
An Exploratory Study of Resilience in Postsecondary Refugee Students Living in Canada Étude exploratoire sur la résilience d'étudiants réfugiés de niveau postsecondaire vivant au Canada

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ABSTRACT

Postsecondary refugee students, who may face many challenges in their migration journeys, constitute one refugee population that has been neglected in research. World University Services of Canada annually sponsors refugee students to attend Canadian postsecondary schools. Although students with refugee experiences are expected to face many challenges in postsecondary schools, 85% of them earn a bachelor's degree. This qualitative case study utilized the ecological-transactional model to understand this refugee population's resilience. Results suggest that resilience is cultivated by family, resettlement community, and educational supports. These findings inform the need to establish community supports to foster educational success.

RÉSUMÉ

Les étudiants réfugiés de niveau postsecondaire, qui peuvent faire face à de nombreuses difficultés pendant leur migration, constituent une tranche de la population de réfugiés que la recherche a négligée à ce jour. L'Entraide universitaire mondiale du Canada attribue annuellement des commandites aux étudiants réfugiés pour qu'ils puissent fréquenter des établissements postsecondaires canadiens. En dépit du fait que l'on s'attend à ce que les étudiants ayant vécu des expériences de réfugiés soient exposés à de nombreuses difficultés dans les établissements postsecondaires, 85 % d'entre eux obtiennent leur baccalauréat. La présente étude qualitative se fonde sur le modèle écologique transactionnel pour rendre compte de la résilience observable dans la cette population de réfugiés. Les résultats indiquent que la résilience est cultivée au sein de la famille, de la communauté de réinstallation, et des ressources de soutien aux études. Ces données confirment la nécessité d'établir des modes de soutien communautaire en vue de favoriser la réussite scolaire.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2015), Canada was the 23rd highest receiving country for refugees in 2014. Canada's commitment to immigration has brought cultural diversity to communities as well as a larger workforce. As an example, Canada recently accepted more than 27,000 Syrian refugees in response to the humanitarian crisis in Syria (Citizenship Immigration Canada, 2016). Yet many issues arise surrounding newcomers' resettlement and well-being, including problems with finding affordable housing, continuing education, and health care coverage (Canadian Council for

Refugees, 2005). Little research exists regarding the experience of postsecondary refugee students arriving in Canada directly from refugee camps. Prior to migrating, these refugee youth may have been exposed to violence and traumatic events, deprivation of basic needs such as food and shelter, loss of loved ones, illness, and substance abuse (Vindevogel et al., 2011).

Furthermore, studies of refugee youth resettlement suggest that they are at risk for struggling with culture shock, ethnic bullying, social exclusion, and marginalization, all of which have negative effects on their health, well-being, education, and development (Sam, 2006; Yohani, 2010). In view of these potential challenges, it is exceptional for refugee students to overcome such risk factors and manage to pursue a postsecondary education.

Our study examined how refugee students entering Canadian postsecondary schools address postmigration challenges and opportunities. Guided by the question “What are the protective factors used by these students that contribute to their resilience?” the objectives were to identify the various institutional, community, cultural, and personal protective factors that postsecondary refugee students use to facilitate a positive adaptation process within the Canadian society.

CONTEXT OF STUDY:

WORLD UNIVERSITY SERVICES OF CANADA'S STUDENT REFUGEE PROGRAM

In this study, “postsecondary refugee students” refers to students who are sponsored by World University Services of Canada (WUSC) and its Student Refugee Program (SRP) to attend Canadian universities and colleges with permanent resident or refugee status. Students are educated in UNHCR schools. Those situated in refugee camps who display academic potential through their grades, work ethic, and extracurricular activities are encouraged to apply to the SRP by their teachers (WUSC, 2007). Since 1978, more than 1,200 postsecondary government-sponsored refugee students have entered Canada through the SRP (WUSC, 2011). Each participating school has an on-campus WUSC club that facilitates the resettlement process for SRP students.

For the first year, WUSC covers the cost of tuition and postsecondary institutions provide food and residence (WUSC, 2007). Beyond the first year, postsecondary institutions are responsible for financially assisting students with tuition, textbooks, food, and residence. Some schools subsidize necessities such as tuition and residence while other schools do not provide financial assistance. Furthermore, students are expected to repay the travel loans subsidized by the Canadian government. Despite these challenges, SRP students are expected to find jobs to financially support themselves when their first year of studies is completed (WUSC, 2007).

