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Building Collective Resilience: The Role of Refugee Informal Support Networks

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Building Collective Resilience:

The Role of Refugee Informal Support Networks

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Abstract

With the arrival of 52,000 Syrian refugees to Canada in recent years and the challenges in adapting to their new life, a better understanding of informal support networks used by refugees will help enlighten governments and policy-makers regarding integration. This paper explores the different informal interpersonal relationships experienced by Syrian refugees in British Columbia and the roles each plays in building collective resilience. Fieldwork was conducted over three months in British Columbia and included semi-structured interviews with 26 former Syrian refugees and eight interviews with non-refugees. The research found six avenues of informal support that provide different functional benefits to former refugees and improve emotional well-being, cultural adjustment, and integration. The findings also show how experiences of trauma bond people into a shared group identity and how this further incites altruism and collective assistance, thus strengthening the social group and building collective resilience. However, the findings also reveal that relying on any one informal support systems too much can be detrimental to psychological well-being and slow integration. The implications of former refugees' connections with informal support networks are discussed.

Keywords: Refugee Resettlement, Collective Resilience, Shared Identity

1. Introduction

The Syrian Civil War started during the Arab Spring protests in March 2011. By the summer of 2012, Syria was in a full-scale civil war and had become a battleground for convoluted proxy wars. Depopulation strategies have caused large-scale displacement and resulted in the largest humanitarian crisis since World War II. Now in the country's seventh year of war at the time of writing, there have been more than 465,000 fatalities, more than a million people injured, and more than half of Syria's prewar population of over 22 million displaced from their homes. As of April 2018, 13.5 million people are in need inside Syria, and most of the 5.6 million people who have fled are hosted in

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neighbouring countries with fading hope to return home (UNHCR 2018). About 1 million have fled to Europe, and another 100,000 are outside Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, predominantly in North America (Connor 2018).

Since late 2015, Canada has committed to permanently resettling thousands of displaced Syrians. As of February 2018, and in cooperation with private sponsors, NGOs, and local governments, nearly 52,000 Syrians have resettled in Canada—4,400 of whom have arrived in communities throughout BC (ISSofBC 2018). Once in Canada, Syrians are legal permanent residents and receive one year of income and living assistance from the government, private sponsors, or a combination of both. Other formal support includes helping refugees know their settlement rights, understanding life in Canada, receiving language training, searching for work, accessing childcare, taking public transportation, accessing translation facilities, finding resources for people with disabilities, and receiving counseling if needed. All refugees may access these settlement services until they become Canadian citizens, which becomes possible three years after arrival in Canada.

Besides formal support services, Syrians make use of numerous available informal support networks and resources as they reconstruct their lives. Collective resilience is the process of building a community that allows more people to benefit and gain support from each other (Likita 2018). This paper uses a collective resilience framework and identifies six themes linked to building resilience among refugees: 1) family members, 2) other former Syrian refugees, 3) Arab immigrants and Canadian citizens of Arab ethnicity, 4) ethnically diverse immigrants, 5) sponsors and volunteers, and 6) Canadian-born citizens. Findings suggest that developing resilience via informal support networks is critical for constructing a new life after displacement. This paper contributes to studies on Syrian refugee resettlement in Canada and resilience by providing an analysis of the informal support networks accessed by former Syrian refugees. It notes implications for future refugee resettlement.

1.1. Literature Review

Resilience is “the ability to withstand and rebound from serious life challenges” (Walsh 2015: 4); and it as part of a normal and healthy response to adversity, rather than previous deficit models of trauma and stress (Windle 2011). Resilience is an adaptive response when faced with severe stress or challenging circumstances, and which ultimately leads to recovery (Masten et al. 2006). There is a growing interest in the positive changes following trauma and the consideration that there is value in suffering (Linley 2003). Syrians in Canada face challenges relating to their physical health (Hansen, Maidment, & Ahmad 2016), education inclusion (Brewer 2016), and housing stability (Oudshoorn,

Benbow, & Meyer 2019); yet Wong and Yohani (2016) indicate that refugees in Canada can still develop resilience. Developing resilience in response to stressors depends on several factors, for example, personal factors, like optimism (Lepore & Revenson 2006), interpersonal factors, like a place to safely disclose feelings (Cohen 1988), and environmental factors, like strong identity connections to physical places (Boğaç 2009). Currently there is no research on the ways Syrian refugees in Canada develop collective resilience during the early years of resettlement and integration.

