefs, and gender; thus, the country is made up of people from varied cultural, ethnic, racial, religious, and national upbringings who, for the most part, live together in mutual peace and goodwill. In 1988, multiculturalism received statutory basis in the Canadian Multiculturalism Act by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, and was reaffirmed in 1997 with only minor changes. Within the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, the policy provides funding for ethnic diversity, anti-racism education training, support for ethno-cultural organizations, support for heritage and language education, and to assist with immigration services (Banting & Kymlicka, 2010).

In 1969, Canada became party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which expanded efforts to handle issues of human displacement around the world. Immigrants and refugees have long been a part of Canada's past, but refugee policy and intake has only existed since the 1976 Immigration Act, before which the term "refugee" was a flexible category (Lanphier, 1981). Refugees that Canada accepts often exhibit a high socioeconomic status, are young, highly-educated, and skilled; for instance, around 70 percent of family heads are between 15 and 44 years old (Lanphier, 1981). Today, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has offices in Ottawa and Toronto, and previously Montréal, to fulfill Canada's responsibilities to refugees, exiles, and asylum seekers. There are four main objectives of the UNHCR in Canada: to seek to provide high standards of *protection* by observing asylum practices and policies; coordinate resettlement opportunities by working

with the Government and private sponsors; inform, educate, and create *awareness* of the condition of refugees and other relocated persons in Canada and the world; support the public and government to engage in *fundraising* activities to deliver monetary backing to UNHCR agendas (UNHCR, 2019b). Canada has welcomed 700,000 refugees in the last four decades (UNHCR, 2017); and in 2015, the country committed to resettling 25,000 displaced Syrians with long-term goals of permanent integration. This target was met, and as of February 2018, nearly 52,000 Syrians have resettled in Canada—4,400 of whom are in British Columbia (ISSofBC, 2018). Of these 4,400, 2,890 are government-assisted refugees (GAR), 920 are privately sponsored refugees (PSR), and 590 are blended-visa office referred (BVOR) (ISSofBC, 2018).

The Government of Canada explains that a refugee has been forced to flee their home country due to of a justifiable fear of persecution, who cannot return home, or who has seen or experienced many horrors (Government of Canada, 2008). Refugees to Canada are selected for resettlement based on their need for humanitarian protection (Yu et al. 2007) and are recognised for resettlement by the UNHCR plus privately sponsoring individuals and organisations. Once identified as a refugee, three paths to relocation in Canada are as government-sponsored refugees, privately sponsored refugees, or through the BVOR Program. GARs receive government housing and up to one year of income assistance provided under the Government Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP). Under the RAP, the Government of Canada or the Province of Quebec provide GARs with financial support and essential services to help them in the early stages of integration. Financial support lasts for 12 months or until the refugee can support themselves. Assistance rates vary by province and territory and are intended to be used by refugees for shelter, food, and other needs. Moreover, the RAP welcomes newly arrived GARs at the airport, helps them find temporary housing and then permanent housing, assesses

their medical and mental health needs, provides information and assistance getting to know Canada, and refers them to federal and provincial programs and integration services. PSRs receive up to one year of income support from their sponsors, who also provide them with housing in their community. In the case of PSRs, these services or their introduction is provided to Syrian refugees by their sponsors. BVORs have been formally recommended by the UNHCR for resettlement in Canada and are eligible for up to one full year of financial, community, and emotional support from a combination of the Canadian government and private sponsors.

Resettlement and integration services include helping refugees know their rights, linking them to the community, helping them understand life in Canada, offering English or French language training, searching for work, connecting with long-time Canadians and established immigrants, accessing childcare, taking public transportation, accessing crisis counselling if needed, and more. These settlement and integration services may be used by all refugees until they become Canadian citizens, which becomes possible after three years. Resettlement is often a godsend to people needing rescue from conflict and displacement, but newcomers face challenges and obstacles to integration, including loss of identity (Fantino & Colak, 2001), housing and poor neighbourhoods (Carter & Osborne, 2009), and language barriers (Stewart et al., 2015). Despite these and other challenges, there is evidence that refugees in Canada can cultivate resilience (Wong & Yohani, 2016). Thus, the question remains regarding positive ways Syrians are adapting to resettlement and overcoming the challenges of resettlement.

1.3 Defining the Terms

Refugee

The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees explains that a refugee is someone who has escaped their home country and, “is unable or unwilling to return to their country of

origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHCR, 2010, p. 3). For the Government of Canada, a refugee is defined as a person who has been forced from their home country due to a justifiable fear of persecution, cannot return home, or has seen or experienced many horrors (Government of Canada, 2008). Zetter (1991) argues that labels, such as refugee, risks objectifying and muting the voices of the “objects,” thus incorrectly reflecting their reality. While Cameron (2014) argues that there needs to be agreed upon definitions of concepts and labels to better organise refugee studies, this has so far been proven to be problematic. I recognise the struggle of academics to effectively label refugees and displaced people, and the purpose of this research is not to redefine who is a refugee. A Syrian refugee, for the purposes of this research, is someone who has fled Syria due to fears of the ongoing internal conflict and has been legally resettled in Canada through the help of the Canadian government and the UNHCR. For clarity’s sake, to avoid repetition, and for the continuation of this dissertation, I will at times use the words “refugee,” “former refugee,” and “Syrian” interchangeably to refer to participants.

Resilience

Resilience can be defined as one’s capacity to bounce back after severe stress with increased personal strength and resourcefulness (Walsh, 2006). This definition describes the lived experiences of participants in this research, as there is an element of growth in their stories. Resilience also includes flexibility, initiative, ingenuity, adaptability, spontaneity, originality, and problem solving skills (Barron, 1969). Various combinations of these traits and qualities were expressed by participants to some degree as they relearned how to live after experiencing a stressful life event. Masten and Reed (2002) have noted that resilience may take time in

becoming evident to an individual and may only be realized years after one has experienced a stressful event. Thus, a definition of resilience should include the potential to overcome adversity in a positive way while acknowledging that it also takes time. Early studies of resilience see it as a normative adaptation pattern, wherein a person eventually returns to a pre-stress state (Selye, 1956), while others argue that resilience means maintaining somewhat constant levels of psychological functioning (Bonanno, 2004). In contrast, I would argue that for refugees, resilience is more than returning to their pre-stress state and an absence of negative effects. Their lives have changed dramatically in terms of geographical location, use of language, social institutions, cultural expectations, career opportunities and more, and as such it is impossible for them to return to the same normal they experienced in Syria. In addition, I would further argue that having some negative reactions and residual negative effects is natural, since adjusting to their new life takes time and new challenges constantly arise. Thus, I have chosen to use a definition of resilience that includes a potential for personal growth while acknowledging that resilience occurs over time and may include setbacks: resilience is an ongoing process and a person's ability to bounce back after adversity with increased personal strength, resourcefulness, and the potential for growth.

Experience

Experience is an account and explanation of someone's unique phenomenological world (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). The Oxford English Dictionary (2020) defines experience as "an event or activity that affects you in some way." Thus, it is a way people ascribe meaning to events that have impacted them. Various types of experiences include emotional, physical, social, spiritual, and subjective. This research is concerned with subjective experiences that participants have lived through in their recent lives. Subjective experience includes factors in

one's life that influence their perception of reality (Didonna, 2009). For instance, forced displacement, resettlement, adjusting to a new life, and overcoming challenges are factors that influence the participants in this study. For this dissertation, lived experience is defined as: participants' perceptions of reality and the meaning they assign to events that have impacted their lives. The terms lived experience and subjective experience will sometimes be used in place of each other.

1.4 Approach and Methodology

Within an interpretivist paradigm, our individual human realities and understandings are made up of subjective experiences. In interpretivism, researchers seek to understand a socially constructed reality inside a defined context (Willis, 2007). The lived experiences, perceptions and understandings of individuals are crucial in deciphering a phenomenon (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Thus, the epistemological belief of reality is that it is a social construct, and knowledge is subjective and must be interpreted. The goal of interpretivist research is to generate new knowledge that may be transferable to other populations or contexts. The purpose of qualitative study is to aid researchers in comprehending and appreciating the richness of people, situations, and social and cultural contexts (Myers, 2009). Lin and colleagues (2004) offer further evidence that lived experiences are crucial for understanding ideologies, institutions, marginalisation, and discrimination. Rather than ending up with numbers and statistics, it is inductive and ends up with personal narratives and descriptions of the data (Domegan & Fleming, 2007). This was an appropriate methodology for this study because while the focus was on lived experiences and resilience, interviews were open to development as participants emphasised what was meaningful to them. The sensitive nature of resettlement following displacement also urges the subjective approach of this study as it touches on delicate issues, including discrimination or

loss (Lin et al., 2004). Therefore, I have chosen to approach this phenomenon with a focus on subjectivity, interpretivism, and openness, thus allowing participants to express the depth and personality of their lived experiences. Analysis of the data was done by thematic analysis, which allowed themes of resilience to emerge naturally.

As the research was interpretive and used thematic analysis, interviews were semi-structured and open-ended. Interview questions focused on experiences of resettlement, identity, community, personal strengths, and society. Examples of some of the interview questions include: Who are your closest friends in Canada, and why are these relationships important to you? How do you express yourself creatively? How do you keep a positive attitude through difficult experiences? And, what are your goals for the next five years in Canada? Interviews were voice recorded and transcribed by myself. Interviews were transcribed within one to two days of the interview with field notes to record reflections, insights, or emerging themes. Recorded interviews, transcripts, and field notes were available only to me to protect individual identities; and the data was analysed by myself using thematic analysis (Nowell, et al. 2017). Categories were identified within each interview then compared against other interviews to distinguish significant themes which then become the themes used throughout the results section of this dissertation. Prior to submission, extracts from interview transcripts were shared with those participants who shared their email addresses to confirm the contents and allow opportunities for amendments to their statements.

Two interview participants were recruited through a religious organization and one through a friend prior to leaving Japan. After arriving in Canada, most participants were recruited via snowball sampling, while the remaining participants were recruited via family friends and non-profit resettlement services. Participants were given informed consent sheets in both English and Arabic at the time of the interview. In total, 26 people were interviewed, 11 of whom were

men and 15 women. Ages ranged from late teens to late 50s, with the average age for men being 30 and for women 35. Eighteen people were married, seven were single, and one was widowed prior to the Syrian war. Twenty-one people were Sunni and 5 were Christian. At the time of the interview, average length of time in Canada was 14 months. The shortest time was one year two months, and the longest time was two years eight months. Ten participants were from Dara'a, six from Homs, four from Damascus, three from Latakia, two from Aleppo, and one from Idlib. On the journey from Syria to Canada, participants had stayed in Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Libya, and Turkey. On arrival in Canada, 18 people were GARs, four were PSRs, and four were BVORs. Eleven interviews were conducted in English and 15 in Arabic with the assistance of an interpreter.

1.5 Significance of the Research

Syrian refugees in Canada are a new and expanding research topic. At present, research covers a wide range of matters. Most of this research leans toward negative experiences and challenges. This may be due to our negativity instinct—a tendency to notice bad events and experiences more than the good (Rosling, 2018). Significant foundations of knowledge include issues surrounding mental health (Bazaid, 2017; Ahmed, Bowen, & Feng, 2017), physical health (Hansen, Maidment, & Ahmad, 2016; Bin Yameen et al., 2019), youths' education inclusion (Brewer, 2016), housing (Wilkinson et al., 2017) and private sponsorship (Hynie et al., 2019; Hyndman, Williams, & Shauna, 2017). It is important to address the objective challenges faced by Syrian newcomers, but it is also valuable to explore areas of subjective strength so as not to construct an image of pathology and ignore the positive consequences of resettlement. On the topic of resilience among Syrian refugees, current research looks at refugee youths in Canada but is yet to focus specifically on resilience among Syrian youths in Canada

(Pieloch, McCullough, & Marks, 2016). Other research on Syrian refugee resilience explores themes of resilience in Syrian refugees in refugee camps in Jordan and identifies the significance of ethnic identification in group resilience (Alfadhli & Drury, 2018). Although refugees face social and cultural barriers in resettlement, lack of opportunities, legal rights and social factors can contribute to growth and improved well-being (Rizkalla & Segal, 2018).

Marfleet (2018) emphasises that most refugee movements are absent from national histories, and silencing refugee voices excludes them from ideologies of belonging and understanding. Their voices are important, and Alase (2017) acknowledges that participant-oriented, interpretive phenomenological research respects, examines, interprets, and is sensitive to the lived experiences of participants. Research on lived experiences allows individual voices to be heard, and is appropriate for discovering the meaning participants give to their experiences (Coleman et al., 2015). There is currently no phenomenological and thematic synthesis of Syrian refugees' lived experiences following resettlement in Canada. Thus, the purpose of this PhD research has been to investigate the lived experiences among resettled Syrian refugees with a focus on resilience. I considered a qualitative phenomenological approach with thematic analysis the most appropriate for this study. Drolet and Moorthi (2018) used mixed methods in communities in Alberta to discuss the importance of ethnic-cultural communities, for example, and found that ties to the community are still shaky. Agrawal (2018) explores the issue of Syrian refugee resettlement in Alberta, finding that PSRs face similar challenges to those that GARs and BVORs face; furthermore, the study was conducted within the first year of resettlement, and more research is needed for subsequent years. My research may be closest to that of Oudshoorn, Benbow, and Meyer (2019) in that it investigates the subjective resettlement experiences of Syrians in Canada. Their research used qualitative exploration into the subjective experiences of resettled Syrian refugees in BC regarding housing satisfaction. The study

highlighted themes related to housing and integration, including faith, gratitude, segregation, integration, connections with Canadians, insufficient housing, and a sense that it was worth it to come to Canada. This review of Syrians' housing and resettlement experiences emphasises integration challenges while also bringing forth more positive attitudes, but it does not give attention to the dimensions and depth of resilience through participants' lived experiences. As such, the lived experiences of Syrian refugees can be further enhanced by listening to refugee voices and delving more deeply into themes of resilience that contribute to positive aspects of resettlement and integration.

There are several reasons for focusing on Syrian refugees as a subject of study. One, focusing on one specific group of people will reduce variables of difference between other subjects, such as language, culture, religion, background, etc. It will help bring attention to the significance of similar characteristics and shared traits among participants. Two, it will contribute to improving resettlement conditions amidst the Syrian refugee crisis and the vast number of Syrians who are displaced around the world. The Syrian refugee crisis is too big to be ignored, and this research focuses on its reach in Canada. Third, it was more manageable to find interview participants, since there are many resettled Syrians in BC, and Syrian refugees are likely to know more Syrian refugees than refugees from other countries. Focusing on Syrian refugees does not discredit the importance of studying other refugee populations or all refugees; however, for this research, it was more feasible to concentrate on one group of people.

The current body of literature leaves conceptual, methodological, and knowledge gaps and suggests a need for further qualitative research to deliver interpretation and rich descriptive accounts of the resettlement experiences and resilience of participants. Phenomenology combined with thematic analysis is the most appropriate approach for this investigation because

it is well-suited to study lived experiences. Therefore, this study seeks to understand the lived experiences and resilience of resettled Syrian refugees in British Columbia.

1.6 Contributions of the Research

This study intends to research the themes of resilience among Syrian refugees by analysing their subjective lived experiences of early resettlement in BC. Current knowledge in the field of Syrian refugee resettlement in Canada covers vast issues and challenges, including physical and mental health, housing concerns, education, and employment, among others. While these studies provide general statistics regarding Syrian refugees and the issues they face, they do not offer researchers with more insight into how Syrians improve their well-being by developing resilience and what these areas of resilience are. In this section, I will outline how the current PhD dissertation contributes to a less explored realm of Syrian refugee resettlement in Canada, namely a need for detailed analysis of the subjective experiences of former Syrian refugees and the ways people develop resilience. I will also argue the importance of further research in the field of refugee resilience.

Conceptual and Methodological Contributions

This dissertation delivers a new conceptual and methodological approach to studying Syrian refugee resilience in Canada. It combines a thematic investigation of resilience and personal narratives to identify the various dimensions of strength in refugees' lives and how people further develop resilience after resettlement. Motivation for this study is summarised by Marfleet (2018) who states that refugee voices are too often silenced and, "against a din of official noise amplified by the state itself and by mass media, they go unheard...If mass displacement is part of the modern socio-political order, so too are the experiences and

memories of refugees and those who empathize and solidarize with them” (p. 32). Current research on Syrian refugees in Canada does not sufficiently give voice to their strengths and resilience. In contrast, an interpretivist paradigm claims that there is only subjective reality and no objective reality. From this perspective, all knowledge and reality is subjective and socially constructed (Weaver & Olson, 2006). At the same time, the research values the lived experiences of individuals and the influence of culture on their perceptions (Welford et al., 2011). In this type of research, the goal is subjectivity, and Thanh and Thanh (2015) argue that interpretive research is more inclusive and accepting of different points of view.

The dissertation argues that we must include personal narratives in studies on Syrian refugees and recognise their resilience in overcoming the challenges of displacement, resettlement, and integration. It is part of the broad and ongoing conversation of Syrian refugee resettlement in Canada and gives voice to individuals to let them share their subjective experiences. Presently, no data is available on the specific dimensions of resilience among former Syrian refugees in BC. Thus, this dissertation uses an interpretivist paradigm and applies a phenomenological approach and thematic analysis of resilience to assess the unique strengths and values of Syrians as they negotiate a positive future for themselves in Canada. It compliments previous research that focuses on challenges by providing evidence of ways people effectively overcome these challenges through their own resourcefulness. The primary contribution of the research is rich insight of a phenomenon in its natural context. This dissertation focuses on Syrian refugees in BC, and British Columbia was chosen due to its relevance as a receiving area within Canada and personal feasibility for the completion of this study.

The study aims to contribute relevant information to the literature on refugee resettlement in Canada and refugee resilience through an analysis of lived experiences. It incorporates aspects from sociology, anthropology, and psychology, such as discrimination, sense of place, and

personal growth. It offers an original process in examining resilience by analysing the subjective lived experiences and personal narratives of former Syrian refugees. This study stresses that further research in the field of Syrian refugee resilience is needed because it gives the voices back to refugees and stages them as active agents of their own future. Previous research on the challenges refugees face and their negative experiences is helpful for policy makers and service workers because it indicates areas of assistance that require greater attention, such as inclusion in education or housing, for example. However, further research on the resilience of refugees and their agency in their own futures is important for refugees and for more thoroughly understanding present-day subjective lived experiences and realities of resettlement and integration.

1.7 Structure of the Dissertation

This PhD dissertation is arranged into five main chapters that create a logical flow of information starting from the beginning of the project until the final discussion of the results.

Chapter 1, the introduction, presents the study; the background to the situation in Syria and the context in Canada; defines the terms; the significance of the study; an outline of the methodology and theoretical framework, including the research questions, objectives, and analysis; and the projected contributions of the research.

Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature on the topics related to the research. It explores refugee studies, specifically labelling, the evolution of the discipline, and argues for a subjective approach; it looks at other lived experience studies and makes a case for this type of refugee research. It also looks at studies on resilience and the relation between resilience and well-being. Finally, it relates all these issues to the current body of knowledge on Syrian refugee resettlement in Canada and addresses the gap that this research will fill.

Chapter 3 discusses the development of the research methodology and methods. It discusses phenomenology, defines the epistemological and ontological views of the research, considers the organisation of the research, argues the advantages of a qualitative study which focuses on subjective lived experiences, outlines the tools and processes of investigation, and summarises the profiles of interview participants.

Chapter 4 presents the main findings of the research. It is organised into three main parts. The first part analyses the themes of resilience found in the wider society; these are 1) physical places of significance around town, and 2) new rights and opportunities. The second part discusses the themes of resilience found at the interpersonal level; these are 3) family relationships, 4) relationships with other Syrian refugees and the Arab community, and 5) non-Arab immigrants, volunteers and sponsors, and other Canadians. The third part breaks down the themes of resilience as stemming from the individual; these are 6) personal characteristics, and 7) creativity and expression.

Chapter 5 concludes the dissertation, and highlights the consequences of resilience—a greater sense of self, a sense of purpose, and a sense of mastery. It also relates the current study to the wider question of refugee acceptance and international cooperation, specifically the triple benefit of accepting refugees for resettlement. This section also readdresses the research questions, notes the limitations of the study, and suggests policy recommendations for Syrian refugee resettlement in Canada.

2 Placing the Study Within the Current Body of Knowledge

2.1 Introduction

At the end of 2018, the UNHCR (UNHCR, 2019a) reported that there were 70.8 million displaced people, 41.3 million of whom are internally displaced persons, 25.9 million who are refugees, with 3.5 million seeking asylum. With so many people fleeing danger and many overflowing into other countries, the study of refugee experiences is of great importance. Three broad ways of discussing refugees are: voluntary repatriation, integration into a second country of asylum, and third-country resettlement. Much research around refugees has been quantitative, measurable, and focused on policy regarding second country integration. However, the lived experiences and stories of resilience of resettled refugees deserve critical attention from the social sciences. Thus, this chapter will make a case for a subjective study of Syrian refugees, their lived experiences, and how they positively construct their reality during resettlement in Canada. It is only focused on the discussion of refugee resettlement in a third country. This topic is significant because we cannot truly understand a situation without understanding the people experiencing that situation. The voices of refugees are often obscured by statistics, broad generalisations, stereotypes, and images of poor mental health. A subjective study of refugees will force us to rethink refugee movement and resettlement. It will reintroduce compassion into an area of study that often glosses over the lived experiences of its subjects. This is important because Canada has accepted nearly 52,000 Syrian refugees in the last four years (ISSofBC, 2018), and many aspects of their experiences of resettlement are still unknown.

The themes of this chapter are, 1) the study of refugees, and 2) resilience. The first half of this chapter will discuss the practice and difficulty of labelling displaced people, the evolution of refugee studies and its relationship to Forced Migration Studies, followed by a critical analysis of objective and subjective approaches to refugee studies. It will discuss the previous

methodology and findings of past refugee studies to create a big picture against which the current dissertation is set. The second half of this chapter will discuss the definition of resilience, what factors may predict or contribute to resilience, and its connection with well-being for refugees. It will also relate these themes to the Canadian context and current research on Syrian refugees that has been done in the last few years. It will also discuss how resilience has been studied by other researchers, the limitations of these studies, and how we can better merge the subjective study of refugee lived experiences to the topic of resilience.

2.2 The Study of Refugees

Refugees are not a new phenomenon, but the official academic study of refugees is relatively new and has undergone several transitions and defining moments in the last one hundred years. While it is not possible to cover the entirety of refugee studies as an academic field, in this section I will discuss several debates surrounding labelling refugees, the evolution of refugee studies as an academic discipline, and make a case for a subjective approach to refugee studies who have resettled in a third country.