Given their rapid resettlement timelines and expectations to achieve academic success soon after arriving in Canada, it is expected that this group of unaccompanied refugee minors and young adults will experience risk and protective factors different from other refugee populations. For example, other refugee groups are often sponsored by family members who subsequently provide social and cultural

support (Ehrensaft & Tousignant, 2006). Likewise, government-sponsored refugees are attached to settlement agencies for at least the first year. By having family members and settlement workers who are already adept in finding employment, education, and other cultural institutions to support resettlement, the process becomes slightly less daunting (Boss, 2006; Sossou, Craig, Ogren, & Schnak, 2008). However, the majority of unaccompanied postsecondary refugee students do not have any social connections when they arrive in Canada. Despite these seeming barriers, they are a refugee group who appear to find success, given their 85% graduation rate from Canadian postsecondary schools (WUSC, 2007).

REFUGEE RESILIENCE DEVELOPMENT

While there are a number of resilience models (Egeland, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1993; Werner & Smith, 1993), the current discussion on unaccompanied postsecondary refugee students is represented by the ecological-transactional model. This model, which was influenced by Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological theory, is conceptualized as three interdependent systems (i.e., micro-, exo-, and macrosystem) that directly and indirectly shape and influence development of resilience in individuals. Resilience, in this context, is a multiplicity of psychological characteristics that are shaped by the ecological interplay of individual, relational, social, and cultural frameworks (Harney, 2007). Whereas early models of resilience focused on individual characteristics such as intelligence and academic achievement (Bryant, Schulenberg, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 2003; Masten, 2001), we also draw upon more recent notions of resilience that recognize the role sociocultural factors such as family supports (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch, & Ungar, 2005) play in the development of resilience.

As such, we view resilience as emerging from the interaction of individual and multicultural environmental factors, and refer to patterns of positive adaptation as a result of this interplay within a context of significant psychological and environmental adversity (Masten & Obradovic, 2006; Ungar, 2008). Positive adaptation (Ungar, 2008) is the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources and a condition of the individual's community and culture to provide these resources in culturally meaningful ways. Using these definitions, we view resilience as both a process of the person's navigation toward available supports/resources and the individual's capacity to negotiate for supports/resources on their own terms. For postsecondary refugee students, this is a fitting definition and one that can be further understood within the ecological-transactional framework, since their experience is one of survival within the refugee camps and resettlement in an unfamiliar environment.

The microsystem focuses on an individual's personal resources for resilience, fostered in childhood through family interactions and parental upbringing. Biological, genetic, and family factors may serve as protective factors (Nielsen & Hansson, 2007). Personality characteristics including a good-natured temperament (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998), positive self-esteem (Bell, 2001), self-worth

(Davey, Eaker, & Walters, 2003), an internal locus of control (Dumont & Provost, 1999), and self-reliance (Cowen, Wyman, & Work, 1996) are cited as fostering resilience. For example, refugee Vietnamese adolescents with fewer family disruptions and strong relationships with both parents were more resilient to previous trauma (King, King, Foy, Keane, & Fairbank, 1999).

The exosystem of the ecological-transactional model encompasses the protective influences of the community including opportunities for education, employment, and extracurricular activities (Fraser, Kirby, & Smokowski, 2004). Since premigration trauma can generate insecurity when refugees move to a new country, an individual's sense of safety can be shaken or restored on a community level (Harney, 2007). For example, refugees living in an economically disadvantaged inner-city community may feel neglected, threatened, and discriminated against due to their refugee status and ethnicity. However, community resources such as cultural and religious groups, educational workshops, student mentors, and nonprofit organizations promote resilience in individuals (Harvey, Mondesir, & Aldrich, 2007; Schweitzer, Greenslade, & Kagee, 2007).