Resilience is also positively related to well-being (Sagone & De Caroli 2014), and Tajfel and Turner (1979) see mutual support and shared social identity among refugees as having many positive outcomes for well-being (Alfadhli & Drury 2018). Other studies on identity transition, i.e. loss of social identity, negatively affect well-being (Praharso, Tear, & Cruwys 2017). Resilience suggests recovery, resistance, and reconfiguration (Lepore & Revenson 2006), and communities that provide supportive and safe places are a vital resource in times of adversity. The ability to safely disclose feelings and concerns with supportive individuals is a resilience strategy that allows the affected persons to process the event and work through emotional issues, thereby improving mental health and well-being (Cohen 1988). Different informal networks of people provide various types of support and identification, such as family (Walsh 1996) and a strong social network of friends (Baumeister et. al 2013), and Canada's private sponsorship system (Hynie et. al 2019). Qualitative research on the subjective experiences of Syrians in developing collective resilience through various informal support networks has not yet been explored. Refugee narratives are often absent from contemporary histories, yet they play a huge role in national histories (Marfleet 2018). While research on the challenges refugees face is unquestionably important, it is also necessary to understand the positive ways people are adapting to their new life and finding routes of belonging and social identification.

Therefore, this paper seeks to uncover the various avenues of collective resilience among Syrian refugees via informal support networks. It answers the research question, what are the roles of various interpersonal relationship networks among refugees?

1.2. Limitations

Much of the research on collective resilience is based on emergencies, such as mass shootings, bombings, and other national security issues (e.g., Drury 2009; Drury, Cocking and Reicher 2009). In these studies, collective resilience mainly looks at *crowds* of people as providing mutual support and coordination to cope with the psychological consequence of emergencies. Former Syrian refugees exhibit different characteristics in that their 'emergency' has lasted for several years and includes

times of relative calm and temporary living conditions. Still, former refugees have pre-existing social bonds, shared identity, shared experiences, and informal networks of support on which they can rely. Thus, the fact that former refugees find each other in Canada, support each other, and understand each other is understood as collective resilience. Additionally, in choosing to focus on the positive outcomes of resettlement rather than viewing refugees as victims of trauma and depression, there is a risk of a positivity bias (Mezulis et. al 2004). To counter this, I have attempted to bring attention to areas where former refugees are still lacking support to illustrate that collective resilience is an ongoing process with setbacks and obstacles that are unique to everyone.

2. Research Method

2.1. Process and Interview

This research was qualitative and sought to find themes in the subjective experiences of former Syrian refugees. The intent was to highlight the voices of refugees so a deep understanding can be found (Weaver & Olsen 2006). The goal of the research was to create transferable knowledge that can build thought and understanding (Appleton & King 1997). Data was coded for themes and categories and is part of a larger study on Syrian refugee resilience.

As of February 2018, 4,400 Syrians had resettled in communities throughout BC (ISSofBC 2018). Fieldwork for this paper took place over three months from August to October 2018 in Metro Vancouver. Primary data came from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 26 former Syrian refugees and eight non-refugees in BC. Participants were recruited via snowball sampling following cold-emailing non-profit, religious organizations, and family friends. Semi-structured interviews were used for this research, as this allowed participants to describe their experiences in detail while allowing follow-up questions to arise organically. Participants were asked to describe their lives in Syria before the war, thoughts on coming to Canada, experiences around their town, family life, community life, daily struggles, concerns about their mental and physical health, hobbies and pastimes, thoughts on being a refugee, and plans for their future. Interviews lasted between 60 minutes to two hours. Eleven interviews were conducted in English, and the remaining fifteen were in Arabic with the help of an interpreter. Interviews were voice recorded with participants' permission and transcribed by the researcher; they were not made available to anyone else.