Labelling

The labels we use, “refugees,” “displaced person,” “exile,” “stateless person,” and “internally displaced person,” for example, carry certain assumptions and reflect structures of power, particularly that of “other” and construction of a reality that is different from our own (Cameron, 2014). Labelling is necessary for conceptual clarity and to help understand and make sense of our world, but it can also be problematic when it concerns legal categories of people. Zetter (1991) states that labelling is a bureaucratic process by which a stereotyped identity replaces a person’s identity because we assume they need to be placed within a prescribed

category. Our world does not mimic the legal categories we create based on our knowledge, and these categories result in exclusion just as much as they do inclusion (Chimni, 2009). The label of refugee produces thoughts of helplessness, dependency, and misery (Harrell-Bond & Voutira, 1992) and a feeling that a refugee has become subhuman or even to feel as if they are part of another race (Dunbar-Ortiz & Harrell-Bond, 1987). Zetter (1991) further implies that labelling involves making judgements of the people we label. For instance, to be a refugee implies uprootedness, exile, dependency, and a break from previous normal lives (Black, 2001). Thus, the label of refugee creates an image of living a liminal existence with blurry boundaries, low legal status, and non-personhood. Damaledo (2018) also finds that labelling inhibits local integration. In Turkey, which was home to 1.7 million registered refugees from Syria (and many more unregistered) as of March 15 (Içduygu, 2015), the word “guests” was chosen over “refugees” under the assumption that Syrians would return home after conflict subsides. Though this label further implies liminality and expected short stay, the label “refugee,” however controversial, opens more doors for humanitarian, policy, and integration support.

The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as a person who has fled their country and, “is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHCR, 2010, p. 3). The Government of Canada defines a refugee as someone forced to flee their country due to a justifiable fear of persecution, cannot return home, or has seen or experienced many horrors (Government of Canada, 2008). However, the word “refugee” as an official status was absent from Canadian immigration literature until 1969. Until that time, the definition of a refugee was used more as a working guideline than a legal status. Zetter (1991) argues that imparting such labels risks objectifying and muting the voices of the “objects,” thus incorrectly reflecting their reality; and

Chimni (2009, p. 16) further writes that the current “legal positivist methodology with its focus on extant legal categories is thus deeply flawed.” While Cameron (2014) argues that there needs to be agreed upon definitions of concepts and labels to better organise refugee studies, this has so far been proven to be problematic even when intending to be helpful. I recognise the struggle of academics to effectively label refugees and displaced people. By all definitions of the word, the participants in this study can be considered refugees, or rather they *were* refugees. According to their legal status in Canada, they are now permanent residents. All participants have Syrian nationality and lived in Syria prior to being forcefully displaced to a second country. However, for clarity’s sake and for the continuation of this dissertation, I will at times use the words “refugee,” “former refugee,” and “Syrian” interchangeably to refer to participants.

Evolution of the Discipline

Said (2000, p. 181) writes that “becoming an outsider” is a practice as old as time. There may not be any definitive starting point of refugee studies as academic discipline, but Chimni (2009) outlines several phases of significant evolution: first, from 1914-1945 in response to World War One and World War Two; second, from 1945-1982 with a focus on people displaced from these two wars; third, from 1982-2000 which produced rapid growth in the field of Refugee Studies as a titled discipline; and fourth, from 2001 onward where he argues that Refugee Studies has been declining and is being replaced with Forced Migration Studies. It was during the third phase of development that many academic institutions and journals on refugees were established. For instance, in 1988, out of concern for resettled Vietnamese, the Center for Refugee Studies was founded at York University (Black, 2001). In response to refugee concerns, the UNHCR created three long-term, solutions for refugees, which includes voluntary

repatriation, local integration, and resettlement (UNHCR, 2011). Black (2001) notes that although refugee studies have crossed various social science disciplines, the growth of refugee studies as an academic discipline has maintained close interaction with policymakers and, in fact, much policy research is commissioned by or written with policy agencies. In defence of refugee studies, Black (2001) contends that this policy- and problem-oriented development of refugee studies is a major strength of the discipline, but at the same time too much focus on policy organizations may marginalise refugee studies from the social sciences. This makes a case for the need to study the lived experiences of refugees who have resettled in a third country.

On one hand, Chimni (2009) states that Refugee Studies should be satisfied with the humanitarian effects it has promoted, including disputing the standard image of refugees as parasitic, bringing attention to the special vulnerability of women and children, and emphasising the need to listen to refugee voices. The basis of current global refugee protection is the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a global accord of the United Nations which defines who is a refugee, summarizes the basic rights of those who are permitted asylum status, and describes the resettlement tasks of nations who are party to the treaty. It was drafted following the Second World War to care for the considerable movements of people in Europe. In 1969, Canada became party to the 1951 Convention to handle issues of human displacement around the world. Immigrants and refugees have long been a part of Canada's past, but refugee policy and study has only existed since the 1976 Immigration Act (Lanphier, 1981). On the other hand, Black (2001) argues that the development of refugee studies largely focused on policy research has had minimal impact on the real lives of refugees. Therefore, the evolution of a policy-centred approach to refugees must be redirected. Chimni (2009) argues further that a transition from Refugee Studies to Forced Migration Studies democratizes the discipline when previous perspectives have been dominated by Western politics of power and capitalism.

Meanwhile, Black (2001) presents the argument of whether refugees should be included in the emerging discipline of transnationalism, which has so far largely ignored the experiences of refugees. Inclusion in transnational studies would be more people-centred and may reduce the policy-heavy bent of previous refugee research, but it still does not bridge the larger gap between refugee studies and actual resettled refugees. The advancement of refugee studies so far has not resulted in the desired real-world effects on the lives and protection of refugees, so a new way of thinking should guide future development of the discipline. Thus, a debate is also growing concerning the subjectivity over the objectivity of refugee studies. A shift to a more subject approach to refugee studies further guides the argument to study the importance of resilience among refugees during resettlement.

Objectivity vs. Subjectivity

More than legal definitions and power dynamics, “forced displacement, uprootings and other refugee-related phenomena...are a standard feature of human social experience, [although] relatively little attention has been paid to it by the academic establishment” (Harrell-Bond & Voutira, 1992, p. 6). Cameron (2014) argues that the merging of Refugee Studies into Forced Migration Studies, as summarised by Chimni (2009), dilutes the attention given to refugees because Forced Migration Studies is too broad to fully delineate the reality of refugees. He reasons that including refugee studies under the encompassing Forced Migration Studies would “stifle the conceptual distinctiveness of refugees” (Cameron, 2014, p. 9-10). Harrell-Bond and Voutira (1992) have argued that refugee research and academic publications have been dominated by legal issues rather than the lived experiences of refugees and their tensions of being uprooted and adjusting to a new culture; and Benard (1986) describes refugees as political symbols. However, refugee solutions cannot be reached solely with calculated, rational

decisions (d'Haenens & Joris, 2019). This view is supported by Malkki (1995) who acknowledges that the diverse and qualitatively different socioeconomic status, histories, psychologies, and spirituality involving displaced people deserves study. Additionally, Harrell-Bond and Voutira (1992, p. 6) assert that “Anthropology has the most to contribute to the study of refugees.” In support of a more subjective approach to refugee studies, I am choosing to view the discipline as separate from the broad umbrella of Forced Migration Studies. As this study is positioned in the discussion of refugee resettlement, rather than asylum or repatriation, a subjective approach is warranted. I believe this highlights the unique experiences of refugees and their subjective experiences of resettlement as opposed to the geopolitical concerns of Forced Migration Studies and other displaced people, such as internally displaced people, trafficked persons, or armed humanitarian intervention (Chimni, 2009). Although Chimni (2009) argues for the merging of Refugee Studies and Forced Migration Studies, he recognises that anthropology, although in the past closely associated with colonialism, is also self-reflexive and self-critical of colonialism and capitalism.

Syrian refugees in Canada are a new and expanding research topic. At present, research covers a wide range of matters, much of which focuses on objective challenges refugees face. For instance, meaningful foundations of knowledge include issues surrounding mental health (Bazaid, 2017; Ahmed, Bowen, & Feng, 2017), physical health (Hansen, Maidment, & Ahmad, 2016; Bin Yameen et al., 2019), educational inclusion (Brewer, 2016), housing (Wilkinson et al., 2017) and private sponsorship (Hynie et al., 2019; Hyndman, Williams, & Shauna, 2017). These studies reflect the objective side of the refugee debate and the challenges Syrians face. I agree that this is important; however, it is also necessary to understand the perspectives of Syrian refugees. Furthermore, studying the objective challenges of refugees helps to reconstruct the idea of refugees as dependent, passive, or helpless. So as not construct an image of

pathology, it is also necessary to explore the positive consequences of resettlement. Cameron (2014, p. 5) confirms that a phenomenological approach is most appropriate for studying various displaced people because, “It is through learning the lived experiences of individuals that one can come closest to understanding how they have constructed their reality.” Betts and Collier (2017, p. 234) propose that solving the world’s refugee problem means to “identify an approach that can offer rescue, autonomy, and a pathway out of limbo to all refugees, not just a minority, while working within the constraints of the contemporary world.” This includes creating safe havens in neighbouring countries and allowing economic participation, thus “incubating people’s capacities through economic empowerment” (Betts & Collier, 2017, p. 234). However, we cannot do this without understanding the subjective lived experiences and individually constructed reality of refugees. Marfleet (2018) also emphasises that most refugee movements are absent from national histories, and silencing refugee voices excludes them from ideologies of belonging and understanding. Although this dissertation is not strictly anthropological, it does draw on anthropological terms and concepts, such as liminality, identity transition, shared language and ethnicity, belonging, and place attachment. The aim of this dissertation is to discuss the subjectivity of the refugee resettlement experiences. To do this, I believe an interpretivist approach is most appropriate, since the individual reality of each participant is their own created reality and reflects their personal surroundings, relationships, and psyche.

Another reason for focusing on the subjective experiences of Syrian refugees is because Canada’s response to suddenly accept a large number of Syrian refugees was spurred by a single emotionally charged image. In 2015, photographs of Alan Kurdi, a child whose body was found on a Turkish shore after his family had been denied asylum in Canada, sparked passionate calls for the government to accept more refugees (Dearden, 2015). Images of a deceased child

previously on his way to Canada stirred the emotions of Canadians in a situation that had become focused on numbers, political burdens, and preventing access into other countries. Refugees are subjects, not objects; and there are stories, personal histories, and unique experiences for every person. The image of Alan Kurdi reminded Canadian citizens and politicians of this. While Alan Kurdi's story is tragic and there are many like his, not all stories end so sorrowfully. On the topic of resilience among Syrian refugees, current research looks at refugee youths in Canada over the years but is yet to focus specifically on resilience among Syrian youths in Canada (Pieloch, McCullough, & Marks, 2016). Other research on Syrian refugee resilience explores themes of resilience among refugees in Jordan and identifies the significance of ethnic identification in group resilience (Alfadhli & Drury, 2017). Although refugees face social and cultural barriers in resettlement and lack of opportunities, legal rights and social factors can contribute to personal growth and improved well-being among refugees (Rizkalla & Segal, 2018). There is currently a lack of research concerning the voices and lived experience of resettled Syrian refugees in Canada and themes of resilience. Thus, the purpose of the study is to give greater appreciation to the dimensions of resilience and offer insight into the subjective lived experiences of former Syrian refugees who have resettled in Canada. The study builds on previous studies of Syrian refugees in Canada and adds information on lived experiences of resilience to the body of literature.

2.3 Resilience

Resilience has been defined and used across a range of multidisciplinary perspectives. Historically used in the physical sciences to describe substances, it has increasingly been adopted by social scientists and pertains to people who have undergone trauma or adversity. Although resilience is a multidimensional construct, this section will attempt to understand the

intricacies, differences, and nuances of resilience as well as how resilience relates to refugees and their well-being.

What is Resilience?

The Cambridge Dictionary (2019) define resilience for physical materials as, “the ability of a substance to return to its usual shape after being bent, stretched, or pressed.” Regarding people, the same dictionary (2019) defines resilience as “the ability to be happy, successful, etc.” after a bad or challenging event has passed. *The Merriam Webster Dictionary* (2019) defines it as “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.” Early studies of resilience see it as a normative adaptation pattern, wherein a person eventually returns to a pre-stress state (Selye, 1956), while others argue that resilience means maintaining unchanging levels of psychological and physical functioning (Bonanno, 2004). In contrast, I would argue that for refugees, resilience is more than returning to their pre-stress state and an absence of negative effects. Their lives have changed dramatically in terms of geographical location, use of language, social institutions, cultural expectations, career opportunities and more, and as such it is impossible for them to return to the same normal they experienced in Syria.

Adding to the above definitions, Dyer and McGuinness (1996) state that resilience implies the promise that something good can be caused by misfortune. The authors see resilience as a sense of hope embedded within adversity (Dyers & McGuinness, 1996). In her work on families, Walsh (2006) concludes that resilience is one’s aptitude to bounce back after severe stress with increased personal strength and resourcefulness. Lepore and Revenson (2006) identify three scopes of resilience: recovery, resistance, and reconfiguration. To illustrate, the authors use the analogy of a tree blowing in the wind which may bounce back, stand still and undisturbed, or change its shape after the wind has stopped; to describe people, recovery is

when a person returns to their normal state of functioning following a stressful event, resistance is when people “exhibit normal functioning before, during, and after a stressor,” and reconfiguration is when people change their thoughts, beliefs, and behaviours that allows them to positively respond to trauma (Lepore & Revenson, 2006, p. 27). A key point of these definitions is the emphasis on overcoming adversity as a stronger person with increased capacity to handle future stresses. Using these definitions, I view resilience as a person’s ability to bounce back after adversity with increased personal strength, resourcefulness, and potential for growth rather than simply a recovery and return to normal state of functioning. Various factors contribute to the development of resilience, including optimism (Haidt, 2006), nostalgia (Routledge et al., 2013), a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006), finding meaningful physical places (Sampson & Gifford, 2010), and extensive social networks (Rutter, 1987). These features of resilience will be examined in greater depth in the results sections of this dissertation as they are related to the evidence given by participants.

Resilience has also been applied quantitatively, and several resilience scales attempt to measure resilience in individuals. The Wagnild and Young’s Resilience Scale (1993) measures the capacity to withstand stresses and find meaning in challenges. Abiola and Udofia (2011) used this scale to measure the mental health and well-being of medical students in Nigeria and found resilience to be negatively correlated with symptoms of anxiety and depression. However, this scale lacks generalisability because it was originally designed to study older women and was only afterward used for male samples and people of different ages. The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (Connor & Davidson, 2003) was created in response and to quantify resilience and assess clinical treatment for anxiety, depression, and stress. However, this scale is focused on personal competences and does not consider the role of community, society, or culture as impacting resilience. A third resilience scale is Firborg et al.’s Resilience

Scale for Adults (Friborg et al., 2003), which was developed in Norway. While Hjemdal and colleagues (2015) have confirmed its validity to a Brazilian sample, additional cross-cultural validation studies of the scale are limited. A limitation of these scales is that they lack in-depth subjective analysis of participants' answers to questions. Thus, there is a need for resilience studies that explore lived experiences while highlighting the ways people become stronger after adversity, rather than simply returning to a normal state of functioning.

What Contributes to Resilience?

Trauma often has the effect of destroying belief systems and depriving people from seeing a sense of meaning, but it can also give people the unique opportunity to rebuild areas of their life that they could never have done willingly (Haidt, 2006). Resilience is ongoing and open-ended as one relearns how to live after experiencing a traumatic, stressful, or negative life event. Masten and Reed (2002) have noted that resilience may take time in becoming evident to an individual and may only be realized years after one has experienced a stressful event. According to Lepore and Revenson, (2006), resilience is both a process and an outcome. While previous models of resilience focus on personal factors and competences, Wong and Yohani, (2016) argue for an ecological-transactional model, in which three interdependent systems (the macrosystem, exosystem, and microsystem) influence the development of resilience. Thus, this research supports a broader notion of resilience that acknowledges outside factors, such as relationships and the larger social and cultural context, and that resilience is a product of various factors beyond the individual psyche.

The macrosystem of support includes the physical environment, resources and services, and social institutions available to refugees that play a role in promoting resilience. Lepore & Revenson (2006) acknowledge that an individual coping with stress may show greater

resilience when they are surrounded by resources that are available when the person needs to access them. If resilience is the ability to prosper despite stressful situations, then one's larger surrounding can either help or hinder. Additionally, physical places strongly inform one's identity and help create a feeling of belonging to a place (Boğaç 2009). Resettlement should be in a place of restoration, safety, sociality, and opportunity (Sampson & Gifford, 2010). Wong and Yohani's (2016) definition of the macrosystem is limited to family culture and personal values. It does not include services available to refugees, the physical environment, or opportunities available as a result of social and institutional contexts that make up the macrosystem. Additionally, Wong and Yohani's (2016) study has a sample size of four participants, which leaves much room for further investigation and depth of study.

The mesosystem, which Wong and Yohani (2016) refer to as the exosystem, includes community groups, like religious groups or education classes, and helps refugees feel a sense of belonging among a group of peers. Supportive and safe social relationships are thus a vital resource to draw on in times of stress. The opportunity to safely disclose feelings and concerns with supportive individuals is a resilience strategy that allows those affected by stress to process the event and work through emotional issues, thereby improving mental health (Cohen, 1988). For instance, Lepore and Helgeson (1998) have found that a spouse or significant other as one's confidant reduces the negative effects of traumatic events, and couples who had hesitation when communicating with each other reported poorer mental health than couples in receptive relationships. Alfadhli and Drury (2018) recognise the importance of ethnic identification with others from the same community as crucial to developing resilience. However, these studies do not capture the entirety of community and social support networks. Additionally, Alfadhli and Drury's (2018) study was done in Jordan, so results may not be generalised to higher income

countries; it is also inclined to better explain male participants than female, as the authors mentioned they had limited interactions with female participants.

The microsystem of personal resources includes psychological and psychosocial factors, like the ones outlined in the various scales used to measure resilience (e.g. personal strength, personal competence, tolerance of stress, and personal control) and how they relate to depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues. Thus, the microsystem most closely resembles the conceptualisations of resilience outlined at the start of this section. Optimism has been shown to positively influence resilience (Lepore & Revenson, 2006); and Haidt (2006, p. 146) says that optimists have “won the cortical lottery” in that they naturally have a higher set-point for experiencing happiness and routinely see events with high levels of hopefulness. However, Tennen and Affleck (1999) contend that optimism may be an outcome of resilience rather than a predictor. The microsystem also lends itself to the theory of post-traumatic growth, as established by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) who find that a perceived change in self, improved relationships with others, and a changed philosophy of life are common among people who have successfully navigated a stressful situation. This idea of perceived growth following adversity underscores the above definitions which argue that resilience includes areas of improvement beyond recovery to a normal state. The concept of growth and self-improvement is a relevant component of resilience, and thus I have chosen to study resilience in way that acknowledges participant’s perceived growth as a result of their experiences.

Resilience and Well-being

Well-being sounds like an impressive buzzword but its scope is wide; and it is notoriously complex, difficult to define, and often confounded. The World Health Organization includes well-being in its definition of health: “A state of complete physical, mental and social well-

being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 2019), but it does not define social well-being or any other well-being label. Keyes (1998) proposes social integration, contribution, coherence, actualization, and acceptance as five dimensions of social well-being. However, this model is heavily focused on social relationships and there is the potential to discredit the individual in creating their own well-being. For instance, someone may be socially accepted but may have poor self-esteem and struggle to accept themselves, thus we cannot say they truly are demonstrating well-being. Ryff and Singer (2008) outline self-acceptance, positive relationships, personal growth, life purpose, environmental mastery, and autonomy as six scopes of psychological well-being. This approach is more encompassing than the previous one, and entails a sense of continuing personal growth. And Kahneman and Deaton (2010) posit that emotional well-being refers to the frequency and intensity of individual’s everyday experiences and emotions, including joy, sadness, anger, fascination, and pleasant affection, whereas life satisfaction refers to their thoughts about their life. The study finds that emotional well-being becomes satisfied as income rises, but life satisfaction does not. This leaves questions as to why not, which could be answered via qualitative methods gauging participants’ experiences.

These various approaches to well-being contain much overlap but there is still a blurring of two distinct ways of understanding well-being: *hedonism*, the subjective happiness arising from pleasure, and *Eudaimonia*, the realization of valued human potential (Ryan et al., 2008). However, what stands out as a common thread in these uses of well-being is the satisfaction of spending time with others as well as improving one’s quality of life. The top of Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs, self-actualisation, is further likened to well-being in that it is about finding purpose and meaning in life and describes empathy and close emotional identification with others. This facet of well-being is closely entwined with Aristotle’s original interpretation

of Eudaimonia in that individual self-realization a dynamic, involving, and “continual process of developing one’s potential” (Ryff & Singer, 2008, p.21). This lack of a constant model of well-being is both a burden and an advantage. Well-being is not a primary focus of this research, so there is flexibility in deciding the best approach. Since the above definition of resilience includes the possibility of personal improvement, it is best to use a model of well-being that compliments refugees’ continuing search for their full potential. Dodge and colleagues (2012) highlight the fact that researchers have yet to properly define (and consistently spell, i.e., well-being or wellbeing) well-being and instead has been driven by describing the dimensions of well-being. In response, they have proposed a move toward a definition of well-being in which well-being is a see-saw equilibrium between resources and challenges: it is achieved when people have the psychological, social, and physical resources necessary for the corresponding challenge, and thus when there are more challenges, the see-saw dips. When resources increase, i.e., get heavier and bring the balance down, the lack of challenges cause stagnation (Hendry & Kloep, 2002). However, a concern with this model of well-being is that it is centred on equilibrium and does not consider any forward trajectory. Thus, I have decided not to use this definition of well-being, since it leaves little room to strive for personal growth, which I have previously outlined as a key component of resilience.

To fulfil this need to allow well-being to include an element of striving, I have drawn from the original concept of well-being. Well-being appears to originate from the term Eudaimonia, a word used by Aristotle in his 350 B.C. essay, *Nicomachean Ethics* (1976). Eudaimonic well-being is often contrasted against hedonistic well-being (Ryan et al., 2008), and the two result in very different images of well-being. While hedonistic well-being is happiness and pleasure resulting from engaging in activities, Eudaimonia is experienced through striving toward one’s excellence (Waterman, 1990). What Aristotle seemed to have meant was happiness as the result

of “striving toward excellence based on one’s unique potential” (Ryff & Singer, 2008, p. 14). Thus, oversimplifications of well-being as meaning subjective happiness, feeling good, contentment, and general satisfaction do not capture the true intent of Eudaimonic well-being. Instead, well-being means to achieve the best that’s within us: to grow toward some final form of realization and best nature is what it means to be human (Johnston, 1997). It is more than subjective happiness. Well-being has at heart two Greek priorities: to “know thyself” and to “become what you are” (Ryff & Singer, 2008, p. 18). This is relevant to resilience and development following negative life events because it is indicative of growth and positive transformation; and the current study will relate well-being to resilience in that it is a goal-directed and purpose-driven life. It argues that despite adversity, our higher purpose is to achieve well-being in the form of a life of self-awareness and personal growth.