The macrosystem, which includes national policies such as public education or universal healthcare, shapes a refugee's cultural values and impacts their resilience. The effects of larger principles defined by the macrosystem have a cascading influence throughout all other systems. This interplay between systems is exemplified in a study of Sudanese youth living in Winnipeg, Manitoba (Kanu, 2008). Adolescents whose parents understood the importance of education were more hopeful and continued practicing their cultural norms. Consequently, these adolescents were more resilient over time (Magro, 2009). From this example, the macrosystem (i.e., societal belief in education) influences the exosystem (i.e., involvement in the school), and also impacts the microsystem (i.e., parents' understanding that their children should receive an education). Sudanese cultural values are often grounded in an individual's upbringing by their elders. Thus, without the guidance of teachers and religious leaders, individuals may lack the desire to pursue education or to continue practicing their religion.

METHODOLOGY

Methodological Framework

A qualitative case study methodology was utilized for the current investigation of postsecondary refugee students' resilience and was guided by the constructivist epistemology. This constructivist approach was appropriate in identifying protective factors contributing to resilience, as subjective experiences are created in lived historical and social contexts (White, Drew, & Hay, 2009). Furthermore, the case study approach allowed us to seek a deeper and richer understanding of the context being studied and brings to light greater attention to the underlying processes and interactions between individuals with others and their environment (Anaf, Drummond, & Sheppard, 2007; Stake, 1995). Researchers abiding by the constructivist worldview also recognize that their own background shapes their

interpretation as they position themselves in the personal, cultural, or historical experiences of their participants (Creswell, 2007). Given that the nature of the current study explored the migration and settlement challenges and resilience of postsecondary refugee students, the qualitative case study approach also provided an interpretive framework to understand the students' processes and experiences (Whitfield, 2011).

Furthermore, the qualitative case study method has been identified as an appropriate method of studying resilience in at-risk groups (Whitfield, 2011). According to Teram and Ungar (2009), studies on cross-cultural resilience have moved away from focusing on the capacity for individuals to cope with adverse life circumstances and toward a focus on the interactions between individuals and their environments. Therefore, a case study was deemed appropriate for studying resilience in postsecondary refugees in their life contexts.

The current investigation followed the instrumental single case study model by studying a unique group—WUSC-sponsored postsecondary refugee students and their challenges and resilience in the migration process. Individual students made up the case unit. A distinct characteristic of instrumental case study is its ability to focus on both the particular issue (i.e., refugee migration experience) and the general phenomenon (i.e., the development of resilience amidst migration challenges) (Stake, 1995). Furthermore, the current investigation is holistic in nature. This differs from the single case embedded units approach, which only focuses on one phenomenon in a single setting (Stake, 1995). By using this paradigm, the current study achieved a better understanding of the factors that supported and challenged refugee students' development of resilience.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Sampling. Our study utilized purposive sampling with the help of intermediaries in WUSC programs across Canada after the study was approved by the university ethics board. Selection criteria included (a) entry into a Canadian postsecondary school through the SRP, (b) 17 to 25 years of age at the time of migration, (c) completed first year of undergraduate studies and in year two or greater of academic studies, and (d) either currently under refugee status as recognized by the CIC or previously entered Canada under such a status. The criterion related to age reflected the application guidelines of WUSC's Student Refugee Program (WUSC, 2007). The criterion regarding the completion of first year undergraduate studies served two purposes: (a) ensured participants had the opportunity to live one year in Canada and experience some resettlement issues; and (b) ensured all postsecondary refugee student participants were completing their second year of studies without financial aid from WUSC and their respective postsecondary institutions, thereby sampling participants with diverse levels of financial support.

Recruitment procedure. Eight postsecondary refugee students from across Canada responded to an e-mail from their WUSC presidents. After initial conversations, 3 participants withdrew their participation while 5 participants remained in the study. These 5 participants completed a timeline activity assessing the variability

and diversity of their pre- and postmigration experiences. The timeline asked participants to list resources that helped them cope with challenges in Canada. In addition, the timeline activity facilitated the participant's recollection and reflection of life events and captured salient experiences that participants were willing to discuss in the interview. When the timeline activity was completed, 4 participants were chosen to participate in a semistructured interview based on their current geographic location and diversity of pre- and postmigration experiences. Please see Table 1 for complete demographic details of participants, who are represented by pseudonyms.