2.2. Participants

Interviews with 26 former Syrian refugees took place in Surrey, Burnaby, Vancouver, and Abbotsford, often in the participants' homes. Participants were 11 men and 15 women with an age range of late teens to mid-50s with an average age of 33 years old. The average time in Canada at the time of the interview was 24 months; the shortest time was one year two months, and the longest time was two years eight months. Eighteen people came to Canada as government-assisted refugees, four as privately sponsored, and four as blended-visa office referred. Eleven interviews were conducted in English and 15 were in Arabic with the assistance of a translator. An additional 8 interviews were conducted with non-refugees, including government workers, a long-term Syrian immigrant, non-profit workers, a spouse, and a former volunteer.

2.3. Analysis

The research was qualitative and guided by literature on resilience following adversity as well as the experiences of refugee resettlement. Research questions were drafted based on this literature and the current refugee crisis. The analysis was progressive and followed a thematic analysis approach (Nowell et al. 2017). It was flexible and inductive and allowed themes to emerge from the data naturally. For example, relationships with non-Syrian immigrants were not originally considered, but discussions with participants revealed that this was a critical interpersonal relationship network for former Syrian refugees.

2.4. Ethics Statement

Participants were informed of the purpose, nature, and extent of the research at the beginning of the interview verbally (in English by myself and in Arabic through an interpreter) and written, again in both English and Arabic. Participants were free not to answer any questions if they did not feel comfortable; they were also free to end the interview at any time. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

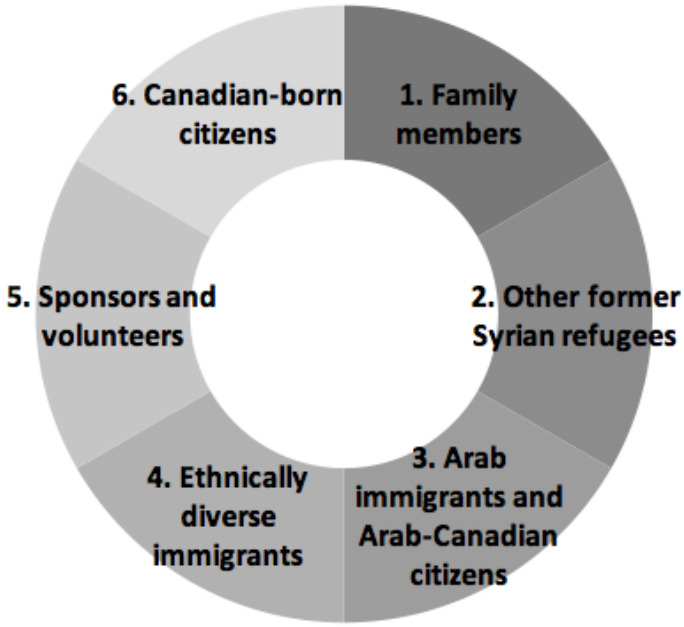
3. Findings

Informal support networks serve multiple purposes for refugees and can be accessed to address different needs. Participants in this study were aware of the benefits to be gained from forming connections with various people and communities. This research discovered six distinct informal

support networks (Figure 1) that played significant roles in building collective resilience in former Syrian refugees. The six networks were (1) family members, (2) other Syrian refugees, (3) Arab immigrants and Canadian citizens of Arab ethnicity, (4) ethnically diverse immigrants, (5) sponsors and volunteers, and (6) Canadian-born citizens. Sponsors and volunteers may be considered a formal support network since these people had to apply and be selected by local governments to assist refugees on arrival in Canada. However, interviews with participants revealed that these relationships occasionally turned into lasting friendships and continued long after the agreement set by the government.

This analysis will examine how Syrians turn these informal networks into meaningful relationships of support. It should be noted that not all respondents had access to each of these networks. For instance, one single woman came to Canada without any other family members, people initially sent to rural towns did not always have contact with other Syrians or Arabs, and not all sponsor or volunteer relationships turned out to be advantageous for resettlement.

Figure 1 Six Informal Support Networks Accessed by Former Syrian Refugees



Note: Not all respondents had access to each of these categories.
Source: Created based on interview answers and themes within community.

3.1. Family Members

Familial support is essential for developing resilience (Sossou et. al 2008). All except one participant in this study came to Canada with other family members. The family is a source of

resilience in times of stress (Walsh 2015), and close family relationships strengthened the family unit and the individual. For most participants, their experiences fleeing Syria and coming to Canada was supported by the family out of necessity. The family provides much-needed love and emotional support as participants deal with loss, transition, and novelty. One woman described the emotional support between her mother, brother, and herself and how they build each other up:

> "We are working really hard on our English, and we're supportive of each other. I think that's how we stick together as a family. It's what helps us the most to get through the challenges. We are determined. We're really strong, emotionally."
> (Extract 1, Participant 14, female, late teens)

She also explains the support her mother gives to her and her brother and how much it hurts when the family is separated for an extended period:

> "[My mother] is really supportive…She raised us and taught us how to be independent…[But] we miss each other so much when someone is not around for a long time."
> (Extract 2, Participant 14, female, late teens)

Another woman expressed how her husband has supported her emotionally:

> "When we arrived, I was very stressed and sad during the first year. He helped with my pregnancy, and he was with me all the time and helped in the house."
> (Extract 3, Participant 4, female, mid-20s)

Additional ways people appreciated emotional support from family members was through positivity and patience. Many participants (especially mothers) said they acted positive, even when they did not feel it, for the sake of their family. These women felt it was their duty to make sure their family is positive. For instance:

> "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."

(Extract 4, Participant 16, female, mid-30s)

One woman stated that she wanted to make her family feel safe, even when she was afraid:

> "I was really scared and afraid, but I acted strong and patient for my kids and husband. I don't show them that I'm scared or afraid, but it was very difficult."
>
> (Extract 5, Participant 9, female, early-40s)

Not everyone could reach out to family in Canada though. For example, a single woman came to Canada without any other family members. One may expect that coming to a foreign country alone to live permanently would be traumatic, but this woman had a positive attitude and did not express deep sorrow that her family was still in Syria. While she missed them, and hoped they were safe, she found her strength in God and was comforted knowing that He had guided her to Canada and was keeping her safe. Most others had their immediate family members with them in Canada, though one family's adult children were scattered around Canada, Europe, and the Middle East. The family members in Canada had each other to lean on, and they did not fear for the others' safety; still they were seeking ways to be reunited in Canada. The family is a natural informal source of resilience, and the examples above illustrate the appreciation people feel for their family's support. Family members continue to pull each other through challenges and encourage each other to strive for a positive future.

3.2. Other Former Syrian Refugees

Another meaningful informal network of supportive relationships was between other former Syrian refugees. Schweitzer and colleagues (2007) note that refugees use their own ethnic community as a coping strategy while they adjust to a new life. Former refugees grew up in the same country, shared the same culture, and experienced the similar adversity of having to flee Syria. Cultural compatibility, or cultural dissonance, is the degree of similarity or dissimilarity between the society of origin and the host society; and more considerable differences in language, religion, gender norms, and age hierarchies, for example, result in less positive adaptation (Berry 1997). Kunz (1981: 46) argues, "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." Since Canada and Syria share very few cultural similarities, establishing informal relationship networks with other former Syrian refugees helps to form social bonds and ease the burden each person carries. It is especially important to make friends with other Syrians because personal happiness benefits from a social network and suffers in isolation (Baumeister et. al, 2013). As one man elaborated:

> "My closest friend is Yaman, and another is named Zafar—Syrian. They feel my problems. I see Yaman 29 times a month—almost every day…They support me and talk about my problems."
> (Extract 7, Participant 6, male, early-30s)

Another woman describes this feeling of shared identity and everyday experience and how they help her during difficult times:

> "I got to meet some two, three people in the school, and I feel very close to them. [They are from] the same city in Syria…Because they are living the same situation and have left their country, when we need something or need some help, we can call them, and we know they will help. And [the same for] them whenever they call. We understand each other."
> (Extract 9, Participant 21, female, mid-40s)

Many people mentioned they had a very active social life in Syria, and this was missing in Canada. People had to put in more effort to forge deep relationships with Syrian, but it was worth the effort to build these relationships because they provided emotional support in ways other interpersonal relationships could not.