The target of well-being is not subjective happiness; and happiness should never be an end goal. Mill (1989) proclaimed those who are truly happy are not those who seek their own happiness, but those who fix their minds on the happiness of others; by aiming at something else, their own happiness finds a way. Therefore, I reason that well-being is related to resilience in that resilient people can overcome obstacles, restructure their goals, understand themselves, move past stressful events through introspection, and find a sense of purpose in their life. A sense of purpose and understanding that comes from resilience results in better well-being.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the struggles of academics to use refugee labels accurately and fairly. I agree that labels are necessary and must be used, though this can be contentious. The participants in this study are fairly unambiguous, so I believe the label “refugee” works well in this context. I recognise that the individuals in my study are part of a larger phenomenon of

refugee movement, yet they all have their own individual needs, identities, backgrounds, and social worlds. Thus, I also sense it is prudent to keep refugee studies separate from Forced Migration Studies as this ensures the study remains unclouded by other studies of forced migration. This analysis of the literature ends with the conclusion that refugee studies should closely explore the subject lived experiences of refugees as a distinctive academic field. A critical analysis of individuals' social-cultural worlds is necessary for the type of phenomenological research that this study aims for. Within an interpretivist paradigm, I seek to understand the phenomenological lived experiences and resilience of Syrian refugees. This will allow us to more fully appreciate the complexity and richness of refugee lives, specifically how they demonstrate and develop resilience during their resettlement. Critically acknowledging this aspect of refugee experiences leads to a more complete study of individuals and their subjective realities. Chimni (2009, p. 23) states that a trend in refugee studies is to "further the project of empowerment of displaced persons." A subjective study can thus help to better protect the dignity and safety of individuals without the risk of reducing them to statistics and passive objects incapable of creating their own future, which is what this research hopes to accomplish. By rethinking refugee acceptance and resettlement with a focus on lived experiences rather than politics and policy, we can better empower refugees as they reconstruct their lives, become important actors in their new environment, and contribute to the redevelopment of Syria following the war.

The strength of subjectively studying refugees is that it forces us to rethink refugee acceptance. Being forced into new physical, social, and cultural environments means adjusting to new languages, customs, beliefs, norms, and expectations. While some people do return to their home country, refugees in Canada are accepted with the intention of permanent residence. In is in *their* best interest for us to understand their lived experiences so we can better inform

policy, programs, and services to ease their integration. It is in *our* best interest because they are our new neighbours, classmates, co-workers, and friends. A subjective approach to refugee studies leaves more biases at the door and lets their voices be heard. On the other hand, there are weaknesses to subjective studies of refugees, especially when done by an outsider, such as myself. It is impossible for people to be truly objective, and some biases may make their way into the research. Thus, it is the responsibility of the researcher and the reader to be aware of these biases, acknowledge them, and be sensitive when interpreting and exposing the voices of others. Also, studying lived experiences is qualitative and time-consuming. A small sample of in-depth and meaningful interviews cannot be said to be representative of an entire population. Voices will be left out of the conversation. However, this leaves room for further research to try to capture the experiences of different groups and segments of the population being studied. Additionally, subjective studies cannot always be generalizable across all populations. Although this is not a problem, it does need to be addressed. Regarding this dissertation, results are subjective to the small group of Syrian individuals and families I interviewed in BC. Parts of the results may be generalizable to the larger population in BC, to other parts of Canada, and to other refugee groups. Furthermore, certain aspects of the results may be generalizable based on other factors, such as gender, age, education level, religion, and so on. Further research would be necessary to compare findings with other populations and segments and fill these additional gaps in the literature.

3 A Phenomenological Study and Thematic Analysis

3.1 Introduction

The current body of literature on Syrian refugees in Canada leaves conceptual, methodological, and knowledge gaps and suggests a need for further qualitative research that will help researchers and service workers appreciate the lived experiences of Syrians. The purpose of the research was to understand the subjective lived experiences and themes of resilience in former Syrian refugees in BC. Rich description of the subjective experiences of Syrian refugees will help refocus refugee studies on people rather than policy. A focus on resilience will also moderate a lens of pathology among study refugees and instead illustrate the ways people can thrive despite adversity and hardship. This section will describe the process of this research to determine the value of the study and how it may be judged or replicated.

In this section I will define the ontology, epistemology, and methodology of the research as well as the process of analysis. The section begins by making a case for a qualitative study, since it deals with lived experiences and subjective realities. It also defines the study as a phenomenological study since the research is exploratory, descriptive, and centred on the meanings and interpretations subjects give to their own experiences. It approaches the research from an interpretivist paradigm, in which human realities and understandings are made up of experiences that researchers seek to understand. Interpretivism is well-matched for this study because lived experiences and perceptions are crucial in making sense of a phenomenon. Thus, the epistemological stance is that reality is a social construct and should be studied subjectively. Next, I describe the method of thematic analysis as well as measures to judge the trustworthiness of the study. This includes the process of gathering and managing data during fieldwork as well as the steps of analysis. Finally, the section describes the sample that was studied and a general analysis of the participants.

3.2 Qualitative Phenomenology

Research is commonly divided into the dichotomy of quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research methods are mainly employed by the natural sciences and employ experimentation and hypothesis testing. Qualitative research is valued for its complexity and ability to create useful results (Nowell et al., 2017). Qualitative research methods are used more often in social sciences and are a way for researchers to study the subjectivity of the social and cultural world with a purpose to produce knowledge and understanding of subjective human experiences (Sandelowski, 2004). Qualitative research studies the everyday lives of people or communities in their natural setting (Thomas, 2010) and seeks to “make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 2). Qualitative inquiry is exploratory and seeks new findings. Per Domegan and Fleming (2007, p. 24), qualitative research uses ‘soft’ methods then ends up with ‘rich’ data. A primary purpose of qualitative study is to assist researchers in understanding the situations, people, and contexts (Myers, 2009). In qualitative research, we explore social and cultural complexities and present them in a descriptive and informative way. In addition, qualitative research requires reflexivity of the researcher and includes the researchers own impressions and reflections (Myers, 2009).

Unlike quantitative research which presents findings in the form of statistics, numbers, and graphs, qualitative research presents data and findings through words and interpretations. A purpose is to make sense of social or cultural phenomena in a way that is “sensitive, insightful, rich, and trustworthy” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2). Phenomenology is the study of a phenomenon: things or events as they appear in our experience, to which we attempt to give meaning. The results of phenomenological research are exploratory, descriptive, detailed, and thoughtful. Still, qualitative researchers recognize that pure objectivity is challenging, if not impossible,

when studying culture and society, since the job of a qualitative researcher is to make sense of multiple subjective realities. Merriam (1998, p. 23) says that qualitative investigation is “an interpretation by the researcher of others’ views filtered through his or her own.” Qualitative studies may be framed by theories but this is not a requirement (Lambert & Lambert, 2012), and inductive research methods can be used to uphold or challenge these theories (Thomas, 2010). At the same time, qualitative research constantly evolves as the research progresses. Because it is nearly impossible for a qualitative study to be completely objective, Merriam (1998) argues that the quantitative idea of generalizability should not be imposed on qualitative research; instead the research should be judged on whether it is trustworthy (Nowell et al., 2017). A phenomenological study then describes the meaning of these lived experiences for those who experience them (Creswell, 1998).

3.3 Research Paradigms

The concept of research paradigms—a way for scientists to understand and explain their world and reality—was first acknowledged by Thomas Kuhn in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Accordingly, a research paradigm is a lens through which we interpret the world and understand our reality. It is an arrangement of principles and philosophies which denote how research problems should be addressed and explained (Kuhn, 1962). While there are numerous research paradigms today, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) recognise positivism, post-positivism, constructivism, interpretivism, feminism, and critical theory as six key paradigms in modern research. As has already been mentioned and will be deliberated in the remainder of this chapter, the current PhD dissertation follows an interpretivist research paradigm.

Three major terms inherent in what makes up a research paradigm and guide the process of research are its ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Ontology questions what constitutes

reality; and epistemology considers how knowledge is created and how we learn about the world (Kelly, Dowling, & Millar, 2017). Methodology is the methods used to carry out the research. Thus, ontology and epistemology sum up a person's worldview, i.e., their belief of reality and how they understand knowledge, and methodology is how we go about conducting research in line with that paradigm. A worldview has a significant influence on what a researcher considers to be important and how they carry out research, and no research paradigm or worldview should be considered superior than another, though one may be more appropriate than another in certain studies. Interpretivism has been deemed an appropriate lens through which to carry out this study.

Interpretivism

The ontological stance of interpretivism values lived experiences and the influence of culture (Welford et al., 2011). Its epistemological stance favours subjectivity (Weaver and Olson, 2006), and those within an interpretivist paradigm posit that a single objective reality does not exist. Thus, researchers seek to understand socially constructed reality within a given context (Willis, 2007); and knowledge is subjective and must be interpreted. Consequently, there are multiple routes to knowledge and ways to understand reality. Within interpretivism, the emic perspective (i.e., from the perspective of the subject) of lived experiences is emphasized (Kelly, Dowling, & Millar, 2017; Welford et al. 2011). In this regard, interpretivism is an esteemed paradigm by which to study the subjective lived experiences of former Syrians and their reality as they understand it, since it guarantees depth of understanding (Weaver & Olsen, 2006). Interpretivism is then an ideal paradigm for understanding the reality and experiences of those within a social or cultural phenomenon.

Interpretivism is a subjective rather than objective research paradigm. Within interpretivism, there is no objective reality, and knowledge and experiences are perceived. Interpretivist research means researchers seek answers through participants' perceptions and experiences and accommodate "multiple perspectives and versions of truths" (Thanh & Thanh, 2015, p. 25). According to Willis (2007, p. 583), a central belief of interpretivism is that reality is a social construct; it includes "accepting and seeking multiple perspectives, being open to change, practicing iterative and emergent data collection techniques, promoting participatory and holistic research, and going beyond the inductive and deductive approach." In this sense, an interpretive methodology provides a lens, or worldview, through which to inspect the experiences of the participants in a study and interpret what they say about their resettlement. Willis (2007) further argues that interpretivism values subjectivity as a primary goal of qualitative research. As such, there is never any one correct answer in research, and interpretive research is more inclusive and accepting of various viewpoints (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Klen and Meyers (1998) understand that the analysis of multiple perspectives results in a more comprehensive portrayal of a research context. Consequently, interpretive research is valued when researchers require in-depth and insightful information from a target population within a phenomenon. With an interpretivist perspective, this research gathers data from a group of former Syrian refugees in BC to obtain a more in-depth and multi-faceted understanding of their experiences of resilience during resettlement.

3.4 Thematic Analysis

Interpretations of resilience are subjective and best carried out as a qualitative study. Thematic analysis is a valuable method of qualitative analysis that can be used across a broad scope of research questions and epistemological stances (Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis can be

used to identify, analyse, organise, describe, and report a variety of relevant themes that emerge from sets of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The focus of this research was the subjective lived experiences of Syrian refugees. In that sense, the voices and lived experiences of participants is crucial to ensure a deep understanding of the participants in their social and cultural phenomenon (Weaver & Olson, 2006). Thematic analysis is flexible and delivers a rich, detailed, and multifaceted representation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Moreover, experience, strategies, and perceptions are ongoing and subject to change. The processes of change will continue for a lifetime, as individuals are influenced by many complex variables and the passage of time. Therefore, this research presents an interpretation of the subjective experiences of Syrians resilience at this moment in their resettlement. The assessment of lived experiences should again be done at various stages of the resettlement and integration processes for more robust and relative results. This presents an opportunity for further research to investigate the themes of resilience across a longitudinal study.

In nearly all regards, thematic analysis is appropriate for this PhD research, but it does present disadvantages as a qualitative method. Nowell and colleagues (2017) point out that there is a lack of substantial literature on how to conduct thematic analysis when compared with other prominent methods of qualitative analysis, such as grounded theory or ethnography. The flexibility and lack of structure of thematic analysis may lead to discrepancy and disorganised themes, but this can be offset by explicitly stating the epistemological position of the researcher throughout the study (Holloway & Todres, 2003).

3.5 Determining Trustworthiness

Thematic analysis of qualitative research offers a rich and deep understanding of people's lived experience. However, without hard data like statistics and graphs, it may be challenging

to have qualitative research recognised as valid and legitimate (Nowell et al., 2017). Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that trustworthiness is important to persuade readers of the legitimacy of qualitative research and thus present credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as criteria by which to assess the validity of a study. These terms will be defined and used to argue the trustworthiness of this PhD research.

Credibility

Credibility is the range to which findings are believable and can be recognised by others beside the researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Techniques for accessing credibility include prolonged engagement with the participants, observation, triangulation of data, debriefing of preliminary finding and interpretations, and member checking with participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this research, I spent time with each participant before and after interviews and interacted with them in a casual manner. I also continually asked for feedback and cross-clarification from interview respondents, translators, and other participants.

Transferability

Qualitative research is not intended to be generalizable; but case-to-case transferability can be assessed (Tobin & Begley, 2004). However, future researchers may want to transfer findings to another population or context. In that case, it is the researcher's responsibility to provide descriptions of the methodology and analysis so other researchers can judge for themselves whether the findings can be transferred to another site (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To do this, qualitative research should include details about the research methods, contexts, underlying assumptions, background, setting, population, and context. To make this research potentially transferable, I have documented the methods, process, procedures, literature review,

participants, and findings that were influential in shaping my interpretation of the data. I have been sensitive to the data and aware of how my own biases may influence my interpretation.

Dependability

Dependability is whether the findings may be observed or replicated in similar circumstances and with similar research subjects in other contexts (Merriam, 1998). It can be realized when the research is logical, traceable, and well-documented (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Merriam (1998) explains that dependability can be achieved by the researcher adequately explaining the theories contained within the study, methods of data collection, and detailed explanations of how data was collected. I have presented a logical literature review and background to the study, explained the paradigm behind the research, documented various methods of data collection, and confirmed findings with the participants.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to whether another researcher with similar backgrounds and paradigms would agree with the findings and conclusions if given the same set of collected data (Tobin & Begley, 2004). A critical account of how the research was conducted and analysed gives confidence to the reader that findings are accurate considering the researchers own perspective and interpretations. Audit trails can help with confirmability and provide evidence that findings can be clearly traced through the process of decision making (Sandelowski, 1986). I have kept data in a system of raw data, field notes, transcripts, excerpts, and the research process to create a clear audit trail. Reflexivity is a self-critical account of the research process and is essential to an audit trail (Tobin & Begley, 2004). This includes a journal of internal thoughts, reflections on data and research methods, the rationale behind methodological decisions, and personal

insights into the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I have acknowledged my own biases and reflections and recognize that the research is influenced by my own subjectivity.

Ethical considerations

This study deals with people who have experienced years of war, adversity, and displacement. At times, this research asked participants to access their memories and parts of their past that are difficult to discuss and which they are still dealing with on an emotional level. As it is a qualitative study, I must interact with these people deeply. This raises several ethical considerations which need to be acknowledged early in the investigation, during the research, and after research has been conducted to respect the rights of the participants. The following addresses informed consent; avoiding harm and risk; establishing honesty and trust; ensuring participant privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity; and voluntary participation in the research.

i) Informed consent. Informed consent means that interviewees have complete knowledge of what is implied by their participation in the research. I informed all participants of the purpose, nature, and extent of the research at the beginning of the interview both verbally (in English by myself and in Arabic through an interpreter), and written, again in both English and Arabic.

ii) Harm and risk. Harm and risk refers to whether the study can hurt the participants. I do not want to cause any physical, emotional, or psychological harm to the participants. I have done my best to avoid overly painful issues and be aware if conversation begins to take a painful turn. Participants had the explicit option of not answering any questions or sharing any information if they did not feel comfortable. They could also terminate the interview at any time if they felt uneasy.

iii) Honesty and trust. This refers to my truthfulness in presenting the data both during the research process and during analysis. I have been open about my purposes and intentions and made sure the participants understand I will not manipulate the data in any way.

iv) Privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. Prior to interviews, participants were informed that pseudonyms will replace their names to protect their identity. Pseudonyms are used in place of first names (family names have not been used) for the remainder of the report for all but one unspecified respondent who has asked to use their real first name.

v) Voluntary participation. Despite all the above precautions in ensuring the safety and confidence of participants, I made it clear that the information will only be used for academic purposes and participation was completely voluntary.

3.6 Phases of Analysis

Data analysis is a complicated part of qualitative analysis (Thorne, 2000). Qualitative data is essentially the researcher “working with the data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesizing them, and searching for patterns” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 147); and in this way, qualitative research is fluid, progressive, and dynamic (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Lincoln and Guba (1985) outline six phases of qualitative analysis that contribute to a study’s trustworthiness: 1) familiarising oneself with the data, 2) creating initial codes, 3) finding themes, 4) evaluating themes, 5) defining themes, and 6) writing the report. In the remainder of this section, I will describe these six phases of analysis and how I have been striving to keep this research trustworthy.

Phase 1: Familiarizing Oneself with the Data

In this phase of the analysis, the purpose is to be immersed in the data and become acquainted with the depth and breadth of it (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I became familiar with the data through the interview process, transcribing interviews, reviewing transcriptions, organising data files, and reviewing initial memos. In addition to Word documents of the interview transcripts, data was also recorded into an Excel spreadsheet for better categorisation.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

Coding involves reflecting on, interacting with, and contemplating the data (Savage, 2000). This phase of analysis is concerned with producing initial codes while allowing the researcher to recognise which are relevant to the data (Nowell et al., 2017). This process was done by hand (i.e., without the use of any specific software program) and involved memos on the transcripts and notes in a separate journal. Codes were identified as I read through the data and noticed participant statements that were potentially relevant, such as “gender,” “support,” “Syrian food,” and “discrimination.”

Phase 3: Finding Themes

The third phase of analysis involves sorting coded data into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2000). In inductive research, themes are strongly linked to the data rather than theory (Nowell et al., 2017). It can be helpful to start sorting data using predetermined themes, but there should be flexibility in knowing when to alter them (King, 2004). This stage included note-taking, reflection, and mind-mapping to search for the best themes and how to organise them.

Phase 4: Evaluating Themes

At this phase of analysis themes have been identified and must be fine-tuned (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When themes are selected, they should be discrete enough to stand on their own and broad enough to capture ideas in the data (Nowell et al., 2017). During this phase, new themes were introduced and others were abandoned. For example, the initial theme of “rights and freedoms” was later broken down and specified to focus on gender rights; and general “freedoms” was not used in the final analysis.

Phase 5: Defining Themes

In the fifth stage of analysis, it is time to decide which themes are the most important, what about them is most noteworthy, and how they fit into the overall data set and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this phase, I analysed each theme and identified its role in the entire research. Although the research was a solo project, I sought feedback from other academic advisors to help determine what was important or what needed more consideration. The themes were organised and reorganised, and I believe they represent a meaningful representation of the participants’ lived experiences in relation to resilience.

Phase 6: Writing the Report

The final phase of analysis is the written report. This final report should cover the thematic analysis and give a well-rounded, intelligible, logical, and thought-provoking explanation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Good qualitative examination must show patterns, interpretations, broader implication, and relation to the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006), otherwise they risk only portraying a flat analysis—a simple description of the themes with little depth of exploration (King, 2004). In this final write-up, I have related the results to

relevant literature, incorporated interpretations of meaning, and included both long and short excerpts from interview transcripts. I have also confirmed transcript excerpts with participants who provided me with their email address. This should give a well-versed analysis of the literature with ample supporting texts.

3.7 Model of the Study

In 2015, the Syrian refugee crisis was underway as a massive global humanitarian crisis. Images of three-year-old Alan Kurdi, whose body washed up on the Turkish shore after his family had been denied asylum in Canada, sparked calls for the Canadian government to accept more refugees (Dearden, 2015). In 2017, two years since that time, researchers were producing findings about resettled Syrians in Canada but was focusing on the struggles, health, and problems Syrians face. The present study may be closest to that of Oudshoorn et al. (2019) in that it uses thematic analysis to understand the subjective experiences of Syrians. However, their research is focused on housing satisfaction and stability and does not provide rich insight into the various dimensions of resilience. Until now, I have not found any similar study that investigates the subjective lived experiences of former Syrian refugees as it relates to resilience. Thus, the purpose of the study was to give greater appreciation to the dimensions of resilience and offer insight into the subjective lived experiences of former Syrian refugees. The study builds on previous studies of Syrian refugees in Canada and adds information on resilience to literature.

Twenty-six former Syrian refugees were interviewed in the south-western cities of British Columbia. Interviewees were given informed consent forms in English and Arabic and informed of the purpose, description, and extent of the research, again in English and Arabic through an interpreter. Interviews took place over three months from August to October in 2018

and were spread out between Vancouver, Burnaby, Surrey, and Abbotsford. Eight interviews with other key-informants were also conducted. Phase 1 of the analysis began after the first interviews with Syrians were conducted and transcribed and I began going over the transcripts and recording memos and initial insights. This continued into Phase 2 and 3 as the fieldwork progressed. Phase 3 and 4 began near the end of fieldwork in Canada and continued after arrival in Japan. It included rereading data and discussions with academic advisors. After I had decided on the final themes during Phase 5, I began writing the final write-up of this dissertation.

Of all respondents, three (one married couple and one single woman) were recruited before I travelled to Canada. The married couple was recruited through a cold-call to a religious organization in British Columbia, and the single woman was recruited via a mutual friend. All other participants were recruited after landing in Canada. From these three initial participants, 15 others were recruited. Two other individuals were recruited from one of these families. Two participants were recruited through a family friend, and five through two different non-profit organizations.

3.8 Initial Analysis of Syrian Participants

Gender and Age

Of the 26 Syrian participants, 11 were men and 15 were women. The average age of male participants was 30 years old, and 35 years old for female respondents. The average age of all respondents was 33 years old, with a range from late teens to late-50s.

Generally, younger participants (i.e., teens and early twenties) were open to the new possibilities for their career, education, and future. Many people still had several years of school to catch up on or retake in Canada, but young people were more aware that their life was still

ahead of them. They also showed having learned English faster than others, which demonstrates an ability to adapt to changes and adjust to new environments.

Marital Status

Eighteen people were married, seven were single, and none were divorced. One 44-year-old woman was widowed, but her husband had passed many years before the war started. Of the eighteen participants who were married, 12 were interviewed with their spouse present, and five were interviewed while their spouse was absent.

Participants who were married often showed resilience because they had someone with whom to disclose intimate emotions and rely on for support. On the other hand, one single woman who came to Canada alone had an independent personality and was not suffering in her singleness. A single man who was serving as caretaker for his mother and brother expressed his desire to get married but was apprehensive that his caretaker duties would not allow him the opportunity to meet anyone. Likewise, the woman who was widowed has been without her husband to support her, but between her and her two children I could witness much love and encouragement.

Religion

Twenty-one participants were Sunni Muslim, and five were Christian. No Shia Muslims were interviewed. Nobody identified as being non-religious.