Table 1
Summary of Participants' Demographic Information

Participant	JK	Esther	Eyotta	Ade
Age	25	24	24	25
Country of origin	Somalia	Rwanda	Rwanda	Somalia
Final refugee camp location	Kenya	Malawi	Malawi	Kenya
Resettlement province	Alberta	Ontario	Alberta	Nova Scotia
Sex	Male	Female	Female	Male
Year of study	3	4	4	3
Religion	Muslim	Christian	Christian	Muslim

Procedure

Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to the interviews. Participants were asked to bring an artifact such as an object, picture, or photograph that symbolized their resilience. Artifacts assist participants by providing cues in the forthcoming discussion of their experiences and strengthen the study's trustworthiness by providing another source of data (Yin, 2009). The semistructured interviews, artifacts, and photographs facilitated an authentic discussion of the premigration and resettlement challenges and the factors contributing to resilience. JK and Eyotta, both of whom lived in Western Canada, were interviewed in person while Esther (Central Canada) and Ade (Eastern Canada) were interviewed using Skype videoconference.

Member checks were conducted after the initial interview, and feedback was handwritten by the first author. Participants were provided with a list of community multicultural counselling resources as well as \$30 as remuneration for their participation. It is important to note that none of the students required an interpreter as their English levels were proficient and they chose not to use interpreters. After the interviews were transcribed, Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis was used to identify themes as outlined by

1. Gaining familiarity with the data by transcribing the interviews and reading the transcripts several times
2. Coding the data contained in each transcript
3. Grouping the codes together to form themes
4. Reviewing and refining the themes
5. Defining and naming each theme
6. Writing the findings.

Methodological rigour (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was attended to throughout the present study, including the use of triangulation, member checks, maintaining a research journal, and obtaining supervision.

RESULTS

Although participants faced many challenges in Canada, they used coping resources to help them overcome these problems, which signified that their social ecologies had resources that they were able to access and negotiate. As a result, this fostered resilience during young adulthood. Common themes of postmigration coping resources included (a) social supports help Canada feel like home, (b) reciprocating family supports, and (c) using family values to open new doors.

Social Supports Help Canada Feel Like Home

Support came from a variety of outlets such as one's ethnic community, on-campus school groups (i.e., WUSC), and friends from school and the community. For all participants, the on-campus community was an initial support system that helped them branch into other social support groups. For example, JK (age 25) was introduced to his ethnic and religious community through the on-campus WUSC club, which helped him network with the community:

The SRP committees when I came here were the only people I knew. What they first did was to connect me to the other Somali friends in the community so that other Somali friends could teach me where to go for Halal meat and for Friday prayer. Attending the SRP meetings also helped me make new friends and now I am even on the committee that chooses future SRP students to the [school].

Because the participants needed to find a job after the first year, the WUSC clubs were a helpful resource. According to Eyotta (age 24), the WUSC members helped her with job applications and shared with her information that they gathered in the community about jobs around campus:

It was first difficult for knowing how to find a job and how to work on a résumé, but the WUSC people, if you just ask anybody, they will help you. They'll say, "Oh, there's this place to look for jobs, you just do this and this." They'll show you how to write a cover letter, search for jobs online, or talk to the WUSC coordinator. I just went to him and he's like, "Are you looking for a job? I heard about this and this and this," so he's the one who found me the job at the call centre. A member also helped me with my interview skills.

Friends were also made within and beyond the campus community including in class and at mosques or churches. It was evident that the participants, like Ade (age 25), utilized their Canadian and international friends for settlement support, networking, and personal supports:

I talked to my international friends a lot ... mostly Chinese friends. They helped teach me how to cook some simple meals, and I shared a house with some of them for half of my second year. When I was looking for a place to live again, I just always talk to my friends and tried networking. My friends finally pointed out to me the guy who I'm living with today ... so through networking, I found him.

Reciprocating Family Supports

Although the participants were far from their families, the family continued to provide important moral support in their lives. In turn, the participants provided financial supports to their families while studying in Canada. Participants considered this ongoing family encouragement and being responsible for the family as vital for successful resettlement.

Ongoing family encouragement. Ongoing family support from the refugee camps and from within Canada propelled the participants toward success despite many resettlement challenges. The parents placed few demands on their children while they studied in Canada. For example, Ade spoke to his parents as often as possible and conversations always ended with his parents' words of encouragement:

What keeps me going are my parents. They obviously carried and supported me to go away. They say, "Hey man, you know you have to get your education!" That keeps me driving. I remember them saying, "You have to study." I talk to them now and they say, "Don't even support us, if you cannot find a job. Just study hard and finish your education."