Especially poignant was the question of shared language, and depending on other Syrians for language services was critical. Many participants spoke little or no English upon arrival and had to rely on people to help them. One woman said:

> "I never help anyone because the language. I can't. But a lot of Syrians helped me with translations. They went with me to the doctor, fill out paper, go somewhere, teach me where to go."
> (Extract 10, Participant 9, female, early-40s)

While it is possible to ask other Arabic-speaking people to help with translation (and many people did), receiving this support from other former Syrian refugees helped to strengthen the collective resilience of Syrians in BC while inciting a desire to help in return. Their shared identity and experiences coming to Canada made it easier to confide, ask for help, disclose personal information, and build resilience in each other without feeling judged or criticized.

3.3. Arab Immigrants and Canadian Citizens of Arab Ethnicity

Besides other former Syrian refugees, another group of people with elements of shared identity is Arabic-speaking immigrants and Canadian citizens of Arab ethnicity. As with other Syrians, many Arab people have similar cultures, speak Arabic, and can help Syrians adjust to their new lives in Canada. Hutchinson and Dorsett (2012) recognises language as one of the key barriers that interfere with refugees' resilience. Thus, the Arab community helps bridge the gap of cultural dissimilarity between Syria and Canada. Participant 20 (male, late-30s) said that most of his friends are Arab, and Participant 15 (male, late teens) also stated his closest friends are other Arab men his age. Additional ways people network with the Arab community is by going to Arab grocery stores and mosques. Many people watch movies in Arabic and keep up with Arab news to a feel a sense of nostalgia and stay connected to the Middle East.

However, there are also downsides to interacting mainly with other Arab people. For those who do not interact with people outside the informal Arab community, integration can be difficult. Shakespeare-Finch and Wickham (2009) argue that people feel disadvantaged and powerless when they are not able to express themselves. One woman expressed that her low level of English made her feel like a baby, while another woman said:

> "They are shy to connect or speak [English]. They don't have Canadian people or people who can speak English with them. They just keep to themselves with Arab society, and all the people they know speak Arabic. They feel it is hard."
> (Extract 12, Participant 2, female, early-30s)

This woman understands that while it is suitable for Syrians to keep their language and connect with others in Arabic, this can also hinder their adjustment to life in Canada if they rely on it too much. Reedy (2007) found that young refugees learn the local language much quick than adults, which I observed for most families. Observations with families revealed one family who had a low level of English, even among the oldest children. The parents' English was also low, and the family had many problems with housing, work, and income that they struggled to solve. Likewise, Syrian refugee studies in Germany also highlight that lack of fluency in the local language is a barrier to integration and prevents full access to the health care system (Green 2017). A man who worked for the BC government and a woman working in a religious organization mentioned that language is a severe barrier to integration in Canada:

> "[The language] is one of the biggest problems that is facing them, especially for finding a job and having a life here in Canada."
> (Extract 13, BC government worker, male, Jordan)

> "A strong community is good because it helps support members of a community…[But] strong community and a large community becomes a detriment when people are put in silos…There are people who, because that's their world, have never had to learn English, so that's not good."
> (Extract 14, Religious organization worker, female, Kenya)

Being part of the local Arab community is positive for Syrians, but can also be an obstacle to integration if relied on too much. It is a way for Syrians to find elements of culture, food, language, and support that they may be missing, but when it prevents them from interacting with the broader Canadian society, it can do more harm than good. There is a delicate balance of depending on the informal Arab community for building resilience without completely shutting oneself off from everything outside the Arab population in British Columbia.

At the same time, for those respondents who initially resettled in rural towns with no Arab community, it was difficult to make friends and feel a sense of belonging. An interview with a resettlement worker talked about one woman who was so desperate to move to Vancouver and be around other Arab people that she was threatening to take her own life. And another interview with a young Syrian woman revealed that she had a negative attitude and was depressed and unhappy until she moved to Vancouver and could be near people with whom she felt a closer connection. While there may be benefits to not being around others who can speak Arabic (i.e., English immersion), it seems beneficial for most people to be near people of the same language and culture, especially during the first years of resettlement.

3.4. Ethnically Diverse Immigrants

The presence of a strong and extensive social support network can help refugees overcome isolation, low language ability, cultural knowledge, and knowledge of employment information (Behnia 2012). Participants were astonished when they came to Canada and realized how diverse and multicultural the people are. Besides other Syrians and Arab people, they had the chance to meet people from around the world and develop friendships with people they would never have imagined. Ethnically diverse immigrants are a type of informal support system that plays a different role than

the networks mentioned previously. Ethnically diverse immigrants do not speak Arabic or share the same culture with Syria, but they still play an essential role in forming meaningful social groups for Syrians.

Meeting and making friends with ethnically diverse immigrants opened the minds of Syrians. It increases compassion and expands their worldview. As one young woman said about her new friendships:

> "In Syria, we are all similar in some way. We all have the same religion; we understand the 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. People are different."
>
> (Extract 15, Participant 14, female, late teens)

An older man also appreciated the diversity in Canada and that everybody seemed to get along with each other with kindness and respect:

> "It's nice to have people from all around the world, and nobody is teasing each other. They're not judging each other on who they are. That's what makes it good…Nobody judges you. You're just welcomed."
>
> (Extract 16, Participant 24, male, late-40s)

A married couple also described their relationship with the neighbours in their building as such:

> P1: "Also, we have friends from Kazakhstan."
>
> P2: "We have all the nationalities from all 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, Turkish, also we practice English with them. Good relationships."
>
> (Extract 17, Participant 1, male, mid-40s; Participant 2, female, early-30s)

Informal support networks with ethnically diverse immigrants create a community of understanding and help strengthen Syrians. Without having to fall back on Arabic, they can easily connect with a group of people who are also adjusting to life in Canada. It may be easier for them to

connect with other newcomers than with Canada-born citizens because with other immigrants they share the similar experience of living in a different culture. Shared social communities of diverse people let Syrians adjust to their life at a comfortable pace while bringing them closer together and creating a sense of community and belonging.

3.5. Sponsors and Volunteers

Sponsor and volunteers are people who applied to the Canadian and BC governments to be part of the Syrian refugee resettlement initiative. Volunteers are assigned to help government-assisted refugees find jobs, learn about Canadian society, help with language and communication, expand their social networks, and offer emotional, practical, and informational support (e.g., Behnia 2012; Behnia 2007). An additional role of sponsors is to provide financial support, housing, and living assistance, including language training and household goods to those they are sponsoring (Indra 1993). Thus, sponsors and volunteers can be considered a formal network since they had to go through formal procedures to be permitted to help. However, it was not uncommon for sponsors and volunteers to form meaningful and lasting friendships with Syrian families and maintain these friendships long after their official duties have been fulfilled. Refugees and other immigrants who meet with volunteers often acquire the language better, find work sooner, have more friends, receive less government funding, and are more optimistic (e.g. Employment and Immigration Canada 1986; Lanphier 1993). For this reason, sponsors and volunteers are considered as informal support networks when they have completed their assignments and kept in touch with the Syrian families they assisted. One man said of his experience as a volunteer:

> "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."
> (Extract 18, Volunteer, male, Canada)

And the family who he volunteered with said about him:

> P1: "He chose my family and just volunteered six months and then finished. But he stayed with us. Two years and six months with us."
> P2: "He visits us, and we visit him. We go outside together. If I want help to go to a specialist doctor, he can go with me…My kids love him. They know all his family—his mother, his

> sister, his brother, and they invite us over a lot. For example, on Thanksgiving or on Christmas we went there."
> (Extract 19, Participant 2, female, early-30s; Participant 1, male, mid-40s)

What is unique about sponsors and volunteers is that they have decided to dedicate time to helping families establish themselves. They helped set up bank accounts, take them to doctor's appointments, assist with paperwork and setting up houses, and more. Sponsors give one-on-one attention and care and love to a family. This close relationship brings both sides together and helps build collective resilience in Syrians because they can rely on someone always being there to help and support them:

> "In my church, my sponsor became very close friends with me. They started to visit me as a family, not just like a sponsorship. This is the third year, and we are still more than friends—family. We never ever feel alone here. They are always with us."
> (Extract 20, Participant 16, female, mid-30s)

It was common for participants to refer to members of their sponsor family as their "Canadian sister" or "Canadian mom." Such close, supportive relationships with people who understand how to live in Canada makes life for Syrians easier. Not only do former refugees have support in establishing their presence, but they also have emotional support and close attention that comes with friendship. In cases where sponsors and volunteers become like an adopted family, Syrians can be strengthened and feel like they are quickly becoming active members of society, which encourages them and builds resilience even during painful adjustment periods.

Not everyone had access to volunteers and sponsors as a source of informal support. Those who came as government-assisted refugees were not sponsored; and not everyone had a volunteer assigned to them. Those who did have a volunteer, the relationship did not always develop into a friendship, either due to the volunteer or to the refugee family. For instance, when speaking to a former volunteer, he mentioned a Canadian woman who was volunteering with him. She had tattoos and wore tank tops, and her Syrian family did not accept her. This was disheartening for the woman because she had hoped to help a new family get settled, but they had rejected her. In Behnia's (2012) study on the motivations of people who volunteer to help refugees, people volunteer because they believe they will help produce positive results and that their volunteer work will be effective to those they help. However, as the story illustrates, although volunteer relationships have the potential to turn into

meaningful support systems and friendships, it does not always turn out that way, in some cases because of the refugee family who is the recipient of volunteering.

3.6. Canadian-Born Citizens

The final meaningful informal support network for former Syrian refugees is Canadian-born citizens, excluding volunteers and sponsors. This is perhaps the most challenging group of people with whom to form meaningful relationships for newcomers because they are socially, linguistically, and culturally the least similar and not easily accessible. Neighbours, co-workers, employers, and other community members were also one of the latest networks of support to be established and usually happened as resettlement continued (Lamba and Krahn 2003). However, when Syrians interact closely with Canadian-born citizens, there is the potential for greater integration into Canadian society, improved language learning, and better cultural adjustment. A few ways former Syrian refugees form relationships with Canadian-born citizens include religious organizations, public schools, schools, and volunteer activities. One woman, who spoke near-perfect English, said her biggest struggle in Canada was making friends since she was initially placed in a small rural town:

> "For two years, I didn't have anyone. Especially where it snowed a lot, and if you don't have a community, you just stay your house…Even though people are so nice, it's a smaller city, so finding friends."
> Extract 21, (Participant 22, female, mid-20s)

When asked who her closest friends are now, she replied:

> "I think this group here [a group of Canadian women she volunteers with]—they're my closest friends. I feel very accepted and welcomed by them, and I feel it's a safe place for me to grow in different ways. I feel I can share my hard things and happy moments."
> (Extract 22, Participant 22, female, mid-20s)

Meaningful relationships with Canadian-born citizens also help Syrians feel at home and that they belong in Canada. As others mentioned, it can feel very lonely in Canada, especially when they cannot speak English well and struggle to meet people. Positive relationships with Canadian-born citizens help to make Syrians feel welcomed in Canada and that they are free to call Canada 'home':

P24: “We feel [at home] already.”

P26: “Because when we came here, we were welcomed. Everyone—school, government. And when we came, we just stayed in the hotel—everywhere.”

P23: “Wherever you go, you feel you’re welcomed. You don’t feel that you left your country behind and you came here as a refugee. Because people treat you as who you are. They don’t say, ‘you’re a refugee,’ ‘What’s your background?’ They don’t care about these things. They’re not racist. That makes it good.”

(Extract 23, Participant 24, male, late-40s; Participant 26, male, late teens; Participant 23, female, late-30s)

When former Syrian refugees establish meaningful relationships with Canadian-born citizens, they experience strengthened attachment to Canada and improved emotional well-being. In the above extract, one of the participant was a young man in the final years of high school. He had adjusted well to life in Canada, could speak English nearly fluently, and had made many friends at school. On the other hand, his father had health issues that prevented him from working, and his mother was busy taking care of the home. This put the two boys in an unofficial position as translators and main source of contact between their parents and the nuances of Canadian society. This again illustrates the role of family as a source of support, but it also leaves the parents vulnerable when the boys grow up and move away to start their own life if their parents have not become self-sufficient by then.

4. Discussion

This research illustrates how informal support networks play critical roles in building collective resilience in refugees. It supports other research which “portrays refugees as highly active agents in their own resettlement” and the importance of extensive social networks in successful resettlement (Lamba and Krahn 2003). It expands on this by illustrating the diversity of informal networks and the functions of support. Upon initial arrival, formal systems (i.e., government services) provide refugees with practical tools and resources to begin rebuilding their lives. However, formal networks do not provide the same level of emotional support, identity, and understanding that occurs organically in informal networks. Informal networks help refugees make sense of the services and resources offered by formal networks as friends help friends of friends with translations, understanding the nuances of Canadian society, and connecting newcomers with those more established in Canada.

The results support other research which highlight family as an important source of immediate support as well as structural ties to the new society (Walsh 1996; Gold 1993). With many informal

supportive networks, such as other Syrians and Arabs, there is an element of shared identity and shared experience, which makes it easier to be open and trusting of one another. Shared ethnic identity and group solidarity is crucial, and ethnic groups function in similar ways as family networks, providing a range of benefits from employment to marital prospects (e.g., Portes and Bach 1985; Lamba and Krahn 2003). Like shared ethnic groups, other immigrants provide a sense of belonging and function as ties to the new society. Sponsors, volunteers, and other Canadian-born citizens provide benefits, such as financial assistance, housing, friendship, emotional support, nuanced integration into Canada. Informal support networks serve as a social bond between communities and offer mutual support as those who have been helped then help others, thus building collective resilience. This research benefits the literature on refugees by providing qualitative, personal stories, and subjective experiences that expose the richness of the lives of former Syrian refugees and highlights their strength to thrive after resettlement.

4.1. Limitations

This study was intended to explore the lived experiences of informal support networks among former Syrian refugees in BC. Experiences of former Syrian refugees in Canada may differ from province to province, especially in Quebec; and in urban and rural settings may differ. Suggestions for future studies include expanding areas of research to other provinces, city settings, or language environments. This study only looked at the informal networks accessed by former Syrian refugees. Further research should look at the informal support networks for refugees in general as well as those unique to specific areas, for example, the Congo or Iraq. A more general study could be further extrapolated to other western countries; while studies focused on certain refugee communities in Canada would bring attention to the specific needs, i.e., language support, gender integration, cultural background, and previous trauma, that may ease integration in Canadian. Furthermore, resilience develops over time, so there is a need for longitudinal studies to determine how people fare years and decades after resettlement.

4.2. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to demonstrate the importance of informal support networks accessed by former Syrian refugees in BC. To recap the scope of informal support networks, 1) family provides love and gratitude: 2) other former Syrian refugees allow a safe place to disclose feelings and provide emotional support through shared experiences; 3) the broader Arab community is a place to find shared identity through language and culture; 4) ethnically diverse immigrants allow Syrians

to more easily integrate into Canada's diversity; 5) sponsors and volunteers offer immediate contact with the English language and provide valuable support in getting settled in Canadian society; and 6) Canadian-born citizens provide valuable insight into everyday Canadian life. The capacities of informal support networks among refugee communities to positively impact resettlement are boundless, and official support systems should not disregard their significance and role in easing resettlement and integration of former refugees.

4.3. Recommendations

1. The Canadian governments and relocation services should not intentionally relocate families to rural areas where they will be knowingly isolated from other Syrians and Arabs, as these relationships provide necessary emotional support. If people are transferred to rural areas out of necessity (for example, the place with a sponsor family available), they should be carefully observed and heard if they say they are unhappy and struggling in isolation.

2. Adult women may find it difficult to interact with people outside of their home due to culturally held gender expectations and domestic responsibilities. At the same time, they are extremely aware of their increased gender equality and rights in Canada. Local governments and organisations should provide more opportunities for women to meet, such as focused English classes, providing babysitting services, career training, or empowerment circles, which would give them greater access to informal support networks like Canadian-born citizens, non-Arab immigrants, and even other Syrians.

3. Efforts should be made by researchers to show the lived experiences, relatable virtues 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 profit the diversity of Canada and add a rich new dimension to the country's demographic landscape. This should help extinguish any apprehension of accepting such a large group of refugees and highlight our similar hopes and desires for a better life.

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