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Becoming United Statesian: Experiences of Newly Resettled Iraqi Refugees and Iraqi Immigrants

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BECOMING UNITED STATESIAN: EXPERIENCES OF NEWLY
RESETTLED IRAQI REFUGEES AND IRAQI IMMIGRANTS

by

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BECOMING UNITED STATESIAN: EXPERIENCES OF NEWLY RESETTLED IRAQI REFUGEES AND IRAQI IMMIGRANTS

The differences between refugees' dreams before and after coming to the United States of America is often shocking. One might ask, "Isn't America the country of the refugees?" The United States is the largest nation built by refugees and immigrants, yet recently resettled refugees or "new Americans" struggle in multiple and overlapping ways to reach successful resettlement. Some of the challenges they face are inherent to resettlement, others come from the socialization process, and the interplay of human beings as they exist together. Language and culture shock are the natural struggles that any internationally-relocated person experiences. The challenges that stem from human beings are more painful and troubling, yet they also hold promise for change. The process of refugee resettlement allows us to examine some of the deepest layers of coexistence, both negative and positive, including racism, xenophobia as well as generosity and peaceful co-existence.

This project explores these larger questions through the lens of refugees in Hampton Roads, Virginia. In this metropolitan area of Hampton Roads, around 200 refugees settle annually based on data adopted from Virginia Department of Social Services, with around 40 Iraqi refugees coming to the Hampton Roads area. Additionally, around 5 Iraqi immigrants resettle in Hampton Roads annually (Virginia Department of Social Services). The refugee label refers to those who have left their country to seek protection from threats they have experienced in their country. On the other hand, those who are labeled as immigrants are those who migrate to obtain a better life for their family. As an Iraqi international student who is an immigrant in this same area, I conducted research on the Iraqi refugees and the Iraqi international student immigrants in the area to explore the differences in these two groups' experiences, according to their status as refugees and immigrants. From this data, I focus on employment and networking as two key central parts

of the resettlement process. I demonstrate why a substantial difference in finding professional jobs can be seen between the Iraqi refugee college-degree-holders and the Iraqi international-student-immigrants, despite both being from the same country with the same race. What makes the difference? How can both groups navigate in relation to each other to resettle more easily? Which experiences directly conflict with the dreams and images they held about their new life in the U.S. before they migrated? How has their sense of community and their existing social networks impacted these groups? Furthermore, I focus on the impact of networking on finding jobs for both groups. In the United States, refugees face challenges adjusting to their new lives, including Islamophobia, racism, culture shock, understanding health and car insurance, and finding jobs. Student immigrants experience adjustment differently through, for example, their limitations in attaining work permissions during their study and their attempt at finding professional jobs. These distinctions between the two groups frame my scholar-activist project, as well as my larger inquiry into the nuances of transnational identity and adaptation following resettlement.

I became interested in refugees' lives in exile because I am one of them. I deeply understand the challenges they face after experiencing the reality of life in the U.S. Given these barriers, I wanted to focus on support systems for refugees and immigrants. In this study, I have interviewed five Iraqi students and five Iraqi refugees resettled in the urban area of Hampton Roads, Virginia. Most of the refugees I interviewed complained about the humanitarian and immigration organizations that are supposed to help them to get settled because they feel misinformed about the struggles they will face in the U.S. This research is important to those organizations because the feedback allows them to better assist refugees and provide more realistic expectations. This research investigates the aspects that make the difference in successful resettlement between Iraqi refugees and Iraqi students in the Hampton Roads community. The purpose of my research is to explore how achieving an American university degree helps for a

better resettlement and the attainment of a professional job, as well as the importance of building a strong network connection between student immigrants and the refugees of the same country (Iraq).

OVERVIEW OF REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS

Since I live and have conducted my research in an historic area of United States (i.e. Hampton Roads), I want to mention that this area, specifically Jamestown, was one of the first ports of entrance of the British to the United States in 1607. Thus, Hampton Roads is a symbolic place to study United States migration issues. Later, from 1892 to 1954, many immigrants and refugees fled to this country through Ellis Island in New York City. The government of that time decided to choose Ellis Island as the main gate of immigration entrance, so they could control the immigration process. Through Ellis Island's operations alone, around 12 million immigrants entered the United States. Those immigrants were mostly from different European countries. They migrated to the United States mainly because of the economic, political, and/or religious issues they faced in their home countries. The interesting part is, nowadays, around 40% of the United States population share heritage ancestry with the immigrants and refugees who migrated the country through Ellis Island from 1892 to 1954.

As immigrants moved into the United States, bifurcated levels of receptivity developed in the wider population. Ali Behdad, in his book *A Forgetful Nation*, talks about his own experience as an Iranian immigrant in the United States. He describes his study as “an attempt to better grasp the immigrant history that has made me simultaneously a ‘model minority’ and a threatening ‘alien’ in America” (p.ix). He illustrates how, throughout history, American politicians are split into two groups, with one group against immigrants (xenophobia), and the other group welcoming to immigrants (xenophilia). Behdad contrasts the “founding fathers” of America. On the one hand,

Thomas Jefferson was willing to let people immigrate to the United States; on the other hand, Alexander Hamilton clearly demonstrated xenophobia, though Jefferson reminded Hamilton and other xenophobes that we all are immigrants to America. These roots of bifurcated responses to immigrants have grown in their intensity and created a polarizing impact in the wider United States society.

This conflict can be seen in the 2016 United States presidential candidacy between Donald Trump, who is against immigrants, and the politician Hillary Clinton, who is welcoming to immigrants. After Donald Trump's winning of the election, the ratio of refugees entering Virginia reduced almost by half (Virginia Department of Social Services). For instance, in 2016, 310 refugees have come to Virginia. In 2017, this number is reduced to 175 refugees. Trump did not stop there. By his executive travel ban order, issued just seven days after his election, seven countries, namely Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya, Sudan, Somalia, and Yemen, had heavy constraints placed on them, limiting their access to the United States and placing high levels of scrutiny on people from those countries within the United States. This sharp measure made finding jobs more difficult for both refugees and student immigrants, while also increasing levels of racism toward Muslims in general. At the same time, obtaining student visas was almost impossible for Iraqi students, even after the duration of the executive order was over. Thus, this extreme policy simultaneously affects the people outside America who are in trouble and the people of those seven countries included in the travel ban, who already live in the United States, particularly in their efforts to attain employment.