Parents also allowed their children to determine their own paths in Canada. The parents supported their children as much as possible, despite having very little money in the refugee camps. This was exemplified by JK's parents:

My parents played a role. They gave me the time, they never told me, "Hey, go out and work for me. You're my son." Instead, they say, "Hey, go to school. If we get money, we will give you. You know we will be okay with just a little money. Don't do it for us. Do it for yourself. Just go learn." So that force was also behind me—my parents.

Being responsible for the family. This subtheme refers to the importance of participants reciprocating the years of parental support, recognizing their privileged opportunity to be in Canada, and learning to budget so that they could send money home. As responsible adults and family members, every participant strongly valued taking care of their families despite their geographical separation. For example, Eyotta felt a sense of family responsibility once she found her independence:

Being able to go to school and work gives me self-confidence. I'm so proud of myself, and I want to make my parents proud too. I like working because it makes me feel proud. I'm able to get the money to help my parents. My sister is going to high school in Malawi, so I want to save money for her so if she gets good grades I can help her pay for a good boarding school.

Participants continued to strive for success in Canada in hopes of one day providing a better life for their families. As illustrated by JK, there was a sense of reciprocity since his parents sacrificed their livelihoods to support his education:

I studied for all these years, 12 years in both elementary and high school. Then this was a tradition when a man is like at the age of 18 ... he has to be the one helping the parents. So there was this thing in me that I have to help my parents out. I either have to get a scholarship in Canada or get a job to help them out and send them money.

Participants noted that they felt guilty that they were no longer struggling together in the refugee camp and could not be there in person to help their parents. This tension was eased, to some degree, by supporting their families financially as succinctly explained by Ade:

They're there. I have to support them. If I get extra money, I can support them. They are in a refugee camp and their income is very limited. So they say, "Oh, don't send us anything or don't support us at all. Go ahead with your education." That's what they told me, but I'm kind of feeling guilty not supporting them. When I was there, although I had few wages, I used to share with them. I need to continue supporting them.

The participants acknowledged their growth as they learned to be independent in Canada. They acquired budgeting skills that included apportioning money toward rent, food, and family. This appeared to help them form a new self-identity as a caregiver who could contribute to their families. They now had a vital responsibility to care for their families who continued to reside in refugee camps. As described by Esther (age 24), this newfound role as a caregiver from abroad helped to establish a sense of pride:

It has come to me that I can be independent again. I know how to budget my money. I earn this much and this goes to rent, this I have to save ... sometimes I just want to help a bit with my sister's schooling. My parents tell us, "You don't have to." But I've been with them, I've lived with them, I know sometimes we go through hard times, so the fact that I can contribute, I'm so happy with that.

Using Family Values to Open New Doors

After many years of observing and learning from their parents, the participants took ownership of the values and practices that were passed down. Two prominent family values participants used to cope with challenges while attending university in Canada were religious beliefs and work ethic and determination.

Religious beliefs. All of the participants spoke extensively about the importance of religion in their lives and how their parents fostered religion as an important source of strength and support. When faced with overwhelming challenges in Canada, the participants turned to religion to help them overcome these difficulties. Eyotta reflected on the development of her religious belief system as she matured:

After we fled, my dad became so involved with the church he would just come home and read the Bible. I had the choice to believe in religion or not. But I realized that I must be in my position today, because of my hard work and some luck. Maybe God has given me this luck. This helped me realize that God has been helping us the whole time ... and helped me come to Canada.

When asked to bring an artifact to the interview that symbolized their resilience, 3 of the 4 participants brought the Qur'an or the Bible. The Qur'an and the Bible were spiritual symbols that guided the participants toward decisions that ultimately benefited their lives. Esther reflected on the role that religion played in her life:

God is my strength. I've come to the position where there were so many doors that seemed closed, but out of nowhere, there is a door that has opened for me to go through. I cannot say that there is a specific thing other than a Bible ... but to me, it's not just about a specific object. My overall strength is my family and God who have helped me open new doors.