For all except for a small number of participants, religion was more of a background factor of resilience rather than what seemed to directly contribute to resilience. For most participants, faith was mentioned in passing, and most people seemed to credit their resilience to themselves

and their own hard work and determination. Nonetheless, religion is an area of resilience that could be further explored as a topic by itself.

Time in Canada at Time of Interview

The average time in Canada at the time of the interviews was 24 months, or just over two years. The shortest time was one year and two months, and the longest time was two years and eight months.

Length of time in Canada does appear to contribute to resilience, and those who had been in Canada longer had a better understanding of society and what was expected of them. Length of time in Canada also plays a role in the strength of community and informal support networks. For young people, it also means more time in Canadian schools, making friends, learning English, and adjusting to life. The family who had been in Canada for the shortest amount of time displayed the most signs of instability, i.e., the parents were not working, the children could not speak English well, and they were unhappy with their housing situation. Conversely, the few families who had been in Canada the longest could speak excellent English (except for the parents in one family) and seemed generally satisfied with their life and options.

Home City in Syria

Ten people were from Dara'a, six were from Homs, four were from Damascus, three were from Latakia, two were from Aleppo, and one was from Idlib.

The largest number of people were from Dara'a, the city in which initial protests began in Syria; however, there seemed to be no difference in resilience based on hometown in Syria.

Time in Transit

The average length of time between leaving Syria and arriving in Canada was three years and two months. The longest time was six years, and the shortest time was one day. In between leaving Canada and first arriving in Canada 13 people stayed in Jordan, four in Lebanon, three in Egypt, two in Libya, and one in Turkey. One person moved between Lebanon and Jordan, and two others moved between Lebanon and Egypt.

All but one participant had spent at least one year as a refugee in another country. While experiences in transit were not explored in depth, participants mentioned experiencing discrimination and not being allowed to work while living outside Syria. One woman arrived in Canada only days after applying for asylum, and her story is outlined in the next chapter. Besides this woman, even the shortest times as a refugee are long, and all respondents expressed their happiness at being accepted by the UNHCR to come to Canada and continue their life.

Current City in British Columbia

At the time of interviews, nine people lived in Surrey, nine in Burnaby, four in Vancouver, and four in Abbotsford. Nearly half of participants had initially arrived in Vancouver, while the others first landed in Montreal or Toronto. Two people first arrived in Winnipeg.

Participants in all these towns had opportunities and access to a broader Syrian or Arab community. Often there were other Syrian families in the same apartment complex, and people were skilled at finding each other through informal Syrian and Arab networks. Smart phones and the internet also helped people stay in touch with other families in Canada and families overseas, which strengthened resilience. One woman had moved from a rural town to Vancouver, and she expressed having an easier time living in Vancouver because she could make more friends and felt a sense of belonging to her community. Another man who lived in

Abbotsford said he had Syrian friends but also that there was not much to do for entertainment in Abbotsford. Still, he was married and was connected with a community at his church and school, so the lack of city life did not have a huge negative impact on his life.

Immigration Status on Arrival

Eighteen participants arrived in Canada as government-assisted refugees, four as privately sponsored refugees, and four as blended-visa office referred. Everybody had been in Canada for less than three years, so they still had permanent residence status. Nobody was yet eligible to apply for Canadian citizenship.

All participants had been in Canada long enough to no longer be eligible for income assistance from the federal government, though most GARs had transitioned to provincial income assistance. Services such as English classes, translating documents, interpretation, job training and finding, and information about health care are general settlement services that are available to all immigrants to Canada until they become Canadian citizens. Participants who were taking advantage of English classes benefited from community interaction. Many Syrians relied on each other for help with translation and filling out documents. GARs were also occasionally assigned a volunteer to help with resettlement, and one family in this research had maintained a very close relationship with their volunteer nearly three years later. PSR and BVOR individuals often could rely on their sponsors to help with resettlement, and all except one participant were grateful for their assistance and continued friendship. Only one woman expressed a poor relationship with her sponsor family, which was hard for her until she could move away from them and live on her own.

Highest Level of Education

The highest level of education was one participant who had a PhD. One other participant had a master's degree. Four participants had completed college or university, while three others had completed some college or university education. One person had finished grade 10, one had finished grade 9, three had finished grade 8, three had finished grade 7, four had finished grade 6, and one had finished grade 5. Four teenagers and young adults were still catching up on the high school education they missed in Syria.

High levels of education did not seem to benefit participants in Canada. There were too many obstacles to employment (i.e., credentials not recognised, need for licensing, language barriers, etc.) that even highly skilled participants have not yet been able to find work in the field in which they had been trained. This was a problem for many respondents and it was an area which made it difficult to be resilient. Young people often had to catch up on high school, but generally they were learning English well and had a positive attitude and outlook for their future. Nineteen people were either unemployed or still students, and the others were generally working in low-skilled, low-paying jobs (e.g., painting, dry cleaning, moving company, etc.). One woman was fortunate to work as an administrative assistant like she had in Syria, and one man was working part-time as a translator.

Language Used for Interview

Eleven interviews were conducted entirely in English. Fifteen were done in English on my part with the help of an Arabic interpreter.

Participants who could speak English well enough to communicate showed greater confidence and resilience in their adjustment. Still, those who could not speak English well were eager to learn and practice when they had a chance. In many cases, parents who could not

speaking English could rely on their children to help with problems in English. This shows family support, but it puts a heavy burden on the children and pressure to care for their parents into adulthood if their parents have not yet adjusted well enough to Canada.

Profiles of Non-Refugees

Eight interviews were carried out with non-refugees. Names in brackets are pseudonyms, though not all names have been used in the analysis.

1. [Liz] a Canadian woman who helps refugees of all nationalities transition from federal income assistance to provincial income assistance.
2. [Vanessa] a Romanian woman who helps refugees of all nationalities transition from federal income assistance to provincial income assistance.
3. [Yosef] a Jordanian immigrant with many Syrian friends and who helps Syrian refugees find work through an official organisation.
4. [Jana] a Syrian doctor who has been travelling between Canada and Syria for over 20 years and helped with interpreting for newcomers during initial resettlement.
5. [Jess] a Kenyan woman who matches refugees of all nationalities with sponsor families in BC.
6. [Denise] a Canadian woman who volunteered to teach English to an Iraqi family (twice refugees from Iraq to Syria then from Syria to Canada) who was being sponsored by her church.
7. [Lydia] a European woman married to a Syrian refugee whom she met while working in Lebanon.

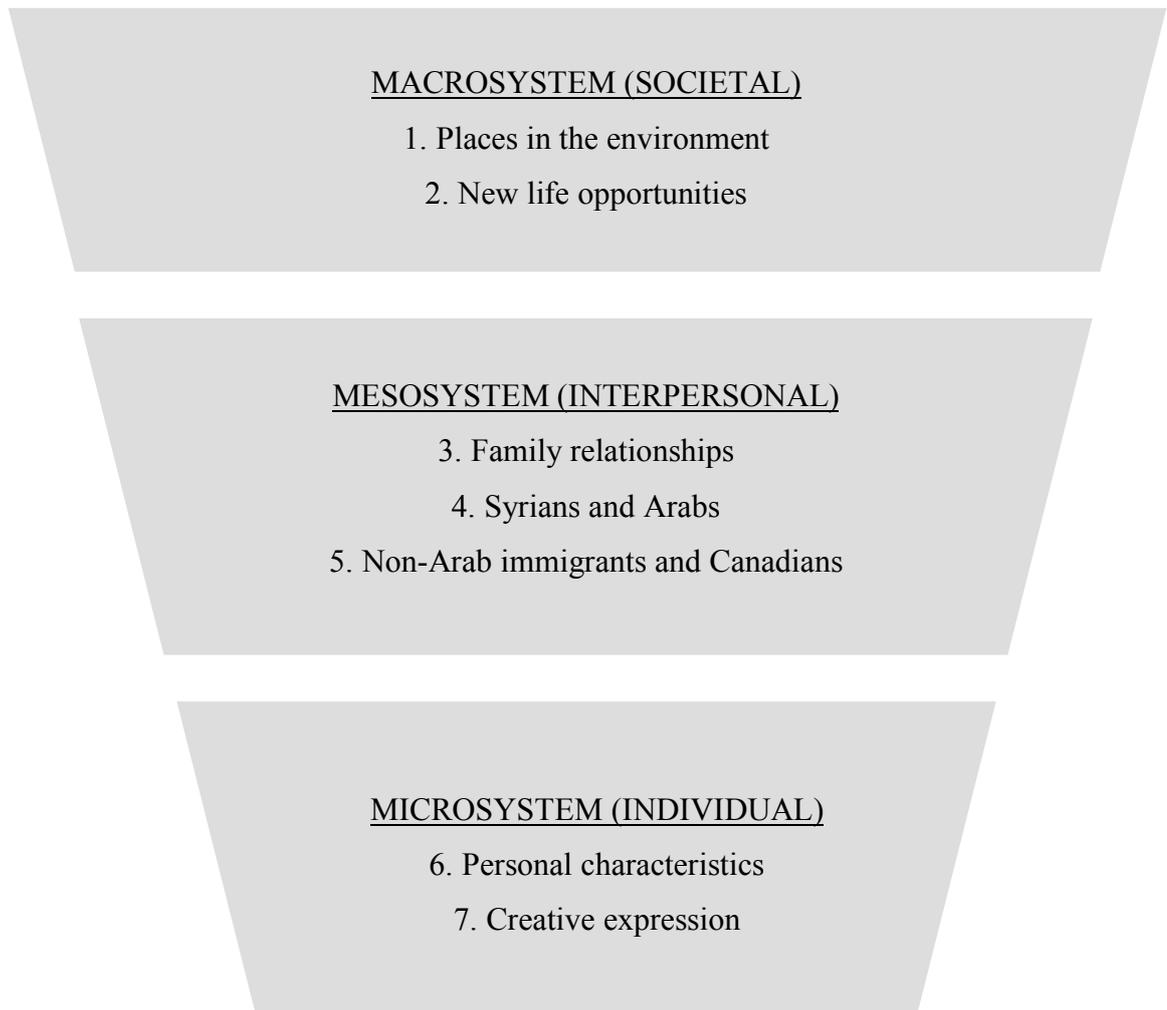
8. [Chris] a Canadian man who volunteered to help with resettlement of GARs and has remained close friends with the family he supported.

4 The Three Systems of Resilience Among Syrian Refugees

4.1 Introduction

Three systems of support were identified that helped foster and develop resilience: the macrosystem, the mesosystem, and the microsystem. Within these three systems, I identified seven themes of resilience that will be discussed in the following order: within the macrosystem, 1) physical spaces, and 2) rights and opportunities; within the mesosystem, 3) family relationships, 4) Syrian and Arab communities, and 5) Canadians and non-Arab immigrants; and within the microsystem, 6) personal characteristics, and 7) creativity and expression. Figure 1 shows the flow of these themes from broad to narrow. Analysis will begin at the broader social level and include significant places Syrians visit in town as well as new rights and opportunities available in Canadian society. Next it will explore the interpersonal dimensions of resilience, specifically the roles and importance of family relationships, networks of other Syrians and Arabs, and finally how meaningful relationships with volunteers and sponsors may contribute to resilience. The last section discusses how refugees develop resilience based on their own personal characteristics and creative expression. The flow of themes from societal—interpersonal--individual was chosen (as opposed to individual—interpersonal—societal) because it illustrates how the environment then relationships then the self influence resilience at a personal level. It should also be noted that many of the following topics overlap and can be placed under more than one category; however, I have done my best to carefully place each topic under the category that best reflects the answers and discussions by participants.

Figure 1. Dimensions of Syrian Refugee Resilience from Broad to Narrow.



4.2 The Macrosystem of Resilience

A positive social environment contributes to resilience-building in refugees. Refugees must develop new relationships with their surroundings and access the new opportunities available to them. The places people live carry significance, and the respondents in this study are resourceful in locating physical places that positively contribute to their well-being. Places are not void of meaning, and over time people learn to attribute certain places with positive emotions and states of being. These places become spaces of respite, relaxation, community, physical activity, and nostalgia. Accessing various places around town helps connect refugees with their new environment and feel a sense of belonging and attachment. At the same time, the social environment of Canada is one of new rights and opportunities that were unavailable in Syria. Attention has been paid to the rights presented to women and the new doors that are open to them. As for opportunities, respondents have frustratingly discovered that many of their skills and qualifications are unrecognised in Canada. Exasperating as this is, it also opens doors to entrepreneurship and creative solutions to financial difficulties. The first part of this section will examine places of healing, socialisation, leisure, and nostalgia as physical spaces that respondents find consequential. The second part will look at the social environment in terms of women's rights and opportunities for aspiring entrepreneurs.

Place Attachment

Places are those spaces in our physical environment where we feel connected and symbolically rooted. As Tuan (1977, p. 6) outlines, "Undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value." The places where one is born, grows up, and spends his or her childhood years strongly inform their concept of what is an ideal environment; and one's birthplace remains a significant part of their identity (Boğaç, 2009).

The literature on refugee displacement looks at two related terms: place attachment and place identity, both of which refer to symbolic bonding of people to physical places. Giuliani (2003) sees place attachment as coming before place identity: as an individual becomes increasingly familiar and attached to a place, they begin to identify themselves with the place. A sense of place can be also characterized by individual and collective values associated with physical spaces (Williams & Carr, 1993). Separation from one's homeland does not result in an eternal loss of identity and belonging, and once resettled in a new land, refugees will begin the process of seeking out places of comfort, safety, familiarity, and recreation. While there will always be a strong attachment to spaces left behind, there are possibilities for constructive rebuilding and connection to new places that indicate resilience in the lives of refugees. Three types of physical places where participants sought to build resilience were places of healing and restoration, places of community and leisure, and places of nostalgia.

Restoration in Natural Settings

Place is particularly poignant for restoring physical and emotional health and encouraging well-being (Sampson & Gifford, 2010). Certain places have highly restorative powers, and the concept of therapeutic natural landscapes is salient for those who have been violently or forcibly uprooted. Gesler (1996) explains places as environments which produce an atmosphere conducive to healing. Displacement can be a troubling and shattering experience, yet refugees are intent on and skilled at seeking out places with curative powers that can heal ill health and spiritual unease (Cooper Marcus & Barnes, 1999). Places of restoration allowed young refugees opportunities to connect with nature, find beauty, and restore health in a supportive environment, such as parks and other green spaces. Parks and nature were important places around town for Syrian people because they are places to relax, release stress, get in touch with

nature, or feel closer to a higher spiritual power. People were also grateful that nature spaces in Canada are “a very nice and clean environment” (Aaron), and “clean, nice, and organized” (Mir). A clean environment symbolises order and structure in society, while a messy or disorganized environment might represent chaos. Respondents had experienced war in Syria and are no strangers to chaos and rubble in the streets. A messy environment contributes to a messy and disorganized mind, and chaos makes it hard to concentrate and focus on important tasks. Clean parks and nature spaces in Canada provided safe and structured spaces where respondents said they felt “fresh” and “refreshed.” Hamza felt, “Really good [in nature] because the parks are all clean and fresh,” and “When you are by the beach you feel like you’re breathing fresh air” (Abbas). Abbas was also joyful that parks have rules and people follow the rules, for example throwing away trash and not tossing it on the ground.

Nearly all the respondents mentioned the importance of nature for maintaining their mental health and well-being. Parks, green spaces, gardens, playgrounds, forests, and the ocean were considerably positive as places of healing. Qamar said that nature is good because she feels happy and can release stress. Abbas appreciates the beauty of nature and that there are “a lot of flowers and different kind of trees.” Speaking on behalf of her family, Safiya said, “We love nature. It’s really important. It’s really calming...I feel safe,” while her brother and mother added that they feel happy, relaxed, and safe in nature. And for Asha, nature was not only a place to relax but also a place of nostalgia: “I really enjoy nature... There’s a lot of green parks, and that also reminds me of home and my parents and of the picnics we used to do at home, so definitely nature is a positive thing.” The green spaces and natural places available in Canada were strikingly different than in Syria, even before the war, and participants were grateful for the cleanliness and relaxing qualities of their physical environment. The overarching theme surrounding nature was that it was a place to destress and be at peace. It was a place to cleanse

one's troubles and heal emotional wounds, which helps build resilience among refugees. Places develop a dimension of emotionality which respondents associate with attachment, arousal, and positive experiences (Fournier, 1991), and nature was repeatedly viewed as a place that supported positive well-being.

Community and Leisure

Places of socialization were spots in town where refugees went to restore social relations and make new friends in a relaxed setting, often with others who had similar life experiences as they had. These places have a degree of commonality and are important in the building and maintaining of relationships with others. Places of socialisation are especially important to finding people with a shared identity and who can help establish a sense of belonging (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). The places where relationships were sustained were also of significance as they become places of social comfort associated with meaningful friendships and nostalgia. Places of community are important for sharing experiences with close others and help group members understand the meaning of past events (Routledge et al., 2013). Connecting with peers in community places supports social networks and is important for the well-being and identity of people in a new place (Sampson & Gifford, 2010). Important places that supported social networks that respondents mentioned ranged from government-provided centres and public places to more intimate neighbourhood settings.

Common places that people went to socialize were the community centre, Arab markets, mosques and churches, coffee shops, apartment complexes, and English classes. For instance, Samar said that Arab markets and Arab neighbourhoods were important places for her to meet others from a similar background to share food and speak a common language. Samar said, "Where I live, there are two Arabic markets...And I live in an Arabic neighbourhood, a Syrian

neighbourhood. They always invite me for dinner or lunch, or they send me some Syrian food.” Another woman who lived in an apartment complex with many Syrian families said, “There’s not a lot of social life here in this city,” but echoed, “the gatherings that happen in the houses between Syrians, that’s one of the things that makes me remember home because that’s something people do in Syria—the gatherings. Six families live just in this building” (Asha). Another man who lived in a big city said that socializing with friends in donut shops allowed him to relax from the daily stress of taking care of his family: “I walk every day to Tim Hortons. I’m just stressed all day, and in the end of the day I go out for two hours to reduce stress with my friends” (Victor). Community centres were also places to get together with friends from Syria and other countries while engaging in physical activity.

Building a diverse network of friends helped people find strength in their differences, and people could engage in a variety of activities at the community centre. Shared places of interaction, communication, and socialization among group members facilitates integration within society (Williams & Carr, 1993). One participant said, “I go to the community centre with my kids. There are mostly families and friends, and sometimes I find my neighbour. We talk, drink coffee, sometimes swim, play with our kids. They’re not all Syrian” (Nana). Positive places contributed to the well-being of refugees by helping them see value and purpose in life, reducing fear and anxiety, promoting dignity, promoting social attachment, and promoting a sense of security (Sampson & Gifford, 2010). Seeking these different types of places in a new environment provides an opportunity for refugees to develop patterns of attachment to their environment. In addition, several people commented on social and institutional order in the places they visit: “Everything is organized and put in order: sidewalks, crosswalks, the buses, bike lanes, traffic lights” (Mir). For one woman, it took her some time to get used to the order in the streets and the fact that people follow the rules. At first, she was afraid to cross the street

because, “I used to get scared that a car will come [and hit me]. But now because there’s a traffic light, you can push the button and you can go” (Mir). Those of us who grew up with these seemingly insignificant everyday conveniences may take them for granted. But for Syrian refugees who are coming from a society that was at war when they left, these simple events can be immensely positive. They help to put structure back in the lives of Syrians and give them systems and routines they can trust and feel good about.

Becoming more active was an area of growth for people, so seeking places of physical recreation were vital. In addition, places of recreation also include being more socially active, since activities like table tennis and soccer are partner- or team-oriented. Finding places to be physically active naturally promotes a healthy and active lifestyle (Dzewaltowski, Estabrooks, & Johnston, 2002). Also, being socially active opens you up to new opportunities that you would miss if you were living passively in society. Central places of recreation and physical activity include community centres and nature, both places which have already been identified as important places of attachment for newcomers. One woman had recently joined a fitness club, and her husband had a membership at the community centre because, he said, “If you just stay at the computer, maybe you have high cholesterol or diabetes” (Borak). Physical activity is a sign that people are aware of the importance of health to overcome and prevent future challenges. Physical health is something that people can control and act to improve and feel better about themselves.

Nature has already been shown to be important in improving mental health, and some participants used natural places to be physically active. Safiya said that the streets themselves were a place of recreation and empowerment. An independent woman with the desire to be active, she felt stifled in Syria due to her gender. In Canada, she can utilize the streets as a place to fulfill her long-held desire for cycling: “I always wanted to ride my bike in Syria, but

culturally it was not a good thing. So, I really enjoy that I can finally bike anywhere I want here and without so many eyes watching. It's like, 'So what? You're riding a bike?'" This illustrates that the streets themselves can be places of recreation in ways that they previously weren't in Syria, especially for women who have more freedom to exercise and be active in public. People also enjoyed hiking in the mountains, walking through park trails, and playing soccer with friends, so these places were sought out to engage in physical activity. Physical activity and exercise also alleviate symptoms of mild to moderate depressions (Taylor, Sallis, & Needle, 1985), so whether knowingly or not, participants were not only benefiting their physical health but also their well-being.

Reminiscing about Syria

People easily and carelessly think of their identity as tied to their homeland. But when forces uproot people and send them on a traumatic journey overland, they may be left with broken roots that threaten to weaken and die (Malkki, 1992). This theoretical uprooting traps people in a sense of loss of belonging. Nostalgic attachment is a deep emotional connection that comes from belonging to a place, and is not easy to replace or trade for a new one. Finding places of comfort, belonging, and nostalgia are essential to help refugees establish emotional ties with physical places in their new environment. Around the 17th century, nostalgia was considered an illness causing homesickness, disease, anxiety, insomnia, and other physical symptoms (McCann, 1941). It later came to be regarded as a psychopathology in individuals longing for their home (Davis, 1979). Presently, nostalgia is viewed as "an important resource for maintaining and promoting psychological health" (Routledge et al., 2013, p. 808). Respondents often said they felt comfortable at home and that they could feel their Syrian identity when spending time with family in their house or apartment.

Nostalgia is expressed as “a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past” (New Oxford, 1998), and respondents described longing for their childhood, Syria, and even a transit country they had lived in. Watching Arabic television and movies also provided a feeling of nostalgia by reminding people of their childhood in Syria and the culture they enjoyed before leaving Syria. It allows people to reconnect with their Syrian identity after having it all taken away. The house was a common place for people to indulge in nostalgic behaviour, i.e., cooking, television, movies, music, etc., which gives people a chance to develop their resilience by reconnecting with themselves and their family members. But unfortunately, the house was not always a place of comfort and safety. One family was increasingly distressed with their neighbourhood and current living situation. Qamar, the wife and mother of this family said, “My house is not safe. Two times late at night, someone knocked on the door and scared my children. It was a woman. Just one. She knocked on the door; I don’t know why. We don’t open the door,” and that this has happened more than once. The husband and father of this family added that their outdoor porch was rotting and their daughter hurt herself when her leg fell through a rotting patch. It is a troubling situation for everybody as they were having a difficult time finding a new apartment where they could feel safe and relaxed. This example illustrates the emotional dangers when a house that should feel safe leaves its inhabitants feeling uneasy and scared. Their main issue was with BC Housing, which has been slow to help them find a new apartment. This was further exacerbated by the family’s low level of English and disconnect from close Syrian friends.

As several respondents mentioned in the above paragraphs, other places of nostalgia include certain areas of nature and Arab markets. Even regular streets can strike people as feeling like home. While the climate and natural environment of Syria and BC are different, this illustrates that when people need to they can find places that remind them of home. Asha mentioned above

that parks remind her of the picnics she had with her parents when she was a child. Arab markets are a place to meet other Syrians, speak a common language, find familiar food, and feel a similar type of environment. Safiya even said, “There was a street that looked so much like a street in Lebanon where I used to live, and whenever I’m so tired I just take my car and drive and just park there and look at it. And that’s so healing.” We would be surprised to hear that a street in Canada resembles a street in the Middle East, especially to such a degree that it would spark feelings of nostalgia. But this shows the resilience of people to see what they need to improve their mood. Safiya continued, “It’s so weird, but that’s what I used to do. It’s very random. That neighbourhood, I visited it many times because I was homesick.” Routledge, et al. (2013) describe nostalgia as a positive emotional experience, making it sufficiently different from homesickness and not to be confused with vulnerability. Homesickness may strike one with negative emotions, but nostalgia is overall an adaptive and emotional response which counters anxiety and stress. Thus, when participants experience and actively seek places that incite nostalgia, they are improving their overall well-being.

Conclusion

It is easy to understand how forced displacement is ripping a part of one’s identity away from them, leaving them with a hole or missing piece which must be reconstructed. Being torn away from one’s native place has the capacity to create an “unhealable rift” between humans and their true home, leaving insurmountable sadness (Said, 2000, p. 137). A general account of refugees in the literature is painted with a narrative of victimhood, lost identity, and longing for one’s homeland (Malkki, 1992). This is only a small part of the story, and refugees can find many positive places and emotions in their new social environment. Malkki (1992, p. 25) argues that we take for granted the reflection of identity and territory, yet there are “analytical

consequences of such deeply territorializing concepts of identity for those categories of people classified as ‘displaced’ and ‘uprooted.’” Longing for one’s past is not always a cause for alarm, but rather can promote psychological health and well-being, especially for those who are most vulnerable (Routledge et al., 2013). Respondents in this study actively incorporated elements of their past lives into their current lives, which helped reconnect them to their home and their own identity. Meaningful emotional connections with physical places has very real consequences on resilience and well-being, and respondents demonstrate wisdom in seeking out places that heal, reduce stress, foster supportive relationships, and help them reconnect with themselves.

New Rights and Life Opportunities

Besides physical places of significance in town, the more abstract social environment can help refugees develop resilience. A significant theme throughout interviews was the wealth of new rights and opportunities available to women. Previously in Syria, women lived a life far removed from women in Canada. Respondents regularly mentioned not working, staying home and caring for children and the home, and not being allowed to go outside without a male family member. In Canada, women found that it was socially acceptable for women to work in any job they chose, have access to their own bank account and credit card, drive a car, talk to men alone, and have an equal voice within the family. Another opportunity open to both women and men was the ability to start a business. Many respondents lamented their struggle in finding well-paying jobs, and as a next resort several people had ideas of starting their own business that addressed the unique requirements of other Syrian refugees. This part of the analysis will explore a strengthened voice of women because of their new rights; it will also look at the resilience of people who see past barriers to work and actively come up with new solutions to be self-sufficient and provide an income for their family.

A New Voice for Women

All participants interviewed in this study indicated that Canada has greater gender equality than Syria and more rights available for women. Special attention should be paid to female refugees, since women often experience disempowerment through violence and brutality (e.g., Moussa, 1991; McLellan, 1996). Women are especially vulnerable when living in refugee camps, though respondents in this study did not mention being victims of violence while in a transit country. Nonetheless, coming to Canada has opened new doors for Syrian women that they didn't have in Syria, and many women are actively making the most of these chances to

demonstrate their strength and capabilities. If resilience is the aptitude to overcome, learn from, and positively adjust to adversity (Riley & Masten, 2005) or bounce back to a place of internal stability (Lennette, Brough, & Cox, 2012), then in some ways women may be at an advantage in Canada. The predominant themes regarding the lives of Syrian women in Canada were gender equality, rights, independence, and empowerment.

Resilience comes in part from the external social environment, and the social environment of Canada is decidedly different from Syria, for example: “Syria has limited rights for women” (Miriam); “There’s more gender equality than in Syria” (Nana); “Canada is good because a woman is safe and can say anything” (Ahmad); and “Women have equal rights, the same as men. The Middle East is different because the man is outside. I like the Canadian way” (Hamza). In many ways Syrian women recognise the social benefits available to them in Canada. Nearly all the women interviewed said they had many new rights in Canada, including being allowed to open a bank account, drive a car, and go outside alone. Many women were surprised to see women doing construction work, which is not allowed in Syria, and they saw this as a positive sign that women have their own rights and freedoms in Canada. Learning how to be self-sufficient builds resilience because women gain confidence in their abilities to provide for themselves and their families in the aftermath of adversity.

Another area that came up was about the family, specifically the marriage relationship. During one interview, discussion led to the decree that in Islam a man may marry up to four wives. The woman in this interview, and her teenage daughter who was sitting beside her, expressed her disapproval of this rule and said it was better for a man to only have one wife. Relieved, she stated, “I’m not afraid my husband will marry another woman because in Canada [you can marry] just one.” The practice of marrying multiple wives, though allowed in Islam, is not common in Syria and may only take place when a man can afford to financially support more

than one wife and family. Still, it leaves women disempowered and less valued. Multiple marriages are not permitted in Canada, and this woman was pleased to be rid of this possibility. In a similar vein, women mentioned that in Canada wives are free to divorce their husbands, which was also not allowed in Syria. None of the participants interviewed were divorced, but some knew other Syrian women who had divorced their husbands after arriving in Canada. Even if the women in this study had no intention to divorce their husbands, the fact that they knew they could if they wanted to is empowering. It means they recognise they are an equal part of their marriage and have equal voice in it.

Canadian laws define men and women as equals in their marriage, but one male respondent was candid and said that in many Syrian families, the husband still has the final say:

I think it's very good [being a woman in Canada]. It's way better than in the Middle East. But for Syrian women, or Arab women, I don't think it's making any difference for them because their husband still has the last word, and they can't decide anything without their husband. So, I'm not sure if they really get to enjoy this advantage the government offers...And plus the culture, the Arab culture, plays a different role in this. If you let your wife do this, then people will start talking about you if it's something out of the norm. (Salah)

This intimate knowledge of Syrian culture and family life was echoed by two government workers. In helping families transition from federal to provincial income assistance, they realized one way in which Syrian culture clashed with Canadian expectations. For families to be eligible for provincial assistance, both husband and wife must be actively searching for work. This interfered with the expectations of many husbands that their wives would stay home and take care of domestic work: "We actually got physical responses of a little bit of laughter, like, 'Really? You think my wife is going to go out and look for work?'" (Liz). However, in Canada

men and women are both expected to work, which may put pressure on the foundation of Syrian marriages. The two women went on to say,

Vanessa: I can see more ladies coming to our sessions. Some of them are happily driving. A lot of them are learning English, and I see that they are more present in the moment than their husbands.

Liz: They're more eager and excited about their new rights and opportunities.

Vanessa: When it comes to the application, she is going and signing, and he is struggling to write it. Women realise they have a voice, and they can do a lot to support their families.

Greater gender equality in Canada means that women and men can freely speak to each other, even in private, which may be a contributing factor to men not wanting women to work outside the home. There are no restrictions on women in Canada to not talk to men, whereas in Syria women could often not go outside without a male guardian, i.e., a husband, father, son, or other male relative. This is not practiced in Canada, and Syrian men may struggle to accept their new reality of a country that lets women move about freely and speak to men directly.

Gender norms and expectations will not shift overnight. It could take years or even generations for Syrian women to sincerely feel equal to men. What is true now is that women are aware of their rights in Canada and the freedom to make themselves heard. While individual family life and long-held ideals surrounding gender may be obstacles for both women and men, the path toward empowerment has been exposed. To the extent they are able, Syrian women are taking advantage of their right to work, drive, manage their finances, and even divorce their husband. This shows a substantial capacity for resilience and personal growth.

Self-Sufficiency Through Entrepreneurship

Life in Canada is one of disadvantages but also hidden opportunities for those who are open to see them. On the one hand, Syrians are faced with many career obstacles, while on the other hand, this pushes motivated individuals to develop creative solutions to their work and financial concerns. In addition to language, a barrier preventing many educated Syrians from participating in the workforce to the same level as that would like or that they had in Syria is the threat of status loss and downward employment (Tilbury & Colic-Peisker, 2007). Many individuals find that their credentials and certificates are not recognised, they need to obtain licenses in areas in which they are already knowledgeable, or they must complete years of schooling equivalent to what they have already studied. Becoming self-employed offers a way out of financial precariousness and quickens integration in the host civilization (Kloosterman & van der Leun, 1999), since rebuilding a working career can be costly, time-consuming, and mentally draining for people who were qualified professionals in Syria. With few career options, the threat of status loss and downward employment, some respondents are drawn to entrepreneurship.

Nearly half of all respondents mentioned some desire to start a business. Amer is a respondent in his late-20s who was a demolition worker in Syria, and even in Canada he has struggled to find construction work. He attributes this to his low level of English, though he is studying. Instead, he has a new aspiration of starting a tow truck business within the next five years: “I like to drive, and it gives good money. And it’s easy for me because it’s physical work,” though now his biggest challenge continues to be learning English. Another woman with near-perfect English and the qualifications to work as a teacher in Syria is held back in Canada because she lacks the necessary licenses to work. However, she said she would still like to teach, and now she has an idea to start English language lessons for other Syrian women. This idea comes from

her observation of the struggles of Syrian newcomers and the disconnection of government provided English courses:

There are a lot of Syrian women here. Some of them are shy to go to school and learn English, and some of them suffer. They say the teacher speaks everything in English, and they don't understand what she explains or what she says. I asked them [the local resettlement office] if they can give me a class to teach Syrian women the basic things in English. Maybe how to go to the market, the doctor, how to say this, teach them the basic stuff—days, times...I think it's a good idea, and the Syrian women like it. It's better for the teacher to speak Arabic and English. If they don't understand, I will explain to them the meaning in Arabic and English. They will get it more than if I just explain in English. Because most of them had zero, they don't know any words in English. (Nana).

This woman recognises low-level English is a serious problem to women's participation in society and their emotional health. She noticed a detachment in the services provided by the local government from the real needs of Syrian women, and she has the skills to provide what she and many others find to be missing—practical English classes by someone who understands the unique struggles of Syrian newcomers and can communicate in Arabic. Offering Syrian women more accessible English classes would also increase their resilience and social inclusion as they become more confident in their language abilities.

The “enclave effect” is the circumstance whereby people from the same ethnic group live near each other and can easily provide language, service, and employment opportunities within the group (Rajjman & Tienda, 2003; Toussaint-Comeau, 2005). Other Syrians have already started businesses that spread across the Lower Mainland. For instance, a woman who helps place refugees with sponsor families noted,

Among them are entrepreneurs who have set up shops where they bring Syrian food so people have something familiar to buy...For example, one of the families I visited...he lives here, he bought a car, and what he does is he goes to the next town, and somebody has set up a bakery there—one of the Syrian refugees—so this person goes and buys bread there. You make an order through him, he goes and picks it up, and you pay for the bread, but you also pay to get the bread delivered to you. This is how this guy has found employment for himself. (Jess)

She goes on to say, “I’m sure that they are able to do that gives them a good sense of self-esteem.” Her description, as well as the observations by the Syrian woman who would like to teach English classes, highlights the “enclave effect” and the benefits to individual and community well-being. Resilience factors contributing to entrepreneurship in refugees is their tolerance for risk, their ability to persevere beyond obstacles and discouragement, and innovation (Fong, et al., 2007). With a history of risking their lives, refugees are acutely aware of risk. One participant equated her prior experience to drowning in the ocean and grasping on to a stick as if it were her only hope of survival. The participants in this study had already spent several years in a transit country, where they had few rights and faced discrimination, before coming to Canada. These experiences helped build resilience in people, or as one participant said, “Being in Lebanon, we weren’t very welcomed. Many times, I couldn’t speak Syrian [Arabic] because then I wouldn’t get a job. So, part of me had some hurt and made me harder and stronger. I’m proud that I am from Syrian culture, and I really like bringing some of that culture here” (Safiya). This pride in Syrian culture was also expressed by several participants who mentioned starting a Syrian food restaurant and Syrian cultural-learning centres to introduce Syria to Canadians.

There seems to be no direct relationship between education level and resilience among the participants. Within the range of education levels, there was also a range of perceived resilience. For instance, the respondent with a PhD was dissatisfied that he was not able to use his degree to teach at a university. However, he could achieve some level of satisfaction by taking on freelance work for the government that utilized his experience in statistical analysis, which provided intellectual stimulation a sense of contribution. This person did not express that this work was full-time or self-sufficient so they still longed for a more fulfilling career that made use of the elite skills learned in Syria. In contrast, the participant with a Master's Degree had not been able to find either full-time or freelance work in their field, and instead had found work as a construction painter. Comparing these two participants, the one with a PhD had a much higher level of English, which allowed them to obtain more advanced work, while the one with the Master's had a low level of English, which created obstacles. In these two cases, rather than education level, English ability was more of a determining factor in whether each participant was more resilient. Similar trends were found among participants with grade-school levels of education. Many participants with a low level of education also could not speak English confidently; but one participant with a grade-school education had a marketable skill—hairdressing. Although this participant could not speak English well and was not highly educated, they could find occasional work cutting the hair of Syrian women who felt more comfortable going to her than a Canadian salon. Thus, while education may contribute to resilience, it seems that marketable and transferable skills, such as English or practical skills like cutting hair, may be more valuable and contribute to greater resilience and well-being.

Of course, entrepreneurship is not for everyone, and it does not need to be the goal of all Syrians in Canada. Nonetheless, it does illustrate how a history of risk-taking, perseverance, and precarious career options opens minds and opens doors to new opportunities. For those

who are so inclined, starting one's own business is a way to bypass the economic obstacles faced in Canadian society while providing income for oneself, job creation for others, and potential future assets for their family. Entrepreneurship in refugees is a form of resilience that resembles a history of risk-taking and a desire for a more self-sufficient future.

Conclusion

The social environment in Canada can help Syrian refugees build resilience by tapping into the need to attach meaning to places. Physical places allow for emotional healing, stress relief, sociality, and feelings of nostalgia, which all positively contribute to well-being. Participants in this study revealed important spaces around town, such as nature, community centres, and areas that remind them of home. In addition, women were pleased that they had many more social rights than they had in Syria and were actively taking advantage of their new voice. Previously learned gender norms may still prevent women from becoming fully equal with men, but gender equality was expressed as a strength of Canadian society. Opportunities for entrepreneurship is also a path for refugees to bypass social barriers that prevent them from finding jobs that match their skills. Entrepreneurship may not have been a necessary career path in Syria, but new circumstances combined with a history of risky behaviour has allowed those with latent entrepreneurial inclinations to dip their toes into self-employment. These topics all highlight the resilience of Syrian refugees in establishing themselves in their social environment, finding their voice, and seizing new opportunities to rebuild their lives.

4.3 The Mesosystem of Resilience

The people one surrounds themselves with are a contributing factor when developing resilience. While people networks can potentially be sources of pain, most respondents are striving to connect with people who build them up and who they can build up in return. The research uncovers several meaningful social networks and communities of people that constitute a positive part in building resilience and well-being of former refugees. In most of the participants' cases, the fundamental source of resilience is the family. People talked about forcing themselves to keep a positive attitude and how this encourages their family members and themselves. Many people have also become more patient as they learn to deal with circumstances and events that are out of their control—although they may feel that they are not in control of what is happening to them, they remain always in control of their thoughts and emotions. This all comes down to a gratefulness for the family and the love and support they provide during times of need. After family, the Syrian and Arab communities have been extremely supportive for the respondents. The community of former Syrian refugees relies on each other for functional support and emotional support as well as finding a shared identity and experience. To a lesser extent, other Arab people in BC are also supportive, since they have often been in Canada longer and can help navigate Canadian society. A shared language and similar culture also help re-establish a sense of self. The next sphere of social support comes from Non-Arab immigrants and Canadian citizens. Canada's multiculturalism means participants can meet and make friends with people from around the world, which they describe as a positive contribution to their well-being. In addition, Canadians who had previously volunteered or sponsored refugee families in many cases become close friends and important networks of support. All together, these various networks of informal support help strengthen former refugees and allow them rebuild a positive life.

Family Relationships

For nearly all the respondents in this research the family was a foundation of emotional support after arriving in Canada before they had a chance to develop other friendships, and the family is a vital source of resilience in times of stress (Walsh, 1996). Several resilience processes were identified among respondents that enabled individuals and families to be strengthened. For individuals, keeping a positive attitude helped their family and themselves keep a brave face through hard times. Being patient with family members gave individuals a feeling of control over their situation and helped to bring the family together, which is especially important when life seems out of control and patience is truly necessary. And finally, experiencing adversity together produced greater appreciation and love for family members. Seeing family members keep a positive attitude and stay strong helped the rest of the family be strong as they move through challenges.

A "Mirror of Positivity"

Respondents were aware that acting positive influenced their own happiness and that of their families. Emotions and feelings are contagious, and our own attitudes are easily influenced by those around us. A few mothers mentioned that they were positive for the sake of their family. Rayya said, "As a mom, I need to keep my family happy...I'm positive because I'm the mirror of my family. If I'm positive, then my husband and my kids will be positive. If I'm negative they will be negative." Similarly, another mother said, "We have to keep this positive attitude for our children" (Aleia). The words of these women illustrate the expectation of women to keep a family together emotionally. Forcing oneself to maintain a positive attitude seems to be necessary for the emotional well-being of their family. This is a heavy burden for mothers and

women when they are experiencing the same traumatic events as their husband and children. Still they felt it was part of the job of motherhood, and women with children and husbands saw it as part of their duty to be positive. Rayya illustrated that this mirror of positivity works the other ways as well: “We saw very bad things, but now we are very, very happy. I’m positive because all the members of my family are here in Canada, and they are happy and have jobs. That makes me positive.” While mothers may feel it is their duty to be positive for the well-being of their family, at the same time a happy family makes mothers more happy and positive. It is a lot to ask for a mother to be responsible for the happiness of her family during trauma, but the mothers in this study felt their family’s happiness reflected onto them.

The emotional well-being of one’s family is crucial in building resilience and emotional strength. It works as a kind of virtuous cycle of positive attitudes influencing other’s positive attitude and coming back to the first person. Families in this study have been through a lot together, and individuals felt it was their responsibility to love and look after each other. When one family member suffers, the whole family suffers; and respondents were deeply in tune to the welfare of their other family members. Seeing family members happy and positive increased happiness and positivity in individuals and gave them the strength to persevere through challenges. Although positivity could also be discussed under the microsystem, for this dissertation I have discussed it as part of the mesosystem because it was often discussed relating to family members.

Patience and Understanding

Patience is a crucial part of resilience, and it was common for respondents to mention how their patience has increased and how this has helped them and their families. Several respondents stated that they were already a patient person to begin with, while others said they

had become more patient. Becoming more aware of their patience may be an indicator that it has been tested and grown. Although patience is a personal quality, it was often mentioned in relation to other people, such as family and even strangers. For this dissertation, I chose to discuss patience under the mesosystem of resilience rather than the microsystem because it was more prominently discussed in regards to relationships with others. Patience was also mentioned more often by women, who said they feel the need to be a pillar of strength and support to their family. Najila, A woman with adult children in Canada and others scattered around the world said, “I was really scared and afraid, but I act strong and patient for my kids and husband. I don’t show them that I’m scared or afraid, but it was very difficult.” Aleia had a similar response when asked how she stays positive:

It’s being patient. We have to be strong and maintain this attitude for our children to have a better life. It’s difficult, but we have this positive attitude for our children. By patience and work, we can keep this. Everything needs to be patient. Everything will happen, but it takes time, so we have to be patient.

A third woman, Miriam, also said that she is patient for the sake of her children. She said, “I like also to build a new and strong life for my kids...And I was patient.” Patience when dealing with others was not limited to women wanting to protect their families. Victor is a caring, single mid-30-year-old man living with his physically disabled mother and mentally challenged older brother. Patience has also been important for him and a character trait he admires about himself: “I suffered a lot when I was in Turkey. My dad passed away, and my aunt broke her legs. I took care of her for a few months. I’m very patient.” His experience in Canada was unlike the other participants in the research, as he had to single-handedly care for many family members who

had ill health. This puts a lot of burden and suffering on him, which came across during our meeting. Nevertheless, he is aware that his patience has helped him through his challenges.

Respondents mentioned patience in comparison to life in Syria. They understand that as individuals and as families they need be patient while they adjust to life in Canada. One woman, Areej, and her younger brother, Ahmad, came to this conclusion regarding patience on their own when asked if they had every had any bad experiences in Canada:

Areej: The bad experiences are with the hospitals—it takes forever. Like when we go to the emergency it takes forever for a nurse to come and check on us and see what we need. And you wait in line for a really long time.

Ahmad: Everybody faces that. It's for everyone.

Areej: There is a lot of people going to the hospital, and we have to manage. We have to think, there's a lot of people there; we have to be patient. And there's a lot of people who has more emergency than us. For the last time I went to the hospital because of a nose bleed, there were a lot of people who needs more than me. There was a child, a little girl who needs medication. You have to wait. You have to be patient.

When Areej says, “There's a lot of people who has more emergency than us,” she is also alluding to ways she has grown overall through her experience. She and her family have been displaced for years and had many hardships, but she is still able to recognize that she and her family are in a good place now and that there are others who need help more than they do. This family had a noticeably close, caring, and supportive relationship with each other. They are open with each other while being loving and patient at the same time. Patience increases compassion for yourself and for others. Impatience results in being self-absorbed and being too hard on yourself. Having patience means you can stay the course through challenging periods

and take care of others who need you. Many participants had suffered loss and needed to take care of other family members. Patience means they will be compassionate through periods that are out of their control.

Appreciating Family

All but one respondent interviewed were part of family units in Canada. Families included parents with small children, parents with adult children, adults with older parents, single parent families, and childfree marriages. Since leaving Syria, families have undergone extreme adversity on their journey to Canada. The family itself is a source of resilience, and people mentioned the importance of family during adversity. Some couples described the support they receive from each other. For instance, Yusef said about his wife, “She was with me and she just encouraged me to come to Canada even if I was sad...And now she wants to learn how to drive to help me and to work with me to make a good income. And everything. She helped me in everything. She supports me.” And Miriam said about her husband, “He supported me a lot. When we arrived, I was very stressed and sad during the first year. Also, he helped me with my pregnancy, and he was with me all the time and helped in the house.”

Family in Canada was also important in helping to manage feelings about family left behind in Syria. Nearly all respondents still had close or extended family members in Syria who they often worried about, and it was very distressing to think about their family when they heard news about recent bombings. One woman said that sometimes she and her husband feel stressed when they think about their family and the situation in their country. When that happens, she said, “I like to walk with my husband outside” (Miriam). Another woman said, besides her husband and children, “My family and everybody is in Syria, and it’s not safe. My brother, mother, three sisters, and cousins. My brother is in Turkey” (Qamar). Her husband’s family

was similarly spread out between Syria and Egypt, and he “want[s] them to come here but don’t know how. They don’t have any food or anything.” Missing family was significant because in Syria it is normal to be close with one’s extended family, including in-laws. Najila said, “I had a very big family in Syria that I miss. We were always together...Here I don’t know anybody. I don’t go out. Sometimes I’m very stressed...I like to stay alone, [but] sometimes you need somebody to talk to.” Elmira is also suffering emotionally because her husband was living in northern Europe, and they were having a difficult time being apart. A pillar of strength for her was her mother: “When my mom is happy, I’m happy...I like everything about my mom.” Her mother confirmed, “She was really weak in Jordan...but now she’s okay. She’s more strong emotionally. It was really hard in Jordan, but here a little bit better.”

Conclusion

Having a positive attitude is important for individual and family resilience. Respondents remarked that many times they forced themselves to have a positive attitude, often for the sake of happiness and well-being of their family. It is difficult to put on a positive face during adversity, but it seems that emotions follow actions, and even acting positive results in a more positive outlook. Also, patience is a mark of resilience, and respondents mentioned they were more patient with their family members. This comes across as more understanding and compassionate with those who are closest to them and who have the most similar experiences throughout displacement and resettlement. A positive attitude and increased patience come together in greater appreciation for the family, which strengthens the family as a whole. The family is a source of emotional comfort and security during times of upheaval, and refugees come to rely on family members greatly. Having a resilient and supportive family is a fundamental factor in determining whether individuals will develop greater resilience.

Supportive family members can lean on each other and ease the burden from others, thus leaving each other more confident to carry on.

Syrian and Arab Networks

Close social networks provide another avenue for resilience and positive resources for coping with stress (Rutter, 1987). Relationships with people from a similar culture are important for refugees who resettle in culturally dissimilar locations. Cultural compatibility, or cultural dissonance, is the degree of similarity or dissimilarity between the host culture and the culture of origin; greater differences between language, religion, gender norms, and age hierarchies, for example, result in less positive adaptation (Berry, 1997). Kunz (1981, p. 46) reasons that, “Perhaps no other host factor has more influence on the satisfactory resettlement of the refugee than cultural compatibility between background and the society which is confronted.” Strong connections with the Syrian community and Arabic-speaking community were important for refugees to maintain their well-being, and those who could not access these communities as a resource for resilience suffered greater loneliness, isolation, withdrawal, and depression. This section explores the relationship between individuals and the Syrian and Arab communities in developing resilience.

Emotional Support Through Shared Experiences

Social life in Syria was an important part of respondents’ lives. Social life in Canada has been a shock for many people, and a regular theme throughout interviews was that Canadian social life is lacking when compared with Syria, with many people commenting that they had enjoyed an active social life in Syria. Baumeister et al. (2013) find that more time spent with friends was positively related to happiness. In Syria, it was common for friends and neighbours to drop in unexpectedly for a cup of coffee, with the host obligated to accommodate. Social life in Syria was also different than in Canada in that in Syria streets and balconies are meeting places to chat, relax, and smoke hookah. This was missed in Canada, and a few people did not

think Canadians were very social: “Friends and families, they just see each other like in events, celebrations, holidays. It’s not like our social life. It’s very different” (Haya). A similar lively social life was lacking in Canada, and people had to go out of their way to find people and forge the same types of deep relationships with friends like they had in Syria. Thankfully, for most people there was often a close-knit group of Syrian and Arabic-speaking people in whom they could easily find support.

Once in Canada, social life and being around other Syrians took on a new importance as they sought a familiar culture and language in a place far removed from Syria. For around one third of the respondents, the closest relationships they had was often with other Syrian refugees. These relationships were important because they provided emotional support in ways that Canadians and other immigrants could not provide. For example, Yusef, Victor, and Amer were three men who valued their relationships with each other and other Syrians. Yusef said, “I have a lot of friends here from Syria... We’re used to this relationship in our country, and I like to go out—Tim Hortons, drink coffee, come back home. I feel good when I’m with a group of friends.” Victor had two close friends from Syria and said, “They feel my problems. I see one friend almost every day... They support and talk about my problems.” Amer had similar sentiments, in that “One friend is a positive person, and we are around the same age. Also, our wives are the same age, and they like to stay together. The other friend, we stayed together in the hotel and welcome centre, and the same problems are facing us—how to use language, transportation, how to go shopping. We suffer the same problems. We feel each other.” These men highlight a key component of these relationships that makes them significant: mutual understanding of refuge and current struggles. They know what the others have collectively experienced in their journeys leading them to Canada and the emotional and physical pain they have had to bear during that time.

Even once resettled in Canada, cultural and linguistic barriers continue to create challenges and make life difficult. The importance of strong relationships with other Syrians and even Arabic-speaking people should not be downplayed, especially for refugees. Having someone to communicate with easily and unburden emotional baggage is vital for well-being and establishing a good quality of life, and feeling lonely is strongly related to being unhappy (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). Having someone to easily communicate with and unburden emotional baggage is imperative. People are often released from the health-damaging outcomes of traumatic events when they can talk with a friend or a support group (Haidt, 2006), and without this interpersonal resource, it is difficult to develop resilience following severe stress.

For language reasons, availability of sponsors, to combat depopulation, and to satisfy the desires of people to contribute to an international issue, refugees are sometimes resettled in small towns (El-Assal, 2018). A Migration, Resettlement, & Newcomer Program Coordinator working in British Columbia who helps place Syrians with families around the province has seen both extremes of being the only Syrians in the area. On a positive note, there are those who, “come and right away become part and parcel of mainstream culture. And it’s going to force them to learn English” (Jess). But in a more extreme situation, she also noted a mother who was unable to adjust to rural life and threatened to take her life if she and her family were not moved to Vancouver where there are other Syrians. Another young woman I spoke with was also depressed about being the only Syrian family in a rural town. This woman could speak fluent English, so language difficulties could not have been the reason for her struggles. Rather, it was that, besides her immediate family, she missed her friends and had no one with whom to connect on a deep level, which resulted in a negative attitude and symptoms of depression. Personal happiness benefits from a strong social network and suffers in isolation (Baumeister, et al., 2013). Once she relocated to a city, she could meet more people with similar experiences

and struggles, and since then her mental health has been recovering. Being around others with shared experiences builds collective resilience in the Syrian community, which strengthens all members in a virtuous cycle.

Finding a social circle was most difficult for Syrians who were resettled in rural towns or where there is little to no Syrian community. It may be true that having nobody to speak Arabic with will force people to learn English, but it does not consider the importance of shared identity and community with people who you can speak with openly and easily. Whether the above story is a case of only one woman in such dire need of common community, it is a reminder that one person cannot not always know what is best for another person. A rural environment may appear to be a better environment to learn English because there are no other Syrian speakers around, but if it results in a lack of community, depression, and threats of suicide, we cannot say that isolation from other Syrians is ideal.

Prosocial and Behaviour

Syrians in British Columbia use cooperation and self-sacrifice as resilience strategies. Klein (2016) expresses the psychological importance of helping others as personally motivating and increasing a feeling of meaning and purpose in one's life. It was universal for respondents to either have helped others or been helped during resettlement. Likewise, they had all experienced distressing events and understood what each other was going through., which makes it easier to provide a helping hand to others in Canada. The main ways people helped was through language and getting settled in their new lives. All families and individuals were newcomers to Canada at some point, and they had all experienced some form of culture shock and a learning curve in Canadian society. For some people, it has been easier to adapt, and for others it is proving more challenging. One thing that helps people overcome these initial struggles is

having a community with whom to relate collective experiences. A few participants came to Canada with intermediate and even advanced English. A good grasp of the language was helpful in their own adaptation and for others. Many people who spoke English well said that they were often called upon by friends and acquaintances to translate English documents, accompany them to appointments, and help set up various accounts. Not only that, but people who spoke English were often happy to help. For instance, Samar said, “I have a big amount of love in my heart for everyone. Really. I love. Even one who mistreated me, I love. I love, and I always find excuses for people.”

Even when respondents were not able to speak English well enough to help others, they found other ways to go out of their way to make others’ resettlement easier, such as helping them find things around town. Even one family who could not speak English well said they could still take others to the supermarket and show them how to ride the SkyTrain. For activities that do not require difficult conversation, people were willing to help. This also presented itself with families meeting in Arabic markets and sharing meals together at someone’s home. More than simply helping people for the sake of helping, there is an implied shared understanding that binds people and communities. Amer expressed this selflessness when he said, “We understand each other, and we help each other a lot. Anytime anybody ask me to help, I can help. No problem for me. On the other hand, they help me if I need help too... We help each other a lot. Language, driving, go shopping, go hospital, go buy a new car. Anything.” Sacrificing time and energy to aid other people in need helps build resilience within oneself and others at the same time. When one person is helped, their situation and mood improves; they then feel appreciation and desire to help others the way they have been helped.

Conclusion

Being part of a community provides Syrians with much-needed mutual emotional support, a shared social identity and an outlet for helping others (Alfadhli & Drury, 2018). Helping others also increases the helper's feelings of self-worth, self-esteem, and sense of meaning of their life (Klein, 2016). Having access to the strengths and resources of others boosts morale and helps individuals heal from past emotional wounds. Particularly advantageous for Syrians is other Syrians, as a shared experience of loss, emotional vulnerability, and a common language make it easier to identify with and confide in each other. They have experienced identity transition, i.e. loss of former identity and received a new label (Praharso, Tear, & Cruwys, 2017), and closeness with others builds their collective resilience. Connecting with others and assisting in meaningful ways fosters resilience and makes challenges more manageable. Friends and neighbours can encourage each other in Arabic, reflect on past experiences, and take care of each other in Canada. All of this stresses the importance of meaningful connections within the Syrian community as a positive resilience strategy.

Non-Arab Immigrants and Canadian Citizens

The last interpersonal sphere of resilience for Syrian refugees is non-Arab immigrants and Canadian citizens. This group of people shares fewer similarities than previous social groups. Many of these people cannot speak Arabic, may not be familiar with Syrian or Arab culture, and may not have total appreciation of what has been happening in Syria. Although there are fewer opportunities to find elements of a shared identity, it is this diversity that connects people. Many of the participants in this research could find strength in Canada's multiculturalism and diversity because it meant that they didn't stand out in a homogenous society. In a way, their differences blend into a diverse backdrop of people, which was a comfort to many people. As for Canadian volunteers and sponsors, people who offered to help Syrian refugees resettle were doing it out of kindness and compassion. This allowed both sides to be open with each other, care for each other, and thus develop lasting friendships. That the participants could connect with people in English not only helps them learn English, it allows them to become accustomed to life in Canada more quickly and more comfortably. Diversity of friendships could also be grouped under the macrosystem of resilience because it is related to Canada's institutionalised policy of multiculturalism. However, I have included it in under community because of the nature of the relationships as described by participants. Rather than directly recognising Canada's multiculturalism and government institutions, participants described friendships.

Strength in Diversity

Since coming to Canada, many people were happily surprised at the diversity of people in the country. The aspect of multiculturalism and diversity could also fit under the macrosystem of resilience, as it is embedded into Canada's social and political structure; however, people identified with it at a personal level rather than at a political level. It was most meaningful to

participants at a private and community level than as comment on Canadian multiculturalism. Finding that Canada was multicultural was a great advantage to participants as it helped them blend in despite their differences while finding mutual support from other immigrants. Establishing a shared identity as ‘immigrant’ with more settled residents helps to positively affect well-being of refugees as their life undergoes transition (Praharso, Tear, & Cruwys, 2017). Most participants had spent months or years in limbo in a third country (i.e. Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, etc.) before coming to Canada. In terms of culture, language, and religion, these Middle East and North African countries are more like Syria than Canada, but participants still said they felt very out of place in them. In these neighbouring and nearby countries, there were many Syrian refugees, which put a strain on the government and local services. For instance, one family who was in Jordan said they were living in an apartment, but they were not allowed to work and, thus, were quickly depleting their savings. Others who had been in Lebanon were tired of being called ‘refugee’ in a derogatory way. Perhaps participants expected to stand out in Canada and be shunned for being different. Instead most people were delighted to see people with different colour skin, hear people speaking different languages, and see other women wearing hijabs all happily and safely going about their life. When asked if women faced any overt discrimination for wearing a hijab in public, no participants expressed that they had been called cruel names or spoken to rudely for wearing a hijab. This can be attributed to Canada’s history of accepting people from diverse religions and raising awareness among Canadians to accept everyone. On the Syrian side, Canada’s diversity means there have been women in BC wearing hijabs long before Syrians arrived, so there is nothing shocking about their appearance. This has a positive impact on women’s mental health and ability to develop resilience because it means they largely do not experience discrimination for their clothing and belief system.

Exposure to a diverse mix of people expanded the social circle of Syrian in ways they would have never imagined. Syrians have made friends with people from other countries for the first time, often to their surprise. Areej admired Canadian diversity and her new friends and said, “In Syria, we are all similar in some way. We all have the same religion; we understand the same culture. But here the diversity is amazing, and that’s what makes it different in a positive way, in a really good way. Like, I never thought that I would have a Vietnamese friend or a Chinese friend, or even white friends.” Others were pleased to be living in apartment buildings and neighbourhoods with people from around the world, for example, “We have friends from Kazakhstan” (Borak), and, “We have all the nationalities from all around the world as our neighbours. Morocco, Nigeria. Our kids play with their kids. They visit us. We visit them. We go out together. We speak English. Some of them speak French or Turkish. We also practice English with them. Good relationships” (Nana); and other respondents mentioned knowing people from Indonesia and China. Multiculturalism is a strength of Canada, and the participants in this research were conscious of the ways this helps build their own community of friends and support. Developing friendships with diverse people also builds Syrians’ collective resilience because other immigrants could help Syrian newcomers adjust to life in Canada with the shared identity of being born elsewhere. Thus, there is the potential to form deep relationships with others who have already gone through integration with the added benefit of using English as a means of communication and widening each other’s social circle.

From Volunteer to Close Friend

An avenue of emotional and social support for many Syrians has been Canadian volunteers and sponsors. Volunteers and sponsors are often moved by empathy and powerful emotions to help during times of need, and these emotions are infused throughout the volunteering process

(Collins, 1990; Doidge & Sandri, 2019). Shott (1979) says that empathy includes arousal of emotions in oneself through observation of other and imagining what one would feel if they found themselves in another's situation. Volunteer relationships were officially started through government channels as people had to apply to offer support to Syrian newcomers. However, while these relationships may have been predetermined without either party having met the other, they were started through empathy and in some cases the relationships turned into meaningful friendships. Collective activity between refugees and volunteers was significant for refugees because it generates a strong sense of belonging and amplifies emotions (Durkheim, 1967).

A new space for sociality, community, and support was opened through volunteering. Those Syrians who were fortunate enough to be paired with volunteers who were a good fit for each other benefited the most. One former volunteer who still regularly meets the family he helped said, "When I first met this family, it was a volunteer job, but now it's not. It's a friendship... Basically, when I first got into this I just thought, 'Let's get them established, and then my job is done, and I'll go on with my life.' But you get close to them, and they're family now." The family he helped said of him, "He was with us from the beginning, and he's still with us... My kids love him" (Nana), and "He has stayed with us two years and six months" (Borak). Likewise, another family built lasting relationships with the families at the church that sponsored them: "They start to visit me as a family, not just a sponsorship. This is the third year; we are still having more than friendship. Family. We never ever feel alone here. They are always with us" (Rayya). Others used words like 'Canadian mom,' 'Canadian grandmother,' and 'Canadian sister' to describe the closeness of their relationship with those who performed a key part in the early stages of their resettlement.

Not only do sponsorship and volunteering help the settlement needs of refugees and expand their social circle beyond other refugees, they also contribute to belonging at a personal and international level: “The personal commitment of private sponsors leads to a strong interpersonal bond between the sponsor(s) and the refugee, facilitating access to the wider Canadian community and reinforcing solidarity and social cohesion” (Krivenko, 2012, p. 595-596). While not without its imperfections, the volunteer and sponsorship system is a way for citizens to demonstrate hospitality, involvement in refugee resettlement, and act on feelings of empathy. It is a way of bringing the experience of Syrians and other refugees closer to the lives of Canadians in a personal way that breaks down barriers that keep them as distant “others.” Private sponsorship also gives voice and power to refugees, as once refugees are permanent residents in Canada they can then provide sponsorship to others in need (Krivenko, 2012).

Unfortunately, not all Syrian families were able to build resilience through these relationships. Some government-assisted refugees did not get the chance to be set up with volunteers, and not all volunteer relationships worked out positively. For example, a Canadian volunteer described a setting during which another volunteer he was working with only visited their family a couple times a month and didn’t forge a long-lasting bond. Not that this is inherently bad, but it does mean that both sides of the volunteer relationship didn’t have the opportunity for something deeper and more meaningful to develop. Syrian families who don’t get close to their volunteer or sponsors may take longer to feel comfortable in Canada, and volunteers may not appreciate the full struggles of being a refugee and newcomer. Another woman who was sponsored by a family was emotionally held back by them for some time. This woman had some physical, but invisible, traits that made certain types of work challenging for her, and she did not feel supported by her sponsor family. They were telling her to ‘suck it up,’ ‘everybody has some difficulty,’ and generally lacking compassion for her situation, which negatively affected her

mental health while she was living with them. Fortunately, she could eventually move into a place of her own and find a job that is accommodating of her physical and medical needs.

Conclusion

There is great potential for former refugees to develop a wide range of friendships and informal support networks in Canada. Because Canada is multicultural and has welcomed refugees and immigrants for decades, there are numerous communities the participants can reach out to for emotional and functional support. Canadian volunteers and sponsors have been helpful in providing a chance to learn English while getting settled in town, and in many cases refugees have developed family-like friendships with those who helped them in the early stages of resettlement that have continued to this day. Naturally, the community of other Syrian refugees, plus other Arabs, is a source of emotional strength and shared identity and language, which is important to help Syrians maintain ties to their culture, religion, and language. And foremost, the family is vital in building resilience, as they share the closest ties and most similar experiences. These avenues of informal interpersonal support are available to respondents to access in various times of emotional, physical, and personal need.

4.4 The Microsystem of Resilience

The previous two sections explored the ways former Syrian refugees show and build resilience through interactions with community networks and the wider social environment. A third form of resilience comes from the microsystem—the individual and their unique make-up of personal traits, attitudes, hobbies, and habits. This section looks at resilience in the individual. It outlines the role of optimism in seeing hope for the future, describes how openness to change and new experiences predict a positive attitude and personal growth, and explains how those participants who appear more resilient display signs of a growth mindset. Next, it looks at the role of art, creativity, and expression as methods of emotional healing. Having insight into some of these forms of resilience gives people strength to understand their circumstances and find the positive in them. The following topics are not definitive, and several topics in other categories could also fit within this section. For instance, patience and positivity could be considered individual characteristics; however, I have chosen to place them as part of the mesosystem rather than the microsystem to better reflect the responses of participants in relation to other people.

The Resilient Individual

Several important personal characteristics were apparent in respondents who showed resilience. Interviews revealed that resilient respondents were optimistic, open to change, and often had a growth mindset. Those who showed these characteristics indicated that they were hopeful for their future, accepting of their situation and how their life has changed, and were actively seeking ways to improve themselves. By accepting what they could control about their circumstance they can construct a positive narrative of their past, present, and future. While negative thoughts and some hurt is still present, many people showed signs of positive personal

growth following negative life events. This shows resilience and that refugees are not plagued by trauma and depression but can move forward with hope.

Optimism

In trying to uncover who benefits from trauma and who suffers the most, psychologists have found that optimists are more likely to find the benefits and fare better than pessimists (Brown et al., 2003). This may be because optimists can more easily see the bright side of life and find a silver lining in bad events (Haidt, 2006). Resilience can be developed through optimism, and several respondents had optimistic attitudes and outlooks for their future in Canada. Respondents who conveyed more happy thoughts were better equipped to see their lives favourably in each moment. Asha, a mother of four, is “a very positive person, so I can’t really see the bad things.” She talked about the importance of focusing her thoughts on good things in life rather than dwelling on the negative. This helps her keep a hopeful attitude despite life’s challenges. Several people stated that being optimistic is what has allowed them to move forward in life and overcome challenges and obstacles. While positivity is an outward appearance one presents to the world, optimism is one’s internal dialogue and outlook. The two are not mutually exclusive, but many people who expressed a positive attitude were also optimistic and hopeful for their future and that of their family. Becoming a refugee can be a weakness but also an opportunity for new and exciting things, depending how one chooses to move forward. For a small number of Syrian respondents, they were positive in the extreme. Two women described themselves as an “adventure girl” (Samar) and an “adventurous personality” (Rayya) and could look at their overall experiences with more optimism. They both appreciated the changes in their life for new opportunities and benefits they can provide.

They found it in their best interest to not only accept their experience but embrace it for all it can offer.

At the same time, it was not always easy for respondents to remain optimistic and hopeful for their future. Especially before coming to Canada it was sometimes difficult to have hope, and resilience often revealed itself when people were at their lowest point. The following is a shortened account of a moment of desperation and how one woman was hesitant yet optimistic and how this saved her and her family's life. She summed it up as, "It's scary, but if you are in a situation, like you are in the ocean, and you find one stick, you need to take that stick so you don't go down. Imagine, you don't have anything else, and you don't have anything to lose. You will try. Even a little hope, you will try" (Rayya). Resilience does not always come easily. Indeed, it takes real struggles for resilience to have an opportunity to show itself, but a little flicker of hope may be enough to empower someone to make a necessary change. On the other hand, respondents who showed more pessimistic tendencies, such as quitting English school, not actively looking for jobs, or having a generally negative attitude, give the impression that their actions will not make much impact on their lives. For instance, a few older respondents seemed complacent in their current situation and didn't express any real hope for their future. Thus, optimism is also related to openness to change in the next section because if one doesn't have hope they will not be motivated to adapt to change.

Change and Personal Growth

Another way Syrians showed resilience was through their openness to change and willingness to accept changing circumstances. They recognized that life is not stable, and changes will inevitably happen. An ability to accept these changes and feel more experienced about life is a sign of post-traumatic growth (e.g., Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Andreasen & Norris, 1972).

While some changes may not seem good in the moment, respondents were optimistic and recognized that conditions were often out of their control. Several people said they were sad when they left their home in Syria, and their plan was to go back in a few weeks or months. Mir calmly recounted these uncontrollable decisions, “We said that we’re going to go for a month or a couple weeks...The thing that made us the most sad was we left Syria. We were open to move, but at the same time, we were sad to leave.” This was “the hugest change in our life,” he said, because it was the first time to move to another country. Returning to Syria after a few weeks turned out to be unrealistic, as they are now in Canada. Similarly, Rayya said that, “We did 100 percent change in our lives.” Despite the emotional challenges of leaving their home and country, Abbas, who was much younger than the two participants mentioned previously, was positive toward the change and could understand that, “It is good sometimes to change and do something different.” A conversation between Abbas and his brother elaborated on the boys’ acceptance of change:

Abbas: If you stay the same who you are and you don’t communicate with people or travel or do something that can make you explore new things, you will stay the same...

Hamza: Your mind will grow.

Abbas: And you become a more educated person. Accepting of everything, even if it’s good or bad. It doesn’t matter, just accept it how it is.

There was a mix of people who were accepting of change. In general, older participants, i.e., parents, were more pragmatic, as in change happens and you must accept it and move on. While older people were not overtly negative about change, younger respondents, i.e. late teens and early 20s, could recognize more benefits to change, such as new environment, new school, new friends, and new opportunities for their future. Since they are just starting out in life, they may

be more emotionally flexible and able to adapt with fewer challenges. Whatever age respondents were, those who were more resilient expressed a growth mindset by accepting change for what it is, understanding that certain things were out of their control, and making the best of their situation.

A Growth Mindset

A growth mindset contrasts with a fixed mindset, two terms coined by Dweck (2006). A growth mindset infers that people believe they can develop themselves and improve their abilities through hard work and perseverance, and challenges and adversity are opportunities to learn and grow. A fixed mindset implies that a person thinks their skills and talents are fixed from birth and therefore do not put in the effort to develop them. These terms are far-reaching and can be explored in the topic of refugee resilience and their personal characteristics. The findings in this study indicate that a growth mindset is helpful in overcoming challenges, seeing new opportunities, and acting to improve one's own life. Respondents demonstrated a growth mindset by searching for aspects of positive change in their lives. By identifying ways in which they have changed and grown, they can find meaning and value in their experience of displacement and resettlement. By identifying these areas of growth, people could view themselves in a more positive light and see ways they have benefited despite negative life experiences. Those who were more receptive to possibilities of positive change were more able to find positive aspects of negative experiences, overcome anxiety, and become more patient as their life unfolded unexpectedly.

Many participants expressed a decrease in anxiety and that they had become more easy-going. Upon first learning that they could come to Canada, people were understandably nervous about a new culture, a new language, new people, a new life. But after coming to Canada and learning

how to live here, they felt more relaxed and less anxious. For Amer, he feels less anxious and angry, “Back home, when I was angry I would break anything in front of me. But here, I become a little bit relaxed, and I don’t do that [now]. I exercise outside. Walking. I’m easy-going.” That he no longer feels the urge to break things shows that he has grown in a more positive and understanding way despite the frustration of displacement. And his ability to channel negative thoughts into more productive activities is a sign of personal evolution. Walking in parks and spending time in nature also played a big role in helping people become more relaxed and less anxious. Rayya has found herself more relaxed because the stress of war is no longer hovering over her. In Syria, she was constantly worried about dying, bombings, and not being able to go back home. After living in fear of bombs falling on her house, her mind is at ease now in Canada. She did say that this was not something that happened right away. It took many months to realize that she didn’t have to worry about bombings anymore. A symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a constant worry and reliving of some traumatic event, but Rayya, and other respondents, show us that reliving negative events does not have to control your life. It is possible to mature despite bad memories and live a fulfilling life of personal growth and positive change.

Also important to note is that while Syrian refugees have suffered many horrors in the last few years, depression does not always become a defining dimension of their personality. Mental health professionals and psychologists tend to presume that refugees will be plagued by PTSD and are quick to set up resources and counselling to help them. This is thoughtful and important, but rather than assuming people will be debilitated by their suffering, we should also seek ways they have grown, are growing, and have the potential to grow past their suffering. Respondents in this research did mention feeling depression, sadness, and stress from time to time but none expressed that they were seeking counselling or therapy. Still, they did not let this influence

their entire lives. For instance, Aleia said she and her family get sad and depressed, “Only when we hear some news about our family in Syria and the people who are still in Syria and having the war and bombing and all these bad things around them. So, when we hear this bad news we get some stress...But then it all becomes good.” Her family’s situation also tells us that having family members left behind in Syria is a major stressor, and when close family members are together in Canada families experience less negative emotions.

With a few exceptions, people seem to be adjusting well to their life in Canada. A few people were eager to reap the benefits of a positive change in their lives. One couple “studied hard about Canada to integrate easier,” (Borak), and “We like to read a lot about other cultures...and this makes it easy for us to change...Also, most of the changes, it’s better for us. It’s not worse or bad, no, it gives us a lot of benefits to learn a new language” (Nana). They both were cognizant of the fact that the ability to use English has a huge impact on their future in Canada. They accepted this and took their low-intermediate English ability to learn and improve—and they are now speaking advanced English and doing well for themselves. In their experience, they can see the importance of language and noted that Syrians who do not take the time or put in the effort to learn English and Canadian culture take much longer to integrate.

One woman said outright that she had a negative attitude when she first came to Canada. Almost immediately into the interview she told me, “I wasn’t happy [to come to Canada], to be honest...I didn’t want to come because they didn’t give us notice, and I didn’t know what to expect...I wasn’t happy. For a long time” (Safiya). With some hesitation, she went on to say that she thinks now she’s getting better, but there was not a lot of conviction in her words. She mentioned struggles with her relationship with God, feeling depressed and alone in the first city she lived in Canada, having a hard time finding a university that would accept her previous credits, and feeling left behind from her peers. In addition to the depression she experienced

living in a small town in British Columbia, she also alluded to troubling emotional turmoil that she went through about her relationship with God, the war in Syria, the casualties, and her displacement. The experience seemed to be particularly traumatic for her, and she affirmed,

I'm not very positive. Since I came here I wasn't very positive...I can't handle, I don't think my mind can handle just how things changed in one day. And I wasn't very successful believing God is good because of what happened. But I think from past experiences with God, and I saw how good he was, that's the only way I can be positive and see good things that happened in the bad things. (Safiya)

This woman may be adjusting more slowly than others, and while she is still struggling at times, she has eventually come to a point of positive reflection of her experiences. She is aware that she can overcome dark thoughts and grow into a more positive life. Samar was of a similar growth mindset and said, "I'm open and I learn how to do. Maybe I do it wrong the first time, but then I learn how to do it the right way, and I do it the way the culture and society here expect...I'm open to learn." An attitude of growth was present in both Christian and Muslim respondents, and many Christians and Muslim Syrians seemed just as excited to learn a new language, have Canadian citizenship, and experience gender equality. However, strict adherence to Islam may be a stumbling block for some people when it comes to gender relations in Canada. This is an area that should be researched further, especially as children and teenagers grow into adults and face new social norms that conflict with their parents' expectations.

Conclusion

Individual characteristics determine whether someone will show resilience during adverse circumstances. This study found that optimism, receptiveness to change, and a willingness to

grow were significantly interconnected with resilience. Optimism is particularly beneficial, as it means people can see the positive possibilities, or the silver lining, through adversity. Optimism is related to hope, and respondents who mentioned having hope exemplify the ability to develop resilience. In addition, the last few years have been marred by change, from war to displacement to resettlement. Hope is crucial during these events as is openness to change. Many of the changes respondents have experienced seemed beyond their control, so an openness to change means people will be more accepting of things new. This shows in a greater ability to adapt to new environments and expectations. There are many benefits to having a growth mindset, such as less anxiety and overcoming depression, self-control, and mastery over one's emotions. Remaining calm and serene allows participants to think about themselves and other people more compassionately. It helps when dealing with uncomfortable situations that are out of their control, as much of their lives may have felt for the last few years. Through the process of refuge and resettlement, respondents have realized that good things take time, and being more easy-going and patient allows them to endure difficult situations.

Expression and Sense-making

Participants in this research with creative dispositions expressed that making and consuming art helped them process their experiences and emotions. This is a healthy way of healing, as it allows for introspection and reflection on the meaning of things while releasing stress. Participants can make sense of what has happened to them, connect with themselves, connect with others, and move past their pain. Creative and artistic pursuits are a way for participants to create something meaningful and reflective of their lives since leaving Syria. Art is transformative, and the process of creating something is an effective method for reflecting on one's ideas, hopes, and experiences while also contributing something to the social world (O'Neill, 2008). In the following sections, I have outlined the ways participants show active expression in art and creativity, consumption of others' creative expression, and how art allows for healing and growth. This section also includes reframing past experiences in a more positive light and allowing for better personal comprehension.

Processing Emotions Through Creativity

Expressing the self is related to finding meaning in life (Baumeister et al., 2013), and several respondents were active creators and aspiring artists. One woman has enjoyed painting and drawing since her childhood and was proudly praised for her artwork as a child. Although it has been a while since she has painted anything she said, "I really like to express [myself] with painting...Usually when I am happy my paintings are colourful, but when I'm feeling depressed or sad I use darker colours" (Asha). These words infer that artistic expression is not always about creating something beautiful to look at it. It is a way to bring forth a visual representation of one's inner emotions. Other ways people expressed themselves was through writing, photography, and making music. One highly educated Syrian said that he was free to express

his opinions on the internet and enjoyed publishing his writing online. In Syria, it was a risk to his safety to write about his opinions on the war and the government, but now he is happy to have the opportunity to write what he feels. Another woman said that creative writing in English helps her express herself while at the same time improving her English. Music has also helped her, and she said, “When you go through a hard thing, many times you really don’t want to process it because it reminds you of the pain. But if I’m playing music I feel it’s an indirect way of helping me. It’s helping my emotions and thoughts connect somehow...Playing music—it’s weird. It’s like I’m expressing something, and magically it helps” (Safiya). Another young man enjoys taking photos of nature, and this helps him find beauty, release stress, and move on with his life. He hopes to pursue his artistic abilities and start a photography business with his friends in the future. Researchers have recently discovered that production of visual art improves interactions between different regions of the brain and is associated with better resilience and well-being (Bolwerk, et al., 2014), and the creative participants in this study were effectively tapping into the positive brain-changing power of producing art.

Art is as much an individual process as it is a social good. Creative people may reach into their own emotions to create something the world has never seen before, but the final product often contributes to society and the emotions of others. For example, Kawakami, Furukawa, and Okanoya (2014) suggests that listening to sad music produces enjoyment and produces vicarious emotions; they suggest sadness is multifaceted, and since listeners don’t face any real threat by listening to sad music it is enjoyable and has a pleasant quality. Not everyone has the personality or ability to create something new, and consuming others’ creations is also valuable because we often look to others to express the feelings that we can’t. Not everyone in this research was an artist or had a creative personality, so they looked to other’s art to feel something. For instance, not everybody can play an instrument or write music, but respondents

mentioned that listening to music was a way to release stress and understand their emotions. One young man said that he liked to listen to music while running because moving his body helps him to forget the things he doesn't want to remember. Other ways that people found expression was through dancing and singing while they listened to music. One woman said that she loved to dance to music when she was happy, while her daughter uses singing to express herself in school and at home.

Creativity is related to models of resilience because the traits associated with creativity—flexibility, initiative, ingenuity, adaptability, spontaneity, and originality—may also be associated with problem solving skills (Barron, 1969). Csikszentmihalya (1996) also finds that those with a creative personality are better able to adapt to new domains. Creativity may indicate better ability to solve problems and adapt to new environments, which is crucial for former refugees as they resettle and adjust to their new lives. The creative process is about “the ability to bring something new into existence...[and] involves a reshaping of given materials, whether physical or mental” (Barron, 1969, p. 10). Resilience is also defined by one's ability to create a new life after adversity, bouncing back from trauma, and reshaping their identity as a changed person. Creativity is the ability to think flexibly, and resilience is about elasticity and an ability to adapt to novel environments, so creativity and sense-making then serve as a process of rediscovering oneself after adversity. Haidt (2006) sees sense-making as the key to benefiting from severe stress. Participants in this research who have a creative personality were aware that art was a form of self-expression that was extremely helpful in processing their situations and releasing stress, while those who were less artistically inclined could still reap the healing benefits of the arts by consuming the artistic creations of others.

Healing and Sense-making

While art, such as painting and making music, helps people process their emotions, Haidt, (2006) argues that it is words that help people make the most sense of adverse circumstances and contribute the most progress toward resilience. Writing with the specific intention of making sense of events through deep insight was predictive of improved health over the years (Pennebaker, 1997). Thoughtful writing allows people to close painful chapters of their life and move on with the rest of your life. Safiya has been able to tap into the power of writing and said, “I do a lot of writing, and that’s been very helpful to me.” When asked to elaborate on how it has helped her, she replied, “It’s a way of processing things, because I think when you go through a hard thing, many times you really don’t want to process because it reminds you of the pain.” Words have helped her create a meaningful story out of her experiences, and throughout her time in Canada she has overcome depression and improved her mental health. This focus on words does not discount the benefits of non-written activities. Other participants, have benefited from listening to music, creating music, dancing, and painting. It may be, however, that insightful writing is the creative practice most conducive to progress back to a healthy internal equilibrium.

Another sense-making strategy people used to deal with their circumstances and negative past experiences was by thinking about them in a more constructive way. Positive cognitive restructuring is defined as “changing one’s view of a stressful situation in order to see it in a more positive light” and includes increased optimism, active positive thinking, and downplaying the results of negative events (Allen & Leary, 2010, p. 3). One unique way respondents did this was by reframing their negative experiences into “dreams,” “nightmares,” and “miracles.” The importance of dreams can also be used metaphorically. When asked what

it means to experience war or be a refugee, Areej describes the moment when her family decided it was time to leave as a nightmare:

It was getting worse and worse all the time. Few, really few, people were there [in the town], but they were far away from us. We lived with only one person in the basement so we can protect ourselves from the bombs and the bullets and things. When we had the chance to leave, we left because we wanted to wake up from that nightmare.

Coming to Canada was a dream come true for some people because it meant they could “wake up” from the bad dream and move into a better life. Salah said that it was his dream to leave Lebanon because life was full of challenges and discrimination. Rayya also said that coming to Canada felt like she was sleeping and in a dream because everything was happening so fast. Another family was living for years in Jordan; running out of money and facing hard times, they continued to dream about coming to Canada. Thinking about the future and having a goal to work for helped this family pull through and find themselves in a better place. The husband in this family educated himself and his family about the freedom, human rights, and equality in Canada, and this served as motivation to find a way to reach Canada. Studies give evidence that positive reframing and gratitude prompt reframing of otherwise negative experiences and decrease depressive symptoms in longitudinal studies (Lambert, Fincham, & Stillman, 2011).

Participants also expressed gratitude for their situation. Gratitude has a host of benefits to sufferers of adversity, including decreasing depression (Wood, et al., 2008) while improving positive relations with others (Lambert et al., 2010). Rayya described that being a refugee means “somebody will come and save you from the bad. You are in a very bad dream, and somebody is coming and taking your hand and taking you out of that bad dream into the good dream.” The following is a detailed account of one person’s miraculous story:

I was living in a refugee camp. In one room four of us... One day, an old man gave my husband a phone number, and he said, "This phone number will help you to change your life." We asked him, "How can just one phone call change our life?" He said, "It will because your kids are not going to school. You are living very bad here. You are sleeping on the floor. This is not a good life..."

Then we phoned the phone number, and somebody from the support services answered. I told her, "Somebody gave us your phone number, and he said maybe you can help us. How you can help us?"

She said, "I'm doing the paperwork for the refugees that come here."

She found a sponsorship for us... I told her we don't have passports... We don't have money—nothing... Then after three months she phoned us back and said, "I found a church, they are going to sponsor you." I said, "How is it possible? It's impossible." But sometimes it happens like miracles... [Now] we are living good and happy... We made that phone call. (Rayya)

Another participant with a close relationship to God described her salvation that came through trusting his guidance. Her experience is also quite unique, which she attributes to God knowing what is best for her regardless of whether she can see the benefit through the challenges. Attributing her rescue to God helped her to make sense of and accept her situation,

I'm not like other refugees. I've never been a refugee in a camp. I just arrived from Syria to Canada. So, that makes it special, I know. Actually, I came like in a miracle way—it's God's miracle that made it happen.

I never wanted to leave Syria... I stayed in Syria until 2016, which is five years of war... I never applied as a refugee or to leave Syria... So before the embassy interview I prayed and asked God, "God, if this is your will for my life, your plan to my life, you have to help me in the interview,"

because I was not eligible according to the conditions the embassy put in place—I was not eligible at all.

I went there, and the first question that the consul asked me “When did you arrive in Lebanon?” Because I had the interview in the Lebanon embassy. “What time did you leave Syria?” “What date did you leave Syria?” I said, “Today.” He was like, “Okay. How’s your life in Syria?” And I told him, “...It’s not very peaceful, but I’m okay with the sounds of bombs and everything, so I’m okay.” “Did your house get damaged?” I said, no. “Have you lost any of your family members?” I said, no. “Are you in danger?” I said, “Well this is in God’s hands because I could be in my house and die from a bomb in my house but I haven’t.” He said, okay. The last sentence, he said “Samar, according to your story, you’re not eligible because you are still in Syria and you’re living a good life in Syria.” I said, yes. “But because you were honest with me...I’m going to approve you.” And he said, congratulation.

He was very excited. He shook my hand and put a big check near the box of my application. It was a wonderful moment. (Samar)

These events were perceived to be miracles because they were unexpected, unexplainable, unbelievable, but enormously welcomed. The events were mysterious, and Samar, a religious-minded woman, strongly believed they were caused by God. Ascribing their salvation to dreams or miracles was a way for participants to make sense of their circumstances, and was a useful strategy in developing resilience.

Conclusion

Resilience can be developed in a diversity of ways, and there are both personal characteristics and practices that can help people process negative events. An optimistic attitude and an openness to change are imperative. Even the ability to see a sliver of hope in a seemingly hopeless situation helps people move forward and take the steps to carry on with their life. A

willingness to change when life forces you to is also crucial. While we may not want to change all the time, the fact is life happens; and the talent to regulate oneself and adapt to novel situations and demands is significant of resilience. The benefits to being able and willing to change results in personal growth and a more fulfilling life. Art and expression is beneficial in helping people process their emotions, understand their feelings, make sense of past events, and find meaning in their life.

5 Discussion and Questions for Future Research

5.1 Introduction

Resilience is the capacity bounce back to vitality after trauma or adversity; it is something that every person must manifest at some point in their life. In a shift away from the negative effects of trauma, “Resilience evokes the promise of something good resulting from misfortune” and suggests there can be “hope embedded in adversity” (Dyer & McGuiness, 1996, p. 276). The “adversity hypothesis” takes this further and argues, “People need adversity, setbacks, and perhaps trauma to reach the highest levels of strength, fulfillment, and personal development” (Haidt, 2006, p. 136). Understanding resilience and the various paths to it help us understand why people react differently to disrupting life events and the positive consequences of resilience. The first part of this section will discuss the consequences of resilience for former Syrian refugees and the effects this has on their integration. The second part will discuss the broader implications of this research on international cooperation. In the remaining parts, it readdresses the initial research questions, review the limitations of the study, summarize the conclusions, and discuss recommendations for future refugee work.

5.2 The Consequences of Resilience

Resilience does not mean that a person does not experience pain, sadness, or distress. Rather it means that someone does not let these emotions and situations control their life. The outcome of resilience is an ability to manage trauma and adversity and come through a stronger person. Three major positive consequences of resilience as exemplified by participants in this research are an increased sense of self, a sense of purpose, and a sense of mastery.

Sense of Self

A sense of self is a well-adjusted assessment of one's life and experiences (Wagnild & Young, 1990). Like Dyer and McGuiness (1996) explain, the participants in this study accept what has happened in their life and have an appreciation for those events. Resilient people are self-aware and cognizant of the effects their experiences have had on them. Many of the participants in this research have thought deeply about the events that have happened, have longed to make sense of them, and have justified them as having significant purpose in their lives. Women were particularly aware of their increased sense of self. Greater sense of self translates into greater self-confidence, independence, knowing the rules, feeling able to protect oneself, being more active and feeling stronger, and being able to talk to men and go outside freely. Men feel a greater freedom to try different jobs. These people have, effectively, benefited from severe stress. This increased sense of self because of adversity comes from deep thinking about past events and is often dynamic and evolving. When people spend time meditating on their experiences and actively finding the positive consequences of adversity, they develop a stronger and more confident sense of self and feel more comfortable in Canadian society. Findings supports the work of Haidt (2006, p. 138) who sees resilience as positive change to one's self-concept, wherein "rising to a challenge reveals your hidden abilities"; he reasons that people who overcome adverse situations appreciate that they are more resilient than they initially assumed, which gives greater gratefulness of their personal strengths.

Sense of Purpose

A network of emotionally supportive people is both a contributing factor and an outcome of resilience. Social networks help reduce suffering and offer possibilities to find meaning and purpose in that suffering (Durkheim, 1951). Those who are more socially active, who go out of

their way to build relationships, and who spend time befriending diverse people beyond other Syrian refugees are better equipped to move on with their lives. They also end up with a wider network of people on whom to call in the future, since “We often develop love for those we care for, and we usually feel love and gratitude toward those who cared for us in a time of need” (Haidt, 2006, p. 139). These findings support research by Dyer and McGuiness (1996, p. 277) who say that a prosocial attitude and easy temperament “encourages attachment to others who may support the development of resilience... [and] the ability to draw people into one’s life during times of adversity supports the process of resilience.” Helping people find things around town, translating documents, and interpreting during appointments draws others into their lives and builds strong relationship. As well as overcoming the challenges of resettlement and integration, for those who are on the helping side this offers their life a sense of real purpose and meaning. Recker and Wong (1988, p. 221) outline meaning of life to be a knowledge of structure and purpose in one’s life, the pursuit of goals, and an associated feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment. The research echoes others such as Prager (1996) who presents personal relationships and meeting basic needs as two of the most significant foundations for meaning in life, and Haidt (2006, p. 140) who says, “Trauma changes priorities and philosophies toward the present...and toward other people.” Thus, a prosocial attitude is effective in building resilience and improving well-being because it helps people cultivate a sense of purpose by helping others.

Sense of Mastery

Another consequence of resilience is a sense of accomplishment and mastery. Resilient individuals are those who have worked through adverse situations and come out stronger in the end. They have developed a deeper sense of self and found purpose in their lives because of

adversity. These results support other research which suggest that people find a sense of accomplishment and mastery in overcoming a challenging position (Dyer & McGuinness, 1996). Mastery can be described as having the skill or knowledge required for positive adaptation in response to a disruptive event (Earvolino-Ramirez, 2007). That individuals can effectively cope with adverse situations is a primary consequence of resilience. Part of this sense of mastery comes from a quality of determination and perseverance until a goal is achieved; an obstacle is “just another of life’s hurdles to be jumped” (Dyer & McGuinness, 1996, p. 277). Resilience is thus effective management of the challenges life presents and a returning to optimal levels of functionality and well-being. Important in developing a sense of mastery is individual agency and the belief that one has control over their future rather than being ruled by fate (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). Those who take control of their situation, by seizing opportunities, attending orientations, educating themselves, and interacting with others, are effectively exercising their own agency and becoming masters of their lives. This is a key outcome of resilient people, and it helps Syrians adapt to Canadian culture and become an integrated part of their new society.

5.3 Implications for International Cooperation

Conventional wisdom and the current policy problem regarding refugees is that they are an unsustainable burden on host countries. Nations compete to close their doors on them, or at best segregate them into temporary housing on barren land (e.g., Berlatsky, 2017; Bahar, 2018). The current research challenges this idea and supports subjective refugee research that argues refugees are not a burden but an economic and social asset. Accepting and empowering refugees and fostering resilience results in a triple benefit for refugees, the host country, and the country of origin.

For Refugees

The first benefit in accepting and empowering refugees is that could literally be lifesaving. For an individual or family with no home, no money, and no food, being accepted by another country provides them immediate personal safety. When countries open their doors to refugees, families and individuals can more quickly start to feel a sense of security, feed themselves, restart their education, find work, and seek a sense of purpose and fulfillment. A receptive environment will empower refugees to participate in society, form meaningful relationships, and reflect on their experiences, thus allowing them the prospect to build the resilience necessary to overcome their adversity and improve their own well-being. In many cases, refugees will also be presented with new opportunities and rights they didn't have previously. This may particularly affect women who have been denied the right to work, open a bank account, own property, or even drive a car. A variety of opportunities to choose from and the rights of personal protection allow people to explore their capabilities in a safe environment.

For Accepting Countries

A second benefit of accepting refugees is that it helps the host country. Ideally, countries will welcome refugees while providing them with the rights to work and go to school while offering classes to learn the local language if necessary. These are all steps that will help refugees become productive members of society. The sooner refugees can begin working, the better it will be for the host country, as refugees will be contributing to the local economy. Refugees also often engage in entrepreneurship and self-employment activities. Fong et al. (2007, p. 132) describe the connection between entrepreneurial success and personal characteristics as, "Refugees who have been and will continue to be successful are those who focus on their

strengths and not on their shortcomings,” and this research gives evidence that refugees can provide benefits to Canada. Focusing on one’s strengths is a sign of determination, strength of character, sense of self, and thus resilience. Furthermore, refugees have already partaken in risk-taking behaviour—the very act of fleeing one’s home with no belongings or plan is risky. Embarking on new business ventures is likewise risky and comparatively may not seem that hazardous. As refugees create new businesses they also create more jobs for other refugees and locals. This keeps money and resources circulating while also integrating refugees into the very fabric of the economy. A more integrated presence of refugees (no longer refugees but now regular members of society) also increases the diversity of Canada and introduces more people to the culture and customs of Syria.

For Countries of Origin

The third benefit of empowering refugees is to the refugee’s country of origin. In this case, Syria should benefit from this international cooperation in the medium- to long-term, which will be especially important as the country’s economy and infrastructure are rebuilt after years of war. A natural experiment looked at the benefits the Vietnamese refugees to the United States brought back to Vietnam, and findings included higher and more diverse exports from the US (Parsons & Vézina, 2014). Refugees maintain ties with their home countries and regularly transfer new technologies and knowledge, thus bringing two countries closer and promoting greater international cooperation and exchange. The transfer of knowledge, technology, and skills will be pertinent for the growth of Syria in the coming years as former refugees establish business ties and investments between Syria and Canada. For countries that have been devastated by years of war, the empowerment of refugees in other countries will be hugely beneficial for international cooperation and national redevelopment. While it may be too soon

to see the tangible benefits in Syria, this is an area that will deserve further research in the coming years.

5.4 Readdressing the Research Questions

1. What are the lived experiences of former Syrian refugees in British Columbia?

While the experiences of former Syrian refugees are personal, subjective, and varied, it is still possible to determine commonalities. For the most part, people are making the most of past events and their current situation. They are exploring their surroundings, getting involved in activities, meeting new people, and reflecting on themselves. To their advantage, refugees in Canada have access to a long-established system of receiving refugees and immigrants. There are services, support systems, volunteer and sponsor programs, and informal networks of diverse people who can provide different types of assistance.

2. What factors or characteristics make refugees resilient?

Resilience is both a characteristic as well as a process. To varying degrees, it is present in everybody. Through adverse situations resilience can be developed and strengthened. For the respondents of this study the social environment, interpersonal relationships, and personal characteristics influence resilience. A host country with a welcoming attitude and system of support helps people, and exposure to new opportunities opens the minds of people to new possibilities. Family, friends, and acquaintances help build resilience in refugees because they are sources of emotional support, shared identity, common language, mutual experience, and feelings of welcome. Personal qualities, such as openness to change, optimism, and personal growth are helpful, as are creative expression and sense-making through introspection.

3. What are the challenges to refugee resilience?

Life in Canada is not perfect and without challenges. What seems to most prevent resilience is the language barrier. Low levels of English prevent people from expressing themselves, receiving help, and finding adequate work. It is demotivating and demoralising to feel like an infant again in the most basic of circumstances, which may prevent people from reaching out, trying new things, and feeling confident. After language, work was a major obstacle impeding resilience. For educated and highly skilled workers from Syria, it is emotionally challenging to be prevented from practicing their profession or using the skills they worked years to build. Going back to school is out of the question for many people due to time, family, and financial constraints, so people may have to pursue a new line of work or experience job status dissonance. Additional challenges include finding adequate housing, especially for larger families. Most participants were on income assistance and living in government-subsidized housing; however, in a similar position as low-income Canadians, Syrians face long wait times for government housing. Another challenge for some people is adjusting to social expectations regarding women working. While many women are eager to work, there are still families who hesitate at the idea of the wife working outside of the domestic sphere.

4. How does resilience in refugees contribute to well-being during integration?

None of the participants are immune to the challenges of rebuilding a life in Canada. Some people can see past obstacles, find creative solutions, or reimagine their life differently than they thought. When participants have the social environment, interpersonal network, and individual characteristics that contribute to resilience, their well-being can improve. They experience a better adjusted sense of self through introspection, can find meaning and purpose to their past experiences, and develop a sense of mastery that spills over into other areas of life

in the form of self-confidence. This all related to Aristotle's original idea of Eudaimonia, in which well-being is understood as striving for one's unique and highest potential in life.

5.5 Applicability & Limitations

Beyond the methodological approach of studying refugee resilience during resettlement, the findings in this dissertation should not be broadly generalizable to all refugee populations in all parts of the world, though parts of it may be. As mentioned previously, this research only discusses the issue of refugee resettlement in a third country and not repatriation or second-country asylum. Thus, the findings may not be generalizable to refugees who have returned home or who have integrated into a second country. To the degree that the findings are generalizable, I would argue that they are most generalizable to Syrian refugees in other parts of Canada due to a similar background and resettlement environment. Findings may also be applicable to other Arab refugee groups in Canada, since language and culture is relevant to the participants in this study, and to a lesser extent non-Arab refugees in Canada, as culture and language similarities become more dissimilar from the sample of this study. The same may go for the country of resettlement, and more western or European countries will allow for more transferability than, for instance, Asian countries or other Middle Eastern countries. Nonetheless, refugee resilience can be studied for any group of refugees in any country, and each study will produce its own unique results with elements of transferability and elements of non-transferability.

Furthermore, this research is focused on a refugee population who have been fortunate to find themselves resettled in a country that has long accepted refugees and is open to diversity. Canada is unique in that there are few countries in the world with such openness to multiculturalism and the services to actively support newcomers. Even other English speaking

countries with a history of receiving immigrants do not have the same attitude of welcome and unconditional acceptance. For instance, the United States is Canada's closest neighbour and shares similar beginnings; but the United States faces greater issues of discrimination, segregation, and forced assimilation. While the two countries' foundations shared resemblances, their histories have diverged and Canada has grown into a country more accepting of refugees, and I would argue that Canada is a suitable country to study refugee resilience. I do not intend to dissect the reasons for these differences, but rather to acknowledge the fact that Canada is unique in its acceptance of refugees and that the findings in this study show many positive cases of resilience that may not be evident in other countries. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, this does not mean that these findings are invalid or non-generalizable. They are valid for this study and possibly for other populations in Canada other countries. However, one cannot definitively determine if findings are generalizable without considering various other factors and variables.

In attempting to avoid the harmful stereotypes and negative bias often present in refugee studies, it is possible that this research has a positive bias. Wherever possible, I have tried to balance the positive findings with cases of individuals who are still struggling and show less resilience. I do not believe all refugees develop resilience at the same speed or in the same ways, and some people may struggle forever after displacement. This research shows the strengths refugees are capable of, but it does not mean they are always happy and positive. People are still hurting, and painful memories may never disappear. They do not need to forget these memories, but a productive and fulfilling life comes from looking forward with hope rather than looking back with sorrow. The pains of war, death, loss, and displacement will forever be a part of their lives, and I do not doubt, nor can I fully comprehend these feelings. However, I wanted to show the positive lives of refugees with this research.

Additionally, in attempting to portray the voices and subjective experiences of participants, I have effectively inserted my own voice into the analysis. The excerpts from interviews are the participants' own words, however the interpretation is my own. I have done my best to portray their stories as accurately as possible, and I hope my own biases have not altered the meanings intended by the participants.

5.6 Conclusion

This research addressed how three systems of resilience—the macrosystem, mesosystem, and microsystem—can help former refugees achieve greater well-being after resettlement. It was exploratory of a phenomenon and provided a detailed, qualitative examination of the ways former Syrian refugees develop resilience. The research does not discount the suffering and pain many people still have and understands that happiness and satisfaction, like other emotions, come and go in waves and cycles. Notwithstanding the full range of human emotions, the research focuses on the very real benefits that can be found in adversity. It identified and explored the various themes of resilience and recognised the ways these contribute to well-being. It also brings attention to the ways refugees bring value to themselves, the host country, and their country of origin.

Within the macrosystem of resilience, I found two main themes that helped build resilience. One was the variety and quality of public places people could visit to feel a sense of shared identity and belonging. These were places of healing and restoration, socialization, recreation, and nostalgia. Other themes were new rights and freedoms offered to women that they didn't have in Syria as well as new opportunities for entrepreneurship and self-employment.

Within the mesosystem of resilience, I found three themes of resilience people can access. One theme was found in family relationships, since these people have the most similar

experience and appreciation for each other. The next was the community of other former Syrian refugees as well as other Arab immigrants and Arab-Canadian citizens. This group provided much-needed friendship, a sense of belonging, and an outlet for emotions troubles. A third theme of interpersonal support was the wider community, meaning non-Arab immigrants and long-term Canadians, including volunteers and sponsors. People in this group can further help Syrians integrate because of the need to use English and their intimate understanding of Canadian society.

Within the microsystem of resilience, I found various personal characteristics to be closely related to an ability to bounce back and move forward after adversity, such as optimism, openness to change, and having a growth mindset. Another theme of resilience was artistic and creative expression including positive reframing and sense-making activities to help understand and deal with emotions and situations.

Resilience means a person can learn to cope with trauma and adversity in healthy ways and come through it a stronger person. I found three major positive outcomes of resilience for individuals that contribute to overall well-being and a positive life in Canada. These three consequences of resilience are a greater sense of self, a sense of purpose, and a sense of mastery. Increased sense of self means that resilient individuals are more well-adjusted and have accepted and can appreciate past events in their lives. They had greater independence, feel they can protect themselves, are aware of their rights, and feel stronger. This was especially true for women who can more freely go outside, talk to men, work, and have their own bank accounts. A sense of purpose comes when refugees have an emotionally supportive network with whom they interact and share their emotions. A prosocial attitude also means helping others in any way possible, and helping others caused people to find meaning in their actions and experiences. A sense of mastery denotes a sense of accomplishment people have from escaping

Syria, living a life in a transit country, and taking the chance to come to Canada. Those who believe they have active control over their actions and emotions and can direct their life, rather than letting life simply happen to them, have become masters of their own lives.

This research contributes to the field of refugee studies from a subjective perspective. Rather than focusing on objective measures, policy, poor mental health, and “otherness” of refugees, it focuses on the people who have been displaced and their lived experiences of adversity and resettlement. It focuses on the strengths of refugees and their ability to thrive when given the opportunity to do so. It also contributes to studies on resilience because it provides descriptive examples of resilience that cannot be found through questionnaires and surveys. Additionally, a triple benefit to accepting refugees brings value to the refugees, to the host country, and to the country of origin. It benefits the refugees in that it provides them personal safety, followed by the right to work, go to school, own property, and be part of society. Accepting refugees benefits the host country because if people can integrate, they can contribute to the social, cultural, and economic fabric of the country. It also benefits the country of origin and contributes to international cooperation, and in the case of Syria, redevelopment. Following the conflict in Syria, business, investment, and social ties refugees have developed in Canada will help transfer knowledge, technology, remittance, and cooperation as Syria is rebuilt.

There is a great deal we can learn from refugees. Every person will face adversity at some point in their life; there is simply no way to escape it. The potency of the adversity faced is deeply subjective, and thus deserves to be studied through subjectivity and lived experiences. By better understanding resilience and the ways refugees deal with hardship, we can put our own experiences into perspective and have greater compassion for others who are suffering. Refugees are not defined by negative life events, and when given opportunities and resources to grow we see they can overcome challenges, move forward with their lives, provide support

to others, and enrich the cultures and economies of multiple countries. We may think that adversity means losing something, and prosperity means receiving something good. But as philosopher Marcus Aurelius said, “The happiness of your life depends on the quality of your thoughts.” Adversity is not always bad; and it can lead to richness of life. We can take what we have been given in life and improve the world around us, our relationships, and ourselves; and refugees who are resilient can do that. Adversity can change our view of the world, force us to rethink our core beliefs, strengthen us, cause us to approach life with a better perspective, and help others do the same. It is true that, “Suffering is not always all bad for all people. There is usually some good mixed in with the bad, and those who find it have found something precious: a key to moral and spiritual development” (Haidt, 2006, p. 141). The person who can turn adversity into a benefit for themselves and the world is virtuous. Resilient people find the benefits in adversity, overcome misery, and create their own positive future.

5.7 Recommendations

1. Helping Canadian citizens better accommodate Syrians. Former Syrian refugees are capable of developing resilience and thriving after adversity. To the public in Canada, efforts should be made to show the personalities and relatable qualities of refugees and the benefits Syrians bring to Canada. Already a multicultural country that has welcomed immigrants and refugees for decades, adding a large population of Syrian people should benefit the diversity of Canada and add a rich new dimension to the country’s demographic landscape. This will also help strengthen Canada’s image as a safe-haven for refugees and a place where they will be guaranteed personal safety and an opportunity to thrive. Future studies on accepting refugees can explore the ways refugees adapt, grow, and thrive.

2. *Better educating government and service workers on the needs of Syrians.* Refugee resilience comes from three major sources, the society, interpersonal relationships, and individual characteristics. On this basis, the Canadian federal and provincial governments should continue to develop and expand language programs, community services, and work and education opportunities to quickly integrate refugees. Governments and services should not intentionally relocate families to rural areas where they will be isolated from other Syrians and Arabs, as these relationships provide necessary emotional support and purpose. Mental health and service workers should be appreciative of the personal strengths refugees have, such as courage, openness, and adaptability, and seek to encourage growth in these areas.

3. *Empowering women and striving for greater gender equality.* Syrian women are aware of their new rights, which in some ways are counter to tradition in Syria, i.e., working, having a credit card, driving, going outside alone, and talking to men. Women's increased independence is of benefit to themselves and their families, and integration efforts should seek to familiarize women and men with the expectations of them in Canada. For example, to receive income assistance, both husband and wife need to be actively searching for work to be eligible. This is different than in Syria, where women rarely worked outside the home; however, it is necessary to live in Canada. Educating Syrian families and income assistance workers on the cultural sensitivity of this distinction will help both sides understand where the other is coming from.

4. *Improving international cooperation between host countries and countries of origin.* A new cooperation-focused way of thinking about refugees should take place. The number of former Syrian refugees in British Columbia comprises a miniscule representation of the millions of refugees from numerous countries living in limbo around the world. Too many of them are

turned away from borders or live for years in tent cities. Fearfully viewing refugees as a burden not only keeps millions of people from the right to a dignified life, but it stalls cooperation and development around the world. This study has indicated that when refugees are given the resources they need to live in dignity they can overcome emotional challenges, have better well-being, contribute to the local and national economies of the host country, increase cultural diversity, and transfer knowledge, technology, and remittance to their home country. The transfer of these resources back to their home country may mean enhanced medical care, better economic and social systems, enriched cultural understanding, and improved business relations. Future international cooperation research can study the relationships between resettled refugees and the benefits to the host country and the country of origin.

5. Relating findings to other refugee populations in other parts of the world. While future research based on the findings in this dissertation are up to the judgement of those researchers, I believe these findings are, in several ways, applicable to other refugee populations in other countries. Foremost, they can be most helpful in understanding the lived experiences of other Syrian refugees in BC and other provinces in Canada, although new considerations may include geographic location, province- or city-specific government policies, social climate, attitudes toward multiculturalism, rural or urban settings, etc. in analysis. Findings may also be beneficial in understanding lived experiences of Syrian refugees in countries comparable to Canada, such as the United States or English speaking countries in Europe.

6. Sharing stories of adversity for other refugees. To any refugees and former refugees, the research has shown the ways other people achieve an increased sense of self, find a sense of purpose, and feel a sense of mastery through their adversity. One may find resilience in society,

interpersonal relationships, or within themselves, and the stories illustrated in this dissertation show the ways one may develop resilience when they feel they are carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders.

Appendix A: Interview Questions for Syrian Participants

Migration and settlement

1. What was your life like in Syria before the war?
2. What did you know about Canada before coming here?
3. How did you feel when you found out you could come to Canada?
4. Describe the process how you came to Canada.
5. What was the biggest culture shock?
6. How has been your experience learning English?
7. What are your biggest struggles about life in Canada?
8. Do you have any concerns about your mental, emotional, or physical health?
9. Do you feel you can participate in society?

Places in your town

1. How do you feel when you go out around town?
2. What do you do to feel comfortable at home?
3. Is there anywhere you feel unsafe or uncomfortable?
4. Where do you go to experience social life?
5. Where do you find Syrian culture?
6. How do you feel when you are in nature?
7. What are your favourite places to visit around town?
8. What do you do when you feel homesick?

Interpersonal and community relationships

1. Who are your closest friends in Canada, and why are these relationships important?

2. Describe your relationship with your neighbours.
3. Have you ever experienced discrimination by anyone in Canada?
4. What is missing in your relationships in Canada?
5. When and how often do you talk with your family in Syria (or another country)?
6. Are you part of any community groups?
7. How have you helped/been helped by other Syrians in Canada?
8. Describe any gender differences you notice in Canada.
9. What is your experience being a woman in Canada?

Self and identity

1. How do you preserve your Syrian identity?
2. How do you feel about the word 'refugee'?
3. How do you express yourself creatively?
4. What is the importance of religion in your life?
5. How has your personality changed since coming to Canada?
6. How has been your experience finding work? What professional skills can you offer?
7. What are your thoughts on Canadian citizenship?
8. Where do you feel you can call home right now?

Strengths and opportunities

1. How do you keep a positive attitude through difficult experiences?
2. In what ways is your life back to normal now?
3. What new life opportunities do you have in Canada?
4. What are your goals for the next five years?

5. Do you have any dreams to start a business?
6. How do you handle change in your life?
7. In what ways are you stronger having gone through displacement and resettlement?
8. What admirable qualities do you have? (Your partner?)

Conclusion

1. What would you do if the war in Syria ended soon?
2. What does a happy life look like in Canada?
3. In what ways are you proud to be Syrian?
4. What do you want Canadians to know about you and other Syrians?

Appendix B: Profile of Syrian Respondents

	Name	Gender	Age	Hometown in Syria	Previous Country of Asylum	Initial Refugee Status ¹	Time in Canada ²
1	Borak	M	Mid-40s	Dara'a	Jordan	GAR	2 yr 6 mo
2	Nana	F	Early-30s	Dara'a	Jordan	GAR	2 yr 6 mo
3	Samar*						
4	Miriam	F	Mid-20s	Dara'a	Egypt	GAR	1 yr 6 mo
5	Yusef	M	Mid-30s	Dara'a	Egypt	GAR	1 yr 6 mo
6	Victor	M	Mid-30s	Latakia	Turkey	GAR	1 yr 10 mo
7	Amer	M	Mid-20s	Dara'a	Jordan	GAR	1 yr 3 mo
8	Haya	F	Late-20s	Dara'a	Jordan	GAR	1 yr 3 mo
9	Najila	F	Early-40s	Homs	Jordan	BVOR	1 yr 2 mo
10	Elmira	F	Early-20s	Homs	Jordan	BVOR	1 yr 2 mo
11	Miran	M	Late-30s	Damascus	Egypt	GAR	1 yr 6 mo
12	Qamar	F	Mid-30s	Dara'a	Egypt	GAR	1 yr 6 mo
13	Rosarita	F	Mid-40s	Dara'a	Jordan	GAR	2 yr 6 mo
14	Areej	F	Late teens	Dara'a	Jordan	GAR	2 yr 6 mo
15	Ahmad	M	Late teens	Dara'a	Jordan	GAR	2 yr 6 mo
16	Rayya	F	Mid-30s	Aleppo	Lebanon	PSR	2 yr 7 mo
17	Marten	F	Mid-50s	Aleppo	Lebanon	PSR	2 yr 7 mo
18	Salah	M	Early-20s	Latakia	Lebanon/Jordan	PSR	2 yr 8 mo
19	Asha	F	Late-30s	Idlib	Lebanon	BVOR	1 yr 5 mo
20	Tarek	M	Late-30s	Damascus	Libya/Egypt	GAR	1 yr 10 mo
21	Aleia	F	Mid-40s	Damascus	Libya/Egypt	GAR	1 yr 10 mo
22	Safiya	F	Late-20s	Latakia	Lebanon	PSR	2 yr 9 mo
23	Mir	F	Late-30s	Homs	Jordan	GAR	2 yr 8 mo
24	Aimar	M	Late-40s	Homs	Jordan	GAR	2 yr 8 mo
25	Abbas	M	Late teens	Homs	Jordan	GAR	2 yr 8 mo
26	Hamza	M	Late teens	Homs	Jordan	GAR	2 yr 8 mo

¹ GAR: government-assisted refugee; PSR: privately sponsored refugee; BVOR: blended visa office referred

² At the time of interview

* One participant requested to use their real name. Identifying information has been omitted.

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