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Understanding waiting and wellbeing through liminal experiences of Syrian refugees

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Abstract

Using the anthropological concept of liminality, this paper describes an ethnographic study examining the wellbeing of Syrian refugees as they recount narratives of forced displacement and resettlement. The author observed 37 Syrian participants who had been relocated to Austin, Texas, United States, and interviewed 15 Syrian participants about their migration experiences. Through observation, interviews, and field notes, the author examines the refugees' ideas of wellbeing during periods of peace, war and displacement, and resettlement. Throughout the displacement journey, Syrian refugees implemented resilience tactics to escape instances of waiting in order to reach their desired destination—resettlement.

Keywords: forced migration; refugees; wellbeing; resilience; liminality.

Introduction

This article identifies aspects of wellbeing through Syrian refugees' histories of forced migration due to the revolution that transformed into the Syrian civil war in 2011. I focus on forced migration, wellbeing, and resilience as defining factors in the experiences of my research participants. I contextualize these concepts within instances of waiting, or being between flight and resettlement, since this concept represents a space where refugees experienced increased changes in their welfare and development of resilience.

Ideas of wellbeing can focus on *health equity* (Panter-Brick et al., 2014), *psychosocial health* (El-Shaarawi, 2015), or *happiness* (Fischer, 2014). I operationalize wellbeing through Mathews and Izquierdo's (2009) understanding, noting that wellbeing bears a degree of commonality across different groups. Alongside universal commonalities, wellbeing is experienced individually and compared interpersonally and interculturally. It is experienced individually, but also shared and mutually constructed. I identify resilience as the different ways individuals or groups overcome and grow through hardship using individual and cooperative skills and strengths (Panter-Brick et al., 2017).

Although the relevance of wellbeing evolved during the refugees' experiences, it was particularly evident during instances of waiting. Waiting is situated in a particular time and space, which can influence identity and wellbeing (Lennartsson, 2007). I define waiting as a transitory period of liminality, encompassing ambivalence in time and space, as well as a state of in-betweenness (Sutton et al., 2011; Malkki, 1995b; Turton, 2004; Beneduce, 2008; Eyles & Dam, 2012; El-Shaarawi, 2015; Sigantoria, 2016). Initially, liminality marked a transitional stage in rites

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of passage ceremonies where individuals are separated from their group, leading to a 'liminal stage' involving performance or trial, and then reintegration back into society as transformed persons (Turner, 1969). Building on his definition, social scientists extended liminality to become a reference for refugees living in 'limbo' (Turton, 2004). Within a liminal existence, refugees or migrants experience living in a space of uncertainty or in limbo (Malkki, 1995b; Turton, 2004). In this context, liminal waiting is described as a transitory and transformative space full of despair, but also hope (Sutton et al., 2011). Since the war in Syria, Syrian refugees experienced many periods of waiting during their forced migration journey and resettlement. I highlight these periods to understand their wellbeing and development of resilient coping strategies.

Background

The uprising against the Syrian regime occurred in 2011 following the Arab Spring protests that took place in Egypt and Tunisia the previous year (Ismail, 2011). The protests in Syria began in the city of Daraa after a handful of children were arrested and treated inhumanely by Syrian security forces for spraying graffiti on their school wall calling for the ousting of President Bashar Al Assad. This action sparked outrage in the community and led to a series of protests that spread to other cities in Syria (Ismail, 2011). Peaceful protests were met with violence and deadly force from the Syrian regime (Ismail, 2011; Ibrahim, 2017). The revolution transformed into a civil war as rebel groups coalesced to counteract the regime's armed responses. With increasing violence and war, estimates showed that by 2016 death tolls were near 400,000 people (Ibrahim, 2017). It was also estimated that 6.5 million Syrians were internally displaced within Syria, 4.8 million were registered as refugees who had fled and were living outside Syrian borders, and 4.4 million remained trapped under siege in Syria (Ibrahim, 2017).