Participants used religion to rationalize their existence and struggles so that they had goals and ambitions to strive toward even when they were overwhelmed with challenges. Participants such as JK promised to persevere and to maintain a strong faith in God—all of which would lead to success:

God says in the religion, "There will always be challenges. These challenges can only be overcome by patience. You always have to work very hard." Unless you work hard, nothing is going to come to you. Those who work very hard with a strong faith in God, then God may open doors for them. I was always practicing my religion the way it was commanded, and out of nowhere these doors just opened itself.

Work ethic and determination. Hard work, willful determination, and self-reflection were characteristics that the participants embodied in order to achieve success in their refugee camp schools and in Canada. By trusting in their own scholastic abilities and adhering to their motivation, the participants believed that they were in control of their own lives. Eyotta reflected on her persistence:

I know that when many of us come, we have no jobs, nobody to call for a reference, and no work experience. But it gets a little bit easier. School is difficult, but you have to adjust the way you think. I've come so far, I've worked so hard, so if I just continue working hard, good things will happen.

Participants also exhibited strong determination to adapt to life in Canada, especially since they were now on their own in a new country. As long as they kept encouraging themselves to work hard and stay determined, there was the possibility

that life would go in a positive direction. Ade exemplified this determination and fortitude to succeed:

I'm a very determined person. If I stick my mind to do something, I have to get it done to my satisfaction. Now that I have this chance to be in Canada, I'm the only one that can ruin my life right now. I can succeed if I want to ... it's having the power to actually control your life. That is why I can control it to go in a positive way so I can be successful.

Finally, the participants engaged in self-reflection that motivated them to look toward their futures. Every participant described goals and ambitions that they will be striving toward after their undergraduate studies that involved giving back to society and their families. This future goal was described by JK:

I know I'm going to do my master's in economics. I'm critical of how the aid agencies sometimes do things. I have the hope of helping my community and humanity at large. What I'm aiming at is helping people ... through my knowledge. That might be going back to my home country or working in other African countries where there are problems. So I'd like to work hard to extend my education to not only focus on my people, but just bring hope to humanity at large.

DISCUSSION

Although the purpose of this investigation was to examine the development of resilience for postsecondary refugee students, the 4 participants also experienced significant challenges in their resettlement process including loneliness, Canadian pedagogical styles, and adapting to cultural differences. These challenges are not the scope of this article, but are important to mention as a background to the current participants' social ecologies that foster resilience. Despite these risk factors, the participants embodied their families' moral values, networked with friends and on-campus clubs, and coped using religion. They demonstrated many of the qualities of resilience reflected in the literature and were succeeding in their respective university programs (Ackerman, Brown, & Izard, 2003; Kanu, 2008; Montgomery, 2010). The following discussion uses the ecological transactional model to examine these key findings. Consistent with this model, the results revealed how the interrelationships within the three systems (i.e. micro-, exo-, and macrosystems) supported the resources that contribute to the development of resilience in postsecondary refugee students.

Family Connectedness and the Embodiment of Family Values

At the microsystem level, family support continued even when the participants migrated to Canada for educational opportunities. Through moral support, parents provided continual encouragement to fulfill goals of completing postsecondary education. The ongoing support may serve as a protective factor for participants' mental health despite their exposure to traumatic events. According to Raftopoulos

and Bates (2011), families with strong bonds also have an inherent knowledge that family members will constantly support each other regardless of their proximity. Conversely, research on unaccompanied refugee adolescents has suggested that without family supports, these youth are at a significantly greater risk of developing conduct problems and depression (Oppedal & Idsoe, 2012; Thabet, Abed, & Vostanis, 2004). Therefore, our research supports the notion that family connectedness is a primary protective factor against traumatic experiences (Resnick, Harris, & Blum, 1993). Further, our study supports the finding that parental support is associated with educational resilience (Williams & Portman, 2014). Despite adversities in each participant's resettlement, they continued to receive emotional and moral support, which fostered their drive to succeed academically (Wang, Haertel, & Wahlberg, 1994).

Concurrently, the refugee postsecondary students felt the need to reciprocate financial support. In order to send remittances to their families in the refugee camps, the participants searched for exosystem resources such as WUSC to access part-time jobs. As evidenced by the participants, the micro- and exosystems worked in concert to influence the development of a macrosystem value: altruism. This shared value of altruism went beyond helping their families and appeared to be a protective factor for them in Canada. Two of the participants' goals are to return to their home countries to alleviate the troubled political landscapes, while another participant hopes to give back to her resettled community as a teacher. Extrapolating from research conducted by Svensson (2009), perhaps attaining work that contributes to the advancement of a community gives meaning and a sense of self-worth while resettling in a foreign environment. As demonstrated by the above example, all levels of resilience were interrelated and the development of resilience at one level often coincided with the development of resilience at an adjacent level (see Figure 1). Therefore, the ecological-transactional model was an ideal framework for understanding resilience in postsecondary refugee students.

Religion as a Protective Factor

The passing down of religion from one generation to the next may have served as a protective factor for each participant's mental health, who had all witnessed violence and lived a transient lifestyle. Religion, a microsystem-level resource cultivated by parents, was also a shared value among the participants at the macrosystem level in Canada. Participants often spoke about their families praying for guidance when faced with overwhelming challenges during their refugee experiences. When the participants came to Canada, each of them sought out churches and mosques in their communities. These religious institutions are salient examples of exosystem-level resources. Religious coping demonstrates the significant interactions at all three levels of the ecological-transactional model.

Recent studies have explored the importance of religion as a coping resource for refugees (Sossou et al., 2008) and adolescents (Fox, 2012; Ungar, 2008). In particular, refugee children and adolescents observed their parents' use of religion as an instrument to find meaning and motivation amidst their challenges (Gun-

nestad & Thwala, 2011). Through these daily observations at the microsystem level, children’s meaning of spirituality was established as a macrosystem value. Even if the family member was absent, the practice of spiritually believing the person was psychologically present also provided a source of strength for refugees (Boss, 2006). Thus, religion was observed as a shared symbol of optimism and guidance for coping with adversity.

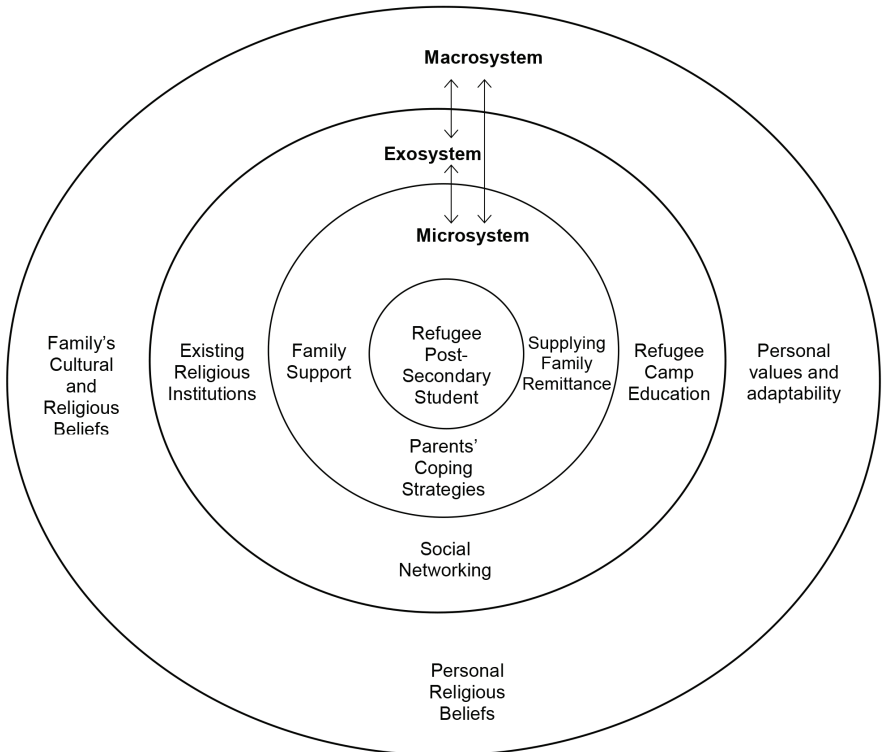
The interactions between each participant’s trust in God and a personal motivation to succeed provided a sense of control and the belief that they would make optimal decisions in their lives (Raghallaigh, 2011). Similarly, the participants from the current study demonstrated perseverance by believing that they were in control of their life’s directions. Rather than only relying on their belief in a divine power (macrosystem), the participants also utilized a dedicated work ethic (microsystem) and existing community groups (exosystem) to cope with resettlement challenges.

Limitations and Recommendations

This exploratory study recruited refugee postsecondary students primarily from Africa because WUSC has mainly sponsored students from that continent in the

Figure 1.

Influences on participants’ resilience at the micro-, exo-, and macrosystem levels



past decade. Future research could examine a larger and more diverse sample of participants from other refugee camps around the world to observe whether cultural or contextual differences exist for migration challenges and the development of resilience.

This study illustrated the importance of exosystem-level supports for refugee students, specifically helping them to acquire a sense of belonging among peers within a new environment. Educational institutions play a significant role in support exosystem-level supports such as cultural and religious clubs; therefore, counsellors and educators are encouraged to facilitate the search for appropriate social or religious groups for their incoming refugee students. By meeting other individuals who are living in similar circumstances, refugee students can expand their support network. Although the participants indicated that on-campus WUSC clubs were the best resource for help, none mentioned being made aware of counselling services. It is suggested that postsecondary educational institutions inform incoming refugee students of counselling services that are available on campus as well as through community agencies that specialize in multicultural counselling as part of a comprehensive approach to support.

Implications for Counselling Practice

This investigation elicited a number of recommendations for counsellors and mental health practitioners working with this population. At the level of service provision, it is important for counsellors to seek out potential community resources that may benefit the postsecondary refugee students. Participants in this study illustrated the importance of exosystem-level supports, specifically acquiring a sense of belonging among peers within a new environment. Therefore, counsellors are encouraged to facilitate the search for appropriate social groups for their refugee students. By meeting other individuals who have the same interests or who are living in similar circumstances, the clients will expand their support network and acquire help and guidance when needed. Furthermore, counsellors need to take an advocacy role for refugee students. Atkinson and colleagues (1993) emphasized the importance of psychologists embracing an advocacy role to help their resettling clients adapt to their new environment. This may include helping clients connect with self-identified religious affiliations, especially if the clients have difficulty finding such a group. Another advocacy activity includes linking refugee clients with employment agencies to acquire résumé and cover letter writing, interviewing, and job search skills.

Mental health counsellors and therapists who offer services to refugee postsecondary students also need to have multicultural counselling training. According to Hwang (2006), most clinicians believe that learning about their client's culture renders them as competent multicultural therapists. However, this learned knowledge does not translate to the implementation of insightful therapeutic interventions.

One model, the psychotherapy adaptation and modification framework (PAMF; Hwang, 2006), guides counsellors to view therapy as an interactive process between client and therapist such that therapeutic interventions are a collabora-

tive process. The more a therapist learns from the client, the more he or she will also learn to adapt the client's culture to efficacious evidence-based intervention approaches (Hwang, 2006).

Another framework that would facilitate implementing interventions with refugee postsecondary students is the multilevel model (MLM; Bemak & Chung, 2002). MLM suggests that psychotherapists must understand the sociopolitical background, premigration history, and experiences the clients have had as refugees (Bemak & Chung, 2002). Furthermore, therapists must identify the barriers their clients are experiencing that may impede successful psychosocial adaptation and adjustment. By asking refugee clients about their experiences, therapists allow their clients to narrate their stories while acquiring a cultural understanding of presenting clinical issues. Finally, MLM incorporates four phases within the intervention process: (a) mental health education, (b) psychotherapy, (c) cultural empowerment, and (d) integration of western and indigenous health methodologies (Bemak & Chung, 2002). By understanding barriers in adaptation while concurrently providing interventions that are congruent with the refugee client's needs, it is expected that the clients will gain skills for effective system navigation in their environments and communities (Bemak & Chung, 2002).

CONCLUSION

Using a qualitative case study design and the ecological-transactional model, the current research examined protective factors that contributed to postsecondary refugee students' resilience. They developed coping strategies at each level of the ecological-transactional model and illustrated how each level was interrelated and moved the participants toward the development of resilience. The participants learned to embody their family's moral values, network with friends and on-campus clubs, and cope using religion. Finally, they held onto the hope that a better future for themselves and their families was attainable. This study exemplifies the need for a comprehensive approach to facilitate resettlement adaptation for postsecondary refugee students.

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