As an Iraqi student asylum seeker, I see the beauty of the U.S. in its diversity. This country has shown to the world that immigrants can have a hand in developing it into one of the most powerful countries worldwide. Much of the acclaim surrounding the United States can be based

on its diversity. For example, the high percentage of the immigrant and refugee professors teaching in the universities (Lin et al.), and Old Dominion University can be taken as an example. *The Middle of Everywhere* by Mary Pipher focuses on the acculturation of immigrants inside the United States, and their importance in diversifying the wider population. She argues that people do not need to travel overseas to see other cultures. One can get exposed to different cultures inside the United States. Mary Pipher, a psychologist, describes her experience of reaching out to an Iraqi Kurdish family of refugees in Nebraska. She shows how partner community organizations can be vital to linking social networks for the refugees within other countries. She observes, “People who are dark-skinned have a harder time. Because of racism, the darker one’s skin, the harder it is to assimilate” (Pipher 72). Through her perspectives, I developed my larger interest in the interconnection between refugees and local citizens. My focus in my larger work is to better understand how these two populations can reach out to each other in their life journeys, especially focusing on strengthening the bridge of networking between the Iraqi refugees and the Iraqi student immigrants so they can support each other, and better resolve the predicaments they face in their new chapter of life. Thus, rather than bifurcating populations, as we see in the larger national political framework, this project seeks to look at new bridges of connection among these populations.

In order to understand acculturation and social integration, we must look at the relationship of the power structure within United States society. One should remember that people are more powerful than political authorities; people can change the ruling class. Michel De Certeau and Mayol Pierre discuss this in their book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, clarifying the relationship of power between the ruling class and society. In their focus on the relationship between authoritative people (ruling class) and society (ordinary people), they believe that people cannot be ruled the way the ruling class wants. People have the power to change things through their daily

routine activities. They have the power to change the culture and change the ruling class. The result of this can be seen in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim, religions in that people are sticking to the scripts from a thousand years ago. They say that for each strategy from the authority to the society, there is a tactic response to it. A good example of tactics from normal people could be the use of gospel songs by African-American slaves to pass hidden messages to each other, so the slave-owners did not understand them. It is important to work on spreading scripts among people, so they obey the rules and avoid forgetting the real writing. Their theories inform our understanding of how subcultures use certain tactics to fit into the dominant culture. For example, refugees that I spoke to in the United States have learned to adapt by changing their traditional culture of being Muslim to fit in to the new culture in order to get jobs more easily. So, they can survive with lower incomes from American jobs. On the other hand, the effects of labeling on the resettlement of refugees and immigrants need to be reduced, and their cultural beliefs should be respected. A simple example could be my Iraqi student friends. For some, when they go to a restaurant, they do not want to show that they do not drink alcohol at all. They just say, “not today” to the waiter, they are afraid of saying, “I am a Muslim, my religion does not allow me to drink.” This cultural and religious belief hiding needs to be overcome so refugees and immigrants can practice their everyday life without fear of rejection. These refugees and immigrants need to be able to practice their cultural and religious beliefs in the open in order to be fully integrated as United States citizens, as religious freedom is supposed to be one of the foundational tenants of America. Yet, as we see in the world, principle and practice do not always easily co-exist.

The United States situation is shaped directly by international conditions of conflict that lead to displacement, the larger international policies that determine how people flow across borders and who is deemed legitimate. Over the past few years, with the rise of the Arabic Spring Revolution, many people have been in exile to find a safe place to rebuild their future. Iraq is

among those countries most extremely impacted by this. Iraqi people went through two deadly wars in the last decade, one during the Iraqi co-operation freedom process in 2003, a United States-led war that destroyed Saddam Hussein's government in a week. But, the war did not stop there. For several years, many different groups led suicide bombing extremist measures in the public areas that pushed thousands of Iraqis into exile. The second war took place after the ISIS war in Iraq and Syria, and its interconnections to the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (Syria). This terrorist group attacked the north and then the middle part of Iraq in 2014. The conflict forced millions of people to leave the country. A large portion of the refugees and other effected people from both countries decided to flee to the western countries; the United States was one of them. This made both refugees and immigrants find their exile routes in a common country. Although both groups come from the same country, the political labels they carried created important differences in their experiences.

This project sharpens the focus on the substantive differences between immigrant and refugee identities through close examination of Iraqi populations in the United States. Based on United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR "Refugee and Immigrant Statistics"), a United Nations program that reaches out to help refugees, immigrants, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) all over the world, "Refugees are persons fleeing armed conflict or persecution. Their situation is often so perilous and intolerable that they cross national borders to seek safety in nearby countries, and thus become internationally recognized as 'refugees' with access to assistance from States, UNHCR, and other organizations. They are so recognized precisely because it is too dangerous for them to return home, and they need sanctuary elsewhere. These are people for whom denial of asylum has potentially deadly consequences." According to the same source (UNHCR "Refugee and Immigrant Statistics"), "migrants choose to move not because of a direct threat of persecution or death, but mainly to improve their lives by finding work, or in some

cases for education, family reunion, or other reasons. Unlike refugees who cannot safely return home, migrants face no such impediment to return. If they choose to return home, they will continue to receive the protection of their government.” According to the UNHCR "Refugee and Immigrant Statistics" up to 2016, there were over 65.6 million forcibly displaced people all over the world, and among those, 22.5 million are refugees and 10 million are stateless. 16% of these people are resettled in both North and South America. From Iraq alone, there are over 3 million IDPs inside the country and over 250,000 refugees in different countries. Thus, in the larger global structure, Iraqi immigrant and refugee populations in the United States provide a vital lens into a particular and often intensified situation of people as reflections of much larger histories, civilizations, political ideologies and interactions among authorities, systems and those deemed most vulnerable.

An overview of this project

My research centers on two groups of Iraqi people, Iraqi refugees and student immigrants, who come from the same country, with the same religious and educational background. All participants are Muslim and hold at least a bachelor’s degree. Based on the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS), from 2009 to 2014, the largest refugee group entering Virginia from 2009 to 2014 were Iraqi refugees, with a total population of 2,846 as shown in Figure 1. The second largest group to resettle in Virginia was the Bhutanese refugees with a total population of 2,371. Even though Iraqi refugees are the largest refugee group in Virginia, they have substantive and overlapping resettlement issues, ranging from the psychological to the social to the economic levels. Cummings et al. conducted research on immigrants’ depression problems. During refugee early resettlement, they focused on depression among older Iraqi-Kurdish refugees in the United States. They determined that health issues such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder are present among elderly Kurdish refugees. VDSS places the Iraqi refugees as the most

educated refugees in their 2009-2014 study, with 35.61% holding a college degree (as can be seen in Table 1).