The large waves of forced migration became known as the Syrian Refugee Crisis. Since 2011, displaced Syrians sought refuge in Arab and European countries, as well as Canada and the United States. Many experienced long periods of waiting during their journey to refuge after the uprising (Koca, 2016). After terrorist attacks in the Middle East and Europe, many countries adopted stricter measures on refugees coming from a region invaded by the Islamic States of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The United States implemented strict security screening procedures for refugees that included extensive background checks, in-depth interviews, and health and security checks (Welsh, 2015).

Globally, negative media portrayals and the policies implemented in several countries responding to the refugee crisis, as well as, increased negative perceptions of refugees coming from Middle Eastern or Muslim backgrounds (Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2012). Due to the perception of Syrian refugees being threatening, many forcibly displaced Syrians encountered instances of discrimination, economic exploitation, xenophobia, and health issues, all of which can lead to physical, social, and emotional problems (Koca, 2016). In spite of increased discrimination and vulnerabilities, refugees can also develop resilience and self-reliance capabilities in response to forced migration (Gabiam, 2016).

In order to understand refugees' forced migration journeys, I focused my research on a small community of Syrian refugees in Texas, United States in the spring of 2017. I chose this site to examine their experiences as they resettled in a state that withdrew from the Federal Resettlement Program due to state security concerns. This action did not halt the resettlement of Syrian refugees into Texas, but local aid organizations were expected to assume more responsibility for assisting refugees (Kennedy, 2016). In 2016, Texas resettled 912 Syrian refugees (Radford & Connor, 2016).



Although residents of Austin welcomed the Syrian refugees, the election of President Donald Trump corresponded with the rise of anti-Muslim and anti-refugee rhetoric (Whittaker, 2016).

During my interviews with Syrian families in Austin, some described experiences of their arduous journey to resettle in the United States and ongoing problems during the resettlement period regarding their wellbeing. Many struggled with financial security, access to jobs and healthcare, and the language and culture of the United States. These issues were common with newly-arrived migrants or refugees; however, the Syrian refugees' history of forced migration became an important aspect in understanding their wellbeing.

Since 2015, 41² families, mainly from Daraa, with a few from Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, and Idlib were resettled in Austin (personal communication with the Syrian American Refugee Aid [SARA], 2017). They consisted of core family units averaging around 5.3 individuals. Most families included about 4 children per family (personal communication with SARA, 2017). By March 2017, their time within the United States ranged from two months to two years. Similar to other migrant and refugee groups, the Syrian families were resettled in lower-rent apartment complexes in the northern part of Austin.

Methods

Developing relationships

During my time in Austin, I connected with SARA, a local nonprofit, which assisted Syrian refugees during the resettlement process. Through this organization, I established connections to the Syrian refugee community and was quickly welcomed due to my own Syrian background. I was born in Aleppo, Syria where I lived until I was ten years old. Therefore, my knowledge of the culture, religion, and language helped me connect with these newly resettled refugees with ease. My positionality as a Syrian Muslim woman and researcher impacted my research in several ways. The women were quite at ease with my presence while the men did not interact with me as much unless I met with them during family gatherings. Many of the Syrian refugees saw me as one of them, disregarding my researcher role. After spending a lot of time assisting the families with daily activities and translation, many started to call me “the daughter of all” in Arabic.

Procedure

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I engaged in participant observation during my time as a volunteer with SARA, as working as a volunteer with SARA placed me into the daily lived experiences of the refugee families. I interacted with the Syrian refugees daily and assisted them in translation, transportation, paperwork, and English learning. Additionally, I attended parties, festivals, and events hosted by the Syrian refugees, SARA, and local volunteers. Engaging with the refugees daily provided an intimate look at their experiences in the United States. I found the study participants through purposive and snowball sampling (Bernard, 2011). I recruited 37 (24 women and 13 men) Syrians for participant observation. As a participant observer, I accompanied and helped the refugees and their families in their daily activities. Also, I attended dinners and parties where I partook in food and event preparation and indulged in eating, translating, and dancing with the families and their guests.

Interviews

Of the 37 recruits, 15 (8 women and 7 men) were also interviewed individually.

² Initially 46 families were resettled, but five of them relocated to other states.



Semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit individual narratives on forced migration. These questions helped in understanding their experiences with wellbeing and resilience before resettling in the United States. Sample questions included, for example: Can you tell me about your experiences in the place(s) where you took refuge? Where did you take refuge and how long did you spend there? How would you define your wellbeing at that time? Interviews were conducted in Arabic, the informants' native tongue. Pseudonyms were used to maintain the refugees' privacy. Interviews took about one hour in duration.

Data Analysis

I translated and transcribed each interview into English before coding specific passages. Field notes supplemented and supported data gathered through interviews. Using a constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I translated and transcribed each interview and then coded specific passages to discern themes and sub-themes related to wellbeing and resilience. Trustworthiness and rigor of the results were achieved through triangulating my data using participant observation, interviews, and questionnaires.

Results

The Syrian refugees interviewed were initially uncertain of the meaning of wellbeing. When asked about their understanding of this concept, most struggled to provide a concrete definition. However, once they were asked about their experiences before the war, during forced migration, and resettlement, they began to construct their ideas of wellbeing. Below, I have included a description of four distinct temporal spaces in which narratives of wellbeing were experienced by the Syrian refugees in my study.

Before the War

All of my participants equated their pre-war lives with *happiness*. As they reflected on the past, they identified their wellbeing in terms of social ties to relatives and friends. For example, Ammar stated, "Syria was our place of happiness. We had our home, families, jobs, schools, and so much more. How I wish I can see it one more time." When asked about wellbeing they indicated happiness and social stability as the defining factors during that time. Culturally, Syrians have very strong communal connections to their relatives, in contrast to Western notions of individualism. A person's identity and wellbeing is associated with social relationships with others (Fischer, 2014). Therefore, proximity to relatives and social stability defined the refugees' understanding of wellbeing during the peaceful times in Syria.

War and Displacement

Participants conflated war and displacement into one long phase of suffering that negatively influenced their welfare. These periods of suffering marked a transformation in their understanding of wellbeing. During this time, their social system became unstable as they were displaced and experienced deaths of relatives. Additionally, they began to experience financial, physical (e.g. illness or injury), and psychological (e.g. stress, bereavement, fear) problems that impacted their daily lives. These factors came to define the refugees' experiences during the war and subsequent displacement. Therefore, the refugee's definitions of wellbeing transformed, reflecting psychological, physical, and financial problems that resulted from the periods of displacement.

As fighting intensified in some areas, families suffered the loss of their homes, jobs, access to schools and healthcare, and other sources of income. Their dire financial situation led to increased



problems with their health. Those who sustained physical injuries or psychological problems from the war were unable to afford medical supplies and care. Violence, accompanied with lack of resources and services, resulted in adverse mental outcomes such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, and stress (Hassan et al., 2016). Many wanted to leave their homes but did not have sufficient financial means for safe passage.

Hoping for the war to subside, a number of the refugees decided to wait before leaving their towns. They felt that waiting provided them with a chance to reclaim their jobs and sense of security after the war. Lina noted, “We waited before we went to work, school, or anywhere because we wanted to make sure there were no attacks or shelling. Sometimes I wish we left right when the war started. Waiting only made things worse for us.” In the unique context of war and displacement, waiting became a period that intensified the negative effects of war on wellbeing. Inadvertently, waiting also became a time for formation of resilient methods.

While waiting, refugees developed survival strategies to protect their families. A few of them learned to identify the types of warplanes, bombs, and attacks by sound and vibration. Most believed they could distinguish between Russian and Syrian planes. In many cases they also knew about scheduled bombings and were able to prepare for them. These men planned their departures for specific hours of the day or night to obtain food rations and supplies.

As the situation worsened, however, families and friends developed plans to escape their homes—by bus, car, plane, often with the help of human smugglers who aid in illegal crossing of international borders—to find safety. In one case, an informant said, “We learned how to navigate in the desert. At that time, there were some skirmishes on the border between Syria and Jordan; so, whenever we heard fighting, we all fell to the ground and covered our children. We waited for the fighting to stop so we can continue on to Jordan.” As the men had learned to protect their families by identifying types of weapons used and aiding their families in crossing borders, the women also played a role in assisting their families toward greater wellbeing. During displacement, children and elderly family members experienced disease and injury. Many women learned to identify maladies and were able to apply appropriate medication for various afflictions.

These periods created tremendous suffering for the Syrian refugees. They lost family, social structure, financial stability, and physical and psychological wellness. As the refugees recalled those moments, they described their wellbeing in terms of these factors, which only intensified during waiting periods. However, they recognized that waiting provided them with many opportunities to plan their survival tactics.

Initial Resettlement in Intermediate Countries

After escaping the war, these families found safety in nearby countries and were recognized as refugees by the international community and United Nations. Becoming registered refugees created issues with identity and self-perception. They felt a mix of loss and uncertainty as they formally signed paperwork indicating their refugee status. This was the longest waiting time since the beginning of the political upheaval. They identified this period as the most prominent experience of identity loss. Along with the initial stressors on their wellness, the development of their refugee status placed them in a space of liminality where identity loss and uncertainty became factors affecting their wellbeing.

The refugees waited in camps, apartments, or family homes in their respective intermediate countries. Although some were reunited with family, many were unsure of their relatives’ whereabouts. Social ties with other Syrians also weakened as relatives and friends separated and fled to different countries. Many refugees faced hostility or distrust from the host communities who



struggled to respond to and accommodate the large influx of Syrian refugees. Due to very high numbers of refugees arriving, aggravating existing infrastructure problems, impacting the labor market, and resulting in social instability, most host communities held anti-Syrian attitudes towards the refugees (Al-Qdah & Lacroix, 2017).

The refugees faced considerable financial issues as they were not allowed to obtain a work permit in many of the countries. Most worked illegally, knowing the repercussions—arrest or deportation—in order to provide for their families. In some cases, they faced exploitation from people who took advantage of their refugee status. These issues also contributed to the deterioration of their sense of wellness. Further, many did not have access to proper medical facilities, some of the children were not given access to schools due to overcrowding and their refugee status, and many of the adults were barred from social services in their host community.

They continued to suffer as they waited in these transitional host countries, in many cases, for years. Most had no choice but to wait since the permanent resettlement application process was long and complex. As unwanted persons waiting to be resettled permanently in another country, the Syrian refugees were in a period of *liminality*. This concept is central in understanding exile groups who struggle with their initial identity markers as they adapt to living in different environments (Siganporia, 2016).

In many cases, the identity and wellbeing of a person may suffer from being in a state of liminality, or having no ties to a place (Lennartsson, 2007). Additionally, refugees, as liminal individuals, may experience identity problems due to their ambiguous state (Beneduce, 2008). Many disliked their refugee identity because it produced complications in their lives. One man said, “We were refugees and no one wanted us. We didn’t belong in Syria nor in Jordan. We waited so long for resettlement. I felt like we weren’t seen as people anymore. I felt lost.” Feelings of loss and confusion regarding identity were shared among the Syrian refugees.

However, the long resettlement process presented several opportunities to develop resilient tactics. For example, men helped sustain their families by finding and keeping jobs. Some of the women supported their children by teaching them at home when they could not attend school. Many befriended local members of the community who aided the families. They persisted through the long resettlement process because they wanted to reconstruct their identities and restore a sense of wellbeing. Most wanted to reclaim their “Syrian identity,” but also acknowledged that they had to incorporate identity markers from their temporary host countries.

Resettlement in Austin, Texas, USA

The approval resettlement locations produced a myriad of mixed emotions from the families. Most of them felt joy and relief when they discovered that they were approved to resettle in the United States. Some felt anxious, but prepared to finally rebuild their lives in a new world. Having no control over where they would eventually be resettled, a few were disappointed upon discovering they would be settled in country with a vastly different culture and far from their relatives. All my informants were concerned that the language and culture of the United States were going to be challenging for their families. Therefore, these factors became the main defining features of the wellbeing of Syrian refugees as they began to integrate into American society.

Many believed that their lives generally improved once they resettled in Austin where they were placed in homes and provided with resettlement assistance. During the first few months, all were provided medical care, housing, and financial help. They had renewed hopes for their children’s futures and safety. However, learning the culture and the English language proved to be a challenge that created many obstacles for the families.



The refugees began rebuilding their social structures into a tight-knit Syrian community in order to help each other and to maintain their culture and language. However, difficulties with the English language caused issues with their finances, health, and identity. After a few months in the United States, many struggled to maintain their financial means due to the high cost of living in Austin. Some were unable to keep their jobs because they could not communicate with others at their workplaces. Those who were skilled workers in Syria were only able to access entry-level and low-paying jobs. Many of them worked multiple jobs to alleviate their financial stress.

Young adults who had achieved university credentials in Syria were unable to transfer their credits and continue their higher education. Due to financial problems, many of them focused on working to help their family survive, subsequently unable to pursue a university education. The high cost of living and family expenses caused tremendous stress on the adults. Even though resettlement organizations supported Syrian refugees with rent and legal documentation,³ they were not properly prepared to aid in resettlement efforts. Per federal policies, only the first three months of expenses were covered, after which the families were expected to survive on their own.

In some cases, resettlement organizations placed families with six to eight individuals in cramped two-bedroom apartments in poor condition. With the influx of refugees and the state's withdrawal from the federal refugee resettlement program, the organizations failed to provide many of the refugees with proper care and attention. Some of the Syrians lost their health insurance since they were not properly informed on renewal procedures. Physical and psychological problems surfaced as a number of them did not know how to access the healthcare system.

Feelings of depression, anxiety, and stress were a recurring topic during conversations with the refugees. While some of these issues surfaced before their resettlement in the United States, many individuals felt overwhelmed with their daily routines. The pressures of work, home management, medical appointments, school meetings, and legal paperwork led many to feel overwhelmed and even hopeless in their attempts at learning the language. The Syrian refugees were also concerned with their safety as they faced xenophobic and islamophobic incidents.

After the election of President Donald Trump, many echoed concerns over their safety due to the administration's reinforcement of the negative stigma attached to Syrian refugees. Assaults and hate crimes on Muslims in the United States increased significantly between 2015 and 2016, with 127 reported cases of simple or aggravated assault (Kishi, 2017). In some cases, families experienced problems with neighbors who expressed anti-refugee and anti-Syrian sentiments. The women, in particular, were more likely to be exposed to islamophobic incidents due to their clothing that immediately identified them as Middle Eastern Muslims. These issues only fortified feelings of anxiety concerning their refugee identity.

During resettlement, refugees experienced a lengthy waiting period concerning work permits, health insurance paperwork, social security application, medical appointments, and the application process to receive their Green Card, a United States document allowing a foreign national to live and work permanently in the country, processes that reinforce their liminality. A few felt apprehensive towards their refugee identity because they experienced problems with their health, financial means, and the lengthy waiting during their Green Card applications. One woman said, "We are waiting to get the Green Card because then we would feel safer, and more American." These experiences contributed to the deterioration of their sense of wellbeing.

However, with time, the Syrian refugees developed methods to learn the language and become familiar with mainstream American culture. For example, many found various ways to take English

³ Legal documents such as: social security cards, food stamps, medical insurance, and other federal and legal resettlement documentation.



courses, whether online or through aid programs. Most of the Syrian refugees befriended residents outside their own community in Austin in order to create an understanding between the different communities. Hosting Americans for dinner parties helped them practice the English language and build new relationships. Many of them worked with local aid groups, such as SARA, and created sewing and catering businesses. Parents, hoping their children would become part of American society, encouraged them to continue their education and to create goals for their future. Most of the adults maintained a refugee identity, or a liminal status. They also believed that, with time, their children would integrate into American society.

Conclusion

The Syrian refugees linked the meaning of wellbeing to their experiences during periods of peace, war and displacement, and resettlement. Within each period, their sense of wellbeing evolved to incorporate several dimensions which included social, physical, psychological, financial, cultural, identity and language factors. This article highlights the importance of conceptualizing refugee wellbeing as a changing, multi-dimensional notion, related to issues associated with their shifting self-understanding that stemmed from a protracted liminal existence.

The effects on wellness changed dramatically during the different periods of forced migration. Waiting became a space, which intensified the effects on the Syrian refugees' wellbeing. In most cases, the many stops along their journey caused adverse effects on them. However, waiting also became a space for the development of resilient tactics. When the Syrian refugees waited for the next phase of their journey, they developed various skills and strategies to improve their lives.

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