These data show that Iraqi refugees are substantive in number and are also well-educated. Yet, as my research reveals, the larger context of xenophobia in the Trump anti-immigrant era places many barriers on the experiences of Iraqi populations attempting to build new lives in the United States.

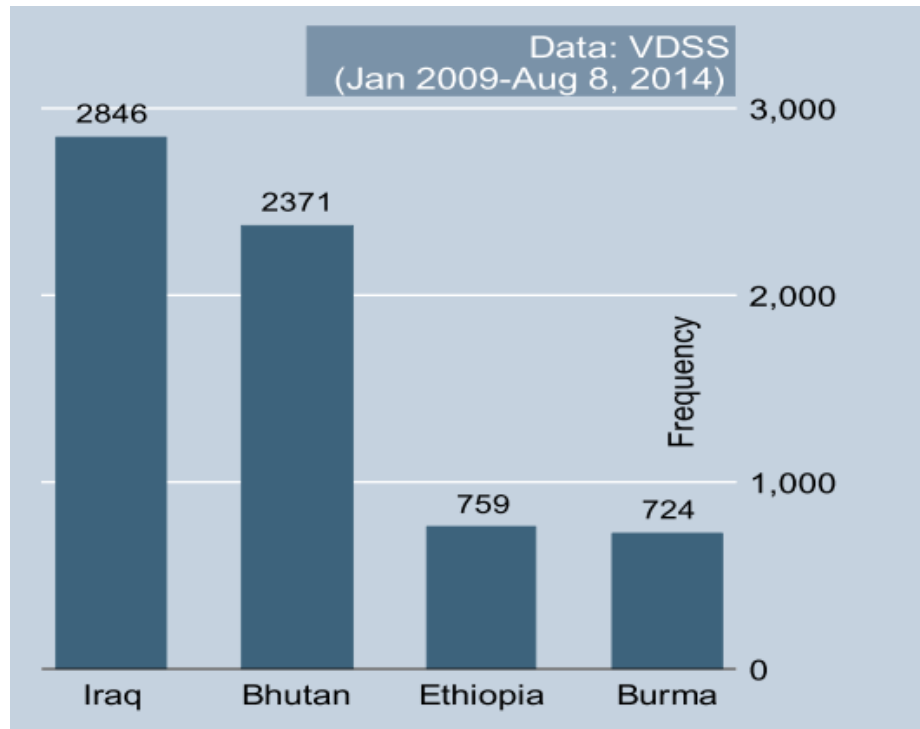


Figure 1: Data of refugees entering Virginia from 2009 to 2014, adopted from VDSS

Table 1: Education ratio of the large refugee groups entered Virginia from 2009 to 2014, adopted from VDSS.

Formal Education	Bhutan (n=881)	Burma (n=178)	Ethiopia (n=456)	Iraq (n=733)
1-5 years	17.48	21.91	2.19	7.37
6 years	5.22	6.74	1.32	3.68

7-11 years	29.97	41.57	13.38	17.46
High School Graduate	8.06	11.24	24.78	11.73
Partial College	3.52	2.81	4.39	4.23
Associate Degree	0.23	-	5.48	1.36
College Graduate	3.86	4.49	30.48	35.61
Master's Degree	1.25	-	11.18	2.18
Doctorate Degree	0.11	-	1.75	1.36
No Education	25.31	11.24	1.32	4.23
Other	0.79	-	2.85	6.27
Unknown	4.20	-	0.88	4.5
Total	100	100	100	100

Focus of the Research

This project focused on an overarching question: What are the most important determinants of successful United States resettlement for Iraqi student immigrants and refugees? As an activist researcher, I wanted to identify these key problems in order to make a meaningful difference with this project. To begin, I interviewed five Iraqi students located at Old Dominion University's Norfolk campus to compare their experiences to five refugees located in Hampton Roads resettled area. My bias is, I observe that refugees face more difficulties in their resettlement process than the Iraqi international students who later on become immigrants. In contrast, I observe that students do not remain at one level. They often go on to study at the master's or doctoral level in a short period of time, which brings substantial status differences for immigrant students compared to Iraqi refugees. My research analyzes the following sub-questions in exploring the differences between these two groups. What are the similarities between refugees and immigrants? What are the differences? What explains these substantial differences between two groups of people who come from same country and relocate to the same country? How do each one of the groups face difficulties in finding work? Which experiences directly conflict with the dreams and images they held about their new life in the United States before they migrated? How has their sense of

community and their existing social networks impacted these groups? Throughout the process of my research, I focused on these questions throughout my semi-structured interviews.

As a point of clarification, I want to make clear that the choice to use the term ‘United Statesian’ as opposed to the umbrella term of ‘American’ was a conscious one. I chose to use the term United Statesian because I understand that there is a specificity to the work I have been conducting with respect to nationality, policies, and governmental requirements. United Statesian denotes that the refugees and immigrants I interviewed are here in the United States and as such are navigating the United States’ legal system. This distinction is relevant when considering that ‘American’ can often be used as a catch-all term that both center the US in the larger geography of the Americas and muddy distinctions among countries and continents that are not always accurate or distinguishable.

Methodology

My role as a Middle Eastern researcher who is also an asylum seeker is a form of activism that I use to show refugees, especially women from my community, resistance against cultural norms.

I also want to fight against the double-standard facing refugee Muslim families and immigrant students in the United States that holds them back based on ethnic and religious discrimination. As a feminist researcher, when I interview refugee women, my concentration is on gender roles. I observe that refugee women face more difficulties than men during their journey and after their resettlement. Both groups of refugees and immigrants have similarities and differences in their predicaments of resettlement. The most obvious and crystal clear one is the difficulty in finding proper jobs. Since my study focuses on the Iraqi refugees who hold college degrees from their home countries and the Iraqi international students who have migrated to the

United States through graduate study programs, I want to understand how that affects the refugee degree holders in finding a proper job in their specialty field, as well as look at the Iraqi immigrant students, who after graduation face different difficulties in getting a professional job. This problem is even more prevalent when it comes to Muslim women, who face another layer of discrimination because they are more recognizable when they wear *hijab*, a scarf to cover their heads. My own social location as a Muslim woman asylum seeker in Hampton Roads, as well as the time I have spent sitting and chatting with the Muslim refugee women, has helped me in developing a rapport with my research participants and enabled a trustful relationship between us as an insider.

I used interview methods to collect the data. A face-to-face interview is seen as the most common way of getting data from the participants by feminist researchers. As Hesse-Biber notes, “The interview method remains one of the most popular tools that feminist researchers employ to get at subjugated knowledge” (Hesse-Biber 190). Interviews help the researcher get in-depth narrative-based data and unveil the marginalization of people in society (Hesse-Biber 190). This method is mostly used when the feminist researcher wants to do research on a specific set of issues and concerns for which the researcher needs detailed answers. Another benefit of this method is that the researcher can ask specific questions that makes the output of the interview simpler and better organized (Hesse-Biber 193). A face-to-face interview also allow for interpreting data beyond the answer to the original question such as emotions, experience, and body language. Interviews provide benefits to the research for obtaining additional information including the flexibility for follow-up questions; snowball sampling to get more participants; and asking for clarification on interviewees’ responses. One of the cons that the researchers face in this method is the inability to escape complexities of *power and authority*, which impact the data according to the nature of the interviewer/interviewee relationships. In order to ensure a better balance between the researcher and the researched, some researchers give a written copy of the transcribed and

analyzed interview to the interviewees to get their approval before they use the data (Hesse-Biber 199). Other cons could be that trust takes time to develop and that it is difficult to find a location for personal connection, scheduling time for the interview, the small sample size, and personal space that may not be sufficient and proper.

As a feminist researcher, I must be aware of the issues which both parties face in this area. I am an “insider” with them because I am an asylum seeker student here and I am from the same country as participants. The interview method has many great benefits. Firstly, through interviews, the interviewer can collect more information through the participants’ body language and through observing their emotions because in interviews, the interviewer has all of their focus on one person. Researchers must build a trustful relationship that can help them to notice issues that the interviewee may want to share but may not have been able to before. Second, face-to-face interview gives the interviewer a better understanding of the answers and by observing gestures it will be easier to understand the point the interviewee is trying to make and empathize with the emotions through seeing body language. Another point that pushed me to use this method is my social location similarities with the participants that help me build trust and allow me to follow up with other questions later during my research.

Sometimes, interviewees do not want to tell the truth because of fear of something, such as retaliation or stigmatization from their social group. During my initial interviews, in one of my previous projects, I realized the mother of one of the refugee families was reluctant to share with me her true feelings for fear of backlash from the resettlement agency. She asked me if I worked for them. She was concerned that they would deny her help if they heard her complaint through me. This is another challenge which I faced during interviews. During one interview, a neighbor visited. When I asked the interviewee to continue, she confirmed that it was okay to go on speaking

with her neighbor there, but I could easily see in her eyes that it was not okay. In our culture, it is rude to say, “I do not want my neighbor to be here while I am interviewing”. Consequently, I had to tell the neighbor that I could not continue the interview with someone else listening. My cultural knowledge as well as my sensitivity to body language during the face-to-face interview process allowed me to adjust my tactics during the interview so I wouldn’t jeopardize my interviewees’ trust. This is also one of the reasons that I cannot use focus group methods for my topic. While it would have some benefits, the topic is sensitive, and interviewees often do not want others to hear their stories and personal details that they are sharing with me. Besides this, I also need to consider my potential bias and social location during the interview, so that the process goes smoothly. Interview methods allow privacy and time to speak in-depth in one-on-one scenarios that allow the participants to share their full story and concerns.

Women have gone through many obstacles throughout the history of humanity. It is important for feminist research to highlight these women’s stories. This motivates me to study the problems women face when resettling through a refugee program in the United States. In my research on the impact of racism on work opportunities for the resettled Iraqi refugees and students in Hampton Roads. I have found that most of the new refugee women do not work. Those who do work always ask me to share their problems with citizens in the community, so people can understand their challenges. In my experience working with refugees in the area, I see the obstacles that refugees face, especially women. Even American women face gender inequality issues related to job opportunities, but refugee women face both gender inequality and cultural prejudice. For instance, all ten participants in my research are Muslims and some of the Muslim women refugee wear *hijab*. This publicly identifies their religious background, particularly notable in this current climate of Islamophobia. This could affect the women more and more among the residents of Hampton Roads. As a Muslim refugee graduate student in the area, I feel their pain when they talk

about problems with their *hijab* at work or in other social spaces because I am a Muslim and also wear a *hijab*. Because I work with an academic staff, I have never faced difficulties at work due to my *hijab*. What I have seen from my coworkers is love, respect, and support. However, this might not be true for the other Iraqi students who work at ODU. There might be students among my research participants who have faced xenophobia. On the other hand, I have experienced racism outside the campus.

Refugees in Hampton Roads get services from Commonwealth Catholic Charities (CCC). CCC is the largest formal organization in Hampton Roads with a dedicated focus on refugees. This area continues to receive refugees from many countries. CCC helps in providing translators to interview the new refugees, finding jobs for the refugees, and filling out forms. CCC is limited in the help it can provide within the larger social, economic and political United States context, where resources for full integration are extremely limited. This places severe challenges on new refugees to attain jobs and integrate quickly in United States society. Many of the newly resettled refugees, for example, are placed in a pork butchering factory in Smithfield, Virginia. The Muslim refugees have religious restriction against working with anything related to pig products. In Islam, it is prohibited to work with pig products or alcoholic drinks. This organization cannot afford all of the refugee needs in the limited timeframe available. For example, CCC can afford to provide English language class only for the first three months after a refugee's arrival. After that period, refugees must find somewhere else to learn English. They might find some volunteers from church or mosque etc. Even though this is helpful, the need for these extended programs points to the severe shortcomings of the 3-month standard window of services in the United States refugee resettlement approach.

Ethics

In any society, ethics is an umbrella that conducts the rules of a society by the principles and standards of that society. Linda Bell says simply that “Ethics generally means moral principles or rules of conduct” (Hesse-Biber 74). As a feminist researcher, it is important for me to focus on the principles of ethics in both feminist research methodology and indigenous research methods. Due to the interconnection of both feminist research and indigenous research, it is important to be cautious about both social location and bias when interviewing the research participants.

Ethics can vary from one culture to another. Feminist researchers’ interpretation of ethics should vary from one group of people to another. In feminist research methods, ethics can be seen in different models namely: *deontological ethics* models that deal with following justice and an intended principle, *utilitarian or consequentialist ethics* models where consequences judge rightness and wrongness, *virtue ethics* that allow the researchers to focus on their morality and value base, and *feminist ethics of care* that focuses on relationships and responsibilities (Hesse-Biber 80). For my research, I incorporate mostly feminist ethics of care because I conducted feminist interviews with a group of refugees and student immigrants who have migrated to Hampton Roads from a different society. This means I must pay extra attention to social location and bias with these participants.

Potential sources of bias arise from my shared social location with the participants (i.e. that of a Muslim, Middle Eastern woman refugee). It is possible that they may have not shared insights or observations with me that they thought I already knew because I have similar experiences. I attempted to ask additional follow-up questions throughout the interview to look for details that they may not share because of this assumption.

Analysis of Dreams and Realities

The dreams both refugees and immigrants have are to provide a better and safer life for their family members. The new settlers start looking for jobs right after their first week of resettlement. This is true by nature to everybody. In today's life, work is the main source of life. Noor Ahmad, who is one of my participant student immigrants, said "right after getting here [to the United States], I started working as a graduate assistant. But, it was not sufficient, I started buying and selling cars on Craigslist. It is so helpful. I work so hard to catch up with my Ph.D. and my small business online. I remember my friends told me that I may not be successful in my study, but I see myself successful in both studying and selling cars." In general, refugees and immigrants are eager how to find their fellow citizens in their new area. One of my refugee participants, Daroon Shamil, said: "finding and making friendship with the Iraqi people in Newport News is as important as finding a good job. It is because I am used to my culture, only my people can understand what my heart needs. I used to have many friends back home. Now, my wish is to have an Iraqi co-worker at work to work with. Even though I love my job, if I hear an opening where my Iraqi friends work, I will apply for it." This tells me that the refugees are also looking for their people in Hampton Roads. This is human nature, when you are far away from your home, you feel homesick. It is so helpful to have a pal from the same culture, same religion, same language to share the daily life problems and experiences with.

Employment

As most people in America have heard pieces of news from President Trump's "Americans first" rhetoric, his priority is getting jobs to Americans, which may push the employers to hire people based on their race. As Takeda Joe mentions in her study, Iraqi immigrants and refugees experience more difficulties in the United States; they face a double-standard because they are Arab and immigrants and because of the United States' war against Saddam Hussein in 2003 (Takeda). Arabic speaking people are broadly unwelcomed in United States society because of the

stereotypical association between terrorism with Arabs and Muslims. Iraqis are doubly stigmatized because they originate from a country considered 'hostile' by the United States. Randy Capps and Fix Michael discuss that overall, most of the refugees who enter the United States have gained employment. They discuss that "refugee men are employed at a higher rate than their United States-born peers, with two-thirds of refugee men employed during the 2009-11 period, compared to 60 percent of United States-born men," but they have not accounted for the payment difference, or what kind of jobs they mean.

Refugees get jobs, but not jobs that meet their education levels. Even with college degrees, these people sometime work at meat processing places like Smithfield, cutting pig meat. One of the participants of this research, Aras Mahmood said "I have two degrees, yet I work as a laborer at Walmart. This is two years I am looking for a suitable job that is my dream, but I am becoming more and more hopeless when nobody calls me for a job interview." The hope the refugees have before coming to the United States stems from the exaggerations they hear about life in the United States. They see the United States in the movies. They assume that everybody has a professional job and if one has a college degree, should work at a professional position. When they come, they get shocked when they cannot even easily get a job at a pizza shop. This shock is much different to the international students. Fatima Ali said "I am so happy working to my department at ODU, my job is fitting me. I do research as well as teaching assistant. I love the students I deal with as well as my adviser who is like a boss for my job. Besides of that, I have Iraqi friends like you [directed to Bnar]. Whenever I want to see you, in five minutes I can come and see you." Ali's words provide wide support for her department. She is so comfortable with her lifestyle. My understanding to this difference between the refugees and immigrants' lifestyle refers to the environment in which they live. Being in a diverse community like Old Dominion University, makes resettlement much easier than being in a general community.

Beyond their race and ethnic differences, Iraqis have social stigmatization problems that lead to difficulties of labeling. When one is labeled differently, the chances of getting a job change. Jeremy Hein sheds light on the phenomenon of labeling refugees. He discusses the differences between immigrants and refugees and the benefits people receive based on the perspective labels. Refugees are mostly defined and distinguished by their relationship to the state. Immigrants leave their countries to find a better life whereas refugees' motives to leave their homeland are war or political conflicts that force their exodus. For the refugees, it is harder to find a job because they are motivated to leave, and therefore have not been able to make their own plans for resettling; whereas, the immigrants are more prepared, and they have chosen the country of their dreams. As the Iraqi international student Jamal Jalil said "America is my dream world. I am so satisfied here, especially when I am one semester away from graduation." In Jalil's case, this educational experience mirrored his earlier dreams, thus creating a continuity that facilitated an easier transition.

Networking

To resolve some of the aforementioned problems, helping the refugees and the student immigrants to create varied and positive connections among each other could help both sides in filling the gap of finding jobs; helping in translation and better understanding the new culture they live in, and also resolving each other's grief, depression, and loneliness. All of this can have an impact on improving their lives during their resettlement. Regarding this, Lori Beaman examines the effect of social networks among refugees for the labor market entry, especially for those resettled in the United States. She has found that bigger social networks make entry into the labor market easier. Sometimes resettlement agencies fail to find jobs for refugees during the initial service period; but through social networks, refugees manage to find employment on their own. In 2006, the United States government decided to welcome many Iraqi citizens who worked with the

United States forces in Iraq. After reaching the United States, those Iraqi refugees faced challenges finding jobs. Most federal jobs in the United States require United States citizenship and background investigations. This report mentioned that some of the institutions decided to offer some flexibility towards noncitizens, such as the Government Accountability Office in the United States (GAO), is a governmental department that is responsible for examining how the government spends public money and how the social service programs progress. The GAO has conducted research on the refugees' cash benefits that they receive from the government. The report shows that refugee employment ratio decreases every year. For instance, the percentage of the refugees who started working in the first eight weeks of their resettlement in 2007 was around 60%. That percentage decreased in 2008 to 40% while the number of the refugees entering the United States also decreased. This unemployment problem leads to the government spending more money to help refugees. The report recommends that the government seeks more strategic ways to find jobs for the refugees and help them in making sufficient income, so they do not ask for governmental benefits as cash assistance, as well as helping them to have a better networking connection so they help each other in finding jobs.

INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

Comparison of the experiences of the refugees and student immigrants

Self-sufficiency is a crucial issue in the transition to a new country. Providing for life without a job is among one of the highest stressors for a person, no matter where they live. In addition to the struggles of finding jobs, resettlement, networking and discrimination play central roles in the capacity to successfully relocate, as seen in the experiences of both the Iraqi refugees and the Iraqi international student immigrants in this study. These dimensions of resettlement pronounce the challenges of integration. For instance, some of refugees left their countries because of joblessness. Yet, when they came to America, they faced the very same problem. They were

thinking that getting a job in America might be easy, until they faced the realities of the United States' job market. Refugees and many migrants have long suffered constraints on their mobility. They are often forced to leave their homes for reasons beyond their control. When these people were forced to flee, they only have suitcases with them, and it is hard to imagine how much a suitcase can carry.

The definition of asylees according to Virginia Newcomer Information System (UNHCR "Who Is a Refugee") are individuals who, on their own, travel to the United States and subsequently apply for or receive a grant of asylum. Asylees do not enter the United States as refugees. They may enter as students, tourists, business people, or even in undocumented status. Once in the United States or at a land border or port of entry, they apply to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) for asylum. Jeremy Hein sheds light on an important phenomenon—labeling refugees. He discussed the differences between immigrants and refugees as well as the benefits people receive based on the labels they have. Refugees are mostly distinguished by their relationship to the state. He explains the reasons immigrants leave their countries to find a better life as compared to refugees' motives to leave their homeland because of war or political conflict that force them to leave their country.

The difference between the refugee and the immigrants (asylees) originates in immigrants' ability to choose their resettlement location. The asylees have the option of where to resettle while the refugees follow the recommendations of the agencies from the beginning. On the other hand, the asylees do not get the government benefits that the refugees receive through said agencies. Another difference is that the asylees are not permanent residents until they go through the waiting time (3 to 7 years) to get interviewed in order to gain a permanent residency and then, after a few years, they may apply for a Green Card. Unlike immigrants, the refugees are permanent residents

upon the first day of resettlement and they often get their Green Card after one year. The refugees have gone through many of difficulties to go to another country to start a new life, they have spent years in the refugee camps before coming to the countries chosen for them while the asylees most often come through the airports without facing any difficulties. Despite this, both asylees and refugees face the same lifestyle change and culture shock. This means they both go through the same social predicaments. They both need guidance and help to get used to the new lifestyle they face. Among the different groups of both refugees and immigrants, in my study, I focus on the refugees who have a college degree and know the English language and the student immigrants who have entered the United States as international students who later apply for asylum to become permanent residents. Here, both groups have college degrees from the same country, Iraq, and both groups know English.

Resettlement

Before the refugees arrive, the agencies rent an apartment based on the refugee's family size, and they buy basic furniture for them. Each refugee member has \$925 from the government, the agency uses that money to rent the apartment and to pay for the furniture they have put in the apartment a week before the refugee arrives. The government also pays for their one-way flight ticket, yet later on the refugee must pay that money back from his/her paycheck through Commonwealth Catholic Charities. The refugees I interviewed have complained about how their money (\$925/person) is spent. They are asking to spend the money themselves, while the agencies say that it is required from the government to rent an apartment and buy basic furniture for the refugees prior coming to the United States. One of the refugee participants, Ali Rashid said:

Those who spent the welcome money \$925/person for us, they did not spend my money properly. I think, that if they give the money to the refugees so they spend the money themselves would be a lot better. For example, in my case, they have rent a very dirty apartment for me full of bugs, my two young kids were so scared of bugs at the beginning,

now they hunt down the bugs with fun. Back home, we had a very clean house, we never had bugs. Besides, the agency spent all of our money in buying stuff that we do not need that much, after finding a job, I was able to provide what I need the most. I threw out all what they had bought for me, then I bought new stuff for the house.

From Rashid's comments, the refugees in their early stage of resettlement know very little about these rules and regulations; they think that the agency should not have spent their money. When I talked to the agency, CCC, they said that they cannot give the money to the refugees. The government requires that agencies spend the money prior to the refugees' arrival, so their apartment will be ready for them when they arrive. The remainder of that money will be given to the refugees in three months, but in the meantime, refugees must be able to find a job in order to survive. Therefore, refugee dreams quickly burdened by the challenges of adapting to the new environment.

All refugees have dreams before they arrive to the United States. Some of them are naive about the lifestyle here. For example, they do not know that they must pay apartment rent, health insurance, car insurance, telephone bill, internet bill, and/or child care. Another problem will appear when refugees settle in their apartment. Refugee agencies must rent apartments for refugees without their prior input. Based on my interviews, refugees stated that they often do not get along with their neighbors because a variety of refugees from different countries, with different cultures, live close to each other in government provided housing. Sometimes refugees have conflicts between each other based on cultural differences. For example, when African refugees mix with Iraqi refugees, differences in perceptions of shared residential space emerge. The common living situations in many parts of Africa, namely the refugee camps from which refugees' transition, lead refugees to use apartment complex hallways as spaces for children to play in. In Iraq, a hallway is kept as a quiet area for all the apartments to respect.

This imposed integration of many nationalities in refugee resettlement housing also leads to perceptions that cultural practices such as cooking take over common spaces. Heshw Hussein, a female refugee, said:

Our neighborhood is safe, I have a good connection with them, but I still have problem with them because they are not Iraqis, they have cultural intersectionality problem with us, in their culture, it is a shame if a Muslim woman not being covered. It is true that I am a Muslim, but I do not cover my head, I wear short-sleeved shirts and short skirts. Even back home, I was like that, in Iraqi culture, more than half of the people wear what I wear here, but it looks that in Afghani and Somali women must be covered. Sometimes they gossip and say, “Heshw is so naked, next time, she might wear sleeping cloth to outside.” This was bothering me at the beginning of our resettlement, but when I neglected them, I got rid of that problem.

We have a refugee neighbor which is from Nepal, their food spices are so different with a very strong smell, when they cook, they open their apartment’s door, the hall way will be filled with their food’s smell. The smell is that much strong that my kids puke sometimes.

Heshw Hussein was so worried about her kids, she is asked her husband to find another apartment, so they could get away of the spice’s smell. The Iraqis are still trying to follow Iraqi culture-norm in the United States. Heshw Hussein wants to dress as she wants not as their neighbors want. This tells me that culture shock has a major impact on the newly resettled refugees. This could be resolved if they could be more widely dispersed in the cities instead of collecting all the refugees in a neighborhood.

This problem is not only among the refugees, but it is among the refugees and the American citizens as well. Based on my experience in our refugee class investigation, one of the refugees told me that a refugee child fought with an American child in their school bus in front of the refugee’s house. When the refugee mother came to separate the two kids from each other to stop the fight, the American mother saw the refugee mother touching her child and proceeded to call the police to arrest the refugee mother.

The experience of the international Iraqi students in the Hampton Roads area is a completely different story. The students prior to coming to the United States, usually make

connections with the other international students who are admitted to their new university. They pick the university to study, meaning that the students go the city where they want to be, based on the information they get through friends and the university websites. In essence, they can choose their dream places. Often, the students use social media, such as Facebook, to setup social networks and build design their basic support systems for everyday life, such as renting rooms. One of the students who participated in my study, San Qadir said:

Old Dominion University did a fair in Iraq, I attended their fair, then they gave me very good information on the university and the area. Then after getting a scholarship from the Iraqi government, I planned to come to the United States, Hampton Roads, before leaving the country, through Facebook, I contacted the Saudi students' organization, they helped me a lot, they even sent me prices and pictures of apartments, cars, and even some clothes in the markets. Through talking, I got much more information. I knew that life in the United States is not easy, but because of my dreams, I prepared my family and we left the country. When we arrived, in a week, I changed two houses, that was with a help of one of the Iraqi Kurdish students who is studying at ODU, I knew him through the Saudi students. They explained many things to me. I was able to resettle easily. However, being homesick at the beginning was so hard.

From Qadir's experience, it was so helpful that one before coming to the United States (or relocating anywhere else) to contact the available organizations to get answers to his questions. This was helpful for myself as well. When we came, my husband's uncle helped us a lot. Old Dominion University has been working significantly on the associations and chaplains available at ODU to help the new students.

Some other students had chosen the area because they have their ethnic community close by in the area. One of the students, Kamyar Hussein, who is an Iraqi Kurdish student said:

I was so fortunate that I have my uncle's family in the area, before even thinking about studying in the United States, I was planning to go to Newcastle University in England, but my uncle who has been in Hampton Roads for more than twenty years and he is finished his MS and Ph.D. at ODU advised me to come to the United States to study close to him in Hampton Roads at ODU. He helped me in applying to ODU, supporting me financially, and letting me to stay at their house for the first two months of my life in the United States. In this two months, he gave me a car, with my wife we both got driving license, we attended many family gatherings and events, his family taught us many useful things about

American culture. I remember, their first advice was that in the United States three questions are never asked: how old are you? how much do you weigh? and how much money do you make? While all the three questions in Iraqi culture is okay. They helped us in finding a good apartment close to ODU. And they introduced us to many Kurdish families in the area.

This narrative shows that knowing someone in the same place which refugees/immigrants want to be relocated to has a magnificent impact on successful resettlement. Especially for the Iraqis, having relatives somewhere is so important due to the strong family relationship and cultural connections. The Iraqis are used to big networking in their communities, sometimes they only marry among each other.

In general, the student immigrants have not faced troubles of resettlement. They gained support through the university, which served as a most helpful institutional tie to establish good connections with peers and local populations. Even the international students of the Muslim Students Association, Saudi Students Association, and Persian Students Association played key roles in supporting the international students in general and the Middle Eastern students in particular.

In terms of resettlement, my research suggests that, for the student immigrants, associations with family and/or friends have a good impact on introducing the community to the new students as well as providing variety help to the new students. This evidence can show the refugee organizations to adapt some outreach and communication methods similar to the services provided through ODU. If the refugees, like the student immigrants, have a social media link to contact, the resettled refugees would be influential in reaching successful resettlement in Hampton Roads. This can be done for refugees from different countries as well. For instance, if CCC opened a Facebook account for Iraqis in Newport News, it will help the Iraqis who migrate to the Hampton Roads to get some information on their new relocation area.

This shows the importance of networking among the refugees and immigrants. If an Iraqi contact an Iraqi refugee in the Hampton Roads area, they get connected to a new common cultural community before migrating the United States. Networking has a magical impact on the life of the refugees and immigrants.

Networking

It is very important for both refugees and immigrants to have a social network among themselves. Daniel Masterson says that the humanitarian organizations should have a long-term plan for refugee resettlement. Refugees have been moved from familiar cultural context to a foreign environment in which they need longer surveillance of in order to become familiar in their new home. The Iraqis that have especially strong culture relations. Sometimes, even the neighbors stay in the same street for more than few decades. When an old neighbor moves out from the street, all the neighbors start crying. This means the Iraqi refugees and immigrants need to build their networking as soon as possible because they are not adapted to survive in a more lonely, disconnected lifestyle. As an Iraqi immigrant in Hampton Roads, I am surprised when I see the same strong relationship among the Iraqis who have been in the area for a long time. They have a strong community; they often gather in one of the Iraqi houses and they host parties and celebrate their religious ceremonies. Whenever I attend those gatherings, I feel relieved; I feel like I am among my relatives back home. However, the new refugees do not have that strong network that they are seeking. They need help in getting introduced to the other Iraqis. Aras Mahmood, as an Iraqi refugee participant said:

When I came to the area, I was feeling lonely a lot. I got introduced to couple of Iraqi refugees, they were like me too. Then we started visiting each other. But that was not sufficient because we were looking for the older refugees that run business who can help us finding a job. But, unfortunately, nobody helped, no one bothered to spend their precious time with us. Later on, when I got a job at Walmart, I started working even overtime, this made me so busy that I did not have time even to my family. When my five started

complaining, I reduced my working hours to spend some time with my family. The problem for my wife is the language, she does not know English, she does not have driving license, everything I should take care of. Back home, I had lots of people around me helping. I think the Iraqis need to be more united in the United States, so we make a better connection among each other. I think the mosques should have done something in that case, they could help the refugees more, they could reunite all the Iraqis in Hampton Roads.

This reflection illustrates that the Islamic centers can have a better impact on successful resettlement for the refugees. I am aware that some churches have cars to help those who need transportation in the area. The mosques could have done that too. The Iraqi refugees are mostly Muslims, yet the contact between the Muslim Iraqi refugees and the Islamic centers is not very strong. The demonstrated importance of shared ethnic networks is a central feature in immigrants' decisions to relocate to a particular area.

The proportional number of refugees from one's country of origin makes a difference in the experience of resettlement. Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) provides data, as can be seen in Figure 2, about the number of refugees in Virginia, according to country of origin.

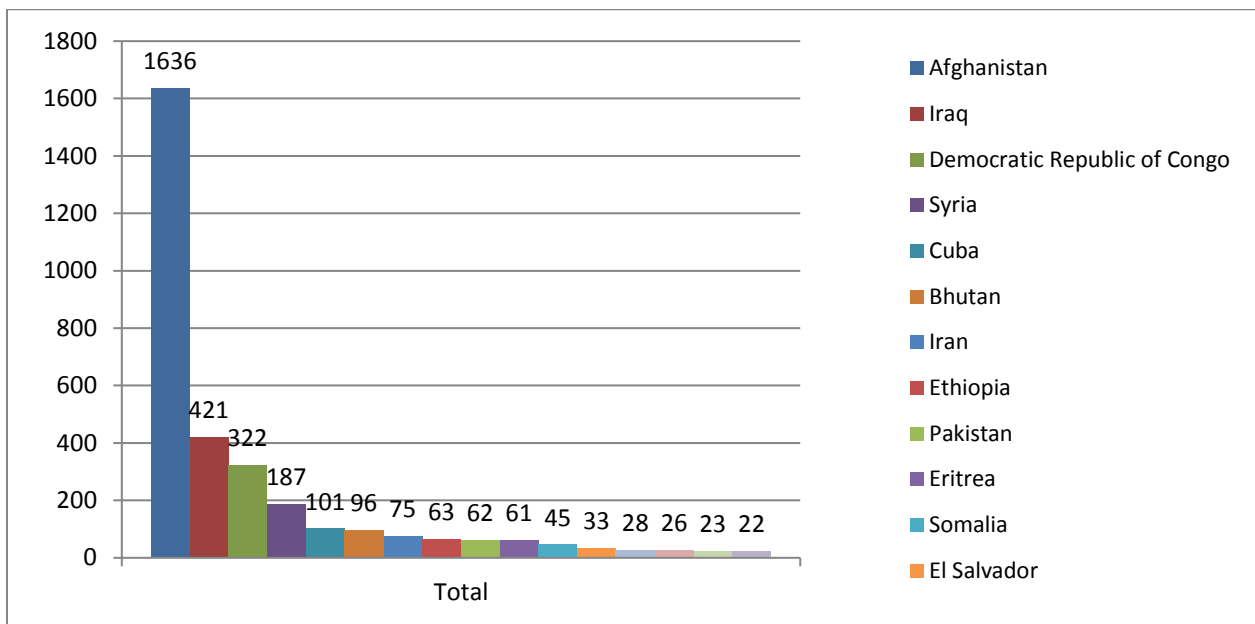


Figure 2: Data of refugees' arrivals for 2016 in Virginia, adopted from VDSS.

Through this data, refugees can see the ratio of people from their country of origin. These data illustrate an important impact on the experiences of refugees. For example, when an Iraqi refugee knows that 421 Iraqi refugees have resettled in Virginia, s/he experiences a mental relief. Initial resettlement means that refugees have a greater likelihood of finding community when they resettle. In his paper, Beaman Ali, (2005) examines the effect of social networks among refugees for the labor market specially for those resettled in the United States. He indicated that larger social networks predict more favorable labor market outcomes. Sometimes resettlement agencies fail to find jobs for refugees during the period of resettlement, but through social networks refugees benefit in ways that provide a better life for themselves.

The Iraqi student immigrants have a totally different story of integration. Because they go to college, most of their friends are college students. The students have problems after their graduation. They need a broader network among Iraqis and Middle Easterners, so they help each other in finding jobs. All five of the student participants said that they have a good connection with other college students. They go to the events held by both ODU and the international organizations. For instance, there is an organization named Global Student Friendship, GSF/ODU, that holds a weekly free lunch for the international students on 49th Street in Norfolk. This event gathers a good amount of the students. Usually, the new students are advised to attend that event. Also, the Islamic Center on 49th Street holds a Friday prayer, a mandatory group prayer in Islam held at noon time. Most of the Muslim students meet at the mosque on that day, and at night, they come back to the mosque to spend more time together. Another example of this is the Muslim Students Association (MSA/ODU), which has a regular meeting on every Monday at the Office of Intercultural Relations at ODU. Some of the Muslim students attend that meeting as well.

By providing annual funding to these associations, ODU has encouraged social networks to help these new students. Among those associations, MSA is one of the busiest associations in helping the new students. Because MSA is not focusing on one country, its broad association to all the Muslim country students who come to ODU makes it a hub for social connection, cross-cultural ties and networking through religious identity.

The Iraqi student immigrants have established solid connections with their neighbors in the community. Since the community around ODU is mostly related to ODU (such as the students and ODU employees), the connection is spread among geographic neighbors. Regarding his connection to his neighbors, Qadir, who has a family of five, said:

We have very good neighbors, they are a mix of Saudis, Egyptians, and Americans. The kids are so happy together, they have a play-day, at that day, they gather at one of the houses to play together. This is the best day of the week for them.

From Qadir's comments, it is clear that the student immigrants have a stronger connection with their neighbors compared to the Iraqi refugees. The diverse community around ODU has made the students happier and more successful.

Despite that, the students need job networking as well. In Hampton Roads, it is so helpful to know somebody to recommend prospective professional opportunities. Jamal Jalil, who is a single Iraqi student, is about to graduate. He has had a hard time finding a job. As he said:

I have applied to many jobs, but so far nobody has interviewed me. My friends tell me that if you know somebody in industry, it would be much easier to find a job. For example, the Indian students find jobs so easily because they have a very good connection with the Indians who have been here for a long time. We all need to unite and help each other in finding jobs. It is so stressful to have such a good degree yet struggling with finding a job.

This statement reflects the importance of networking in finding jobs, especially for new refugees who do not know many people in the area. For students, they often have only interacted with their

college friends. Thus, professional networking requires a much greater leap in association, integration and confidence.

Employment

When most refugees immigrate to the United States, English is not their first language. Ying Zhen discusses the importance of English proficiency among recent immigrants in the United States to get employed sooner (Zhen). Refugees need to know English fluently to find professional jobs. The resources that are available for refugees to find jobs are in English, and the system is not familiar for them. All the websites that are available are only in English. Therefore, a refugee either does not know how to find the career opportunity or does not know about the resources due to a language barrier. Refugees should have some skills to find jobs, for example, refugees need to know English, have a computer, and have internet access in order to go to the websites to look for jobs. However, providing information on the agency's websites can be complicated. Refugees should know about the details of the questions in the application form. Usually refugees ask a skillful person to fill out the form for them, or they might not find the expert person among them.

The refugees' expectations change soon after they resettled in the United States. Participants in this study mentioned some of their expectations before they arrived. Their expectations about finding job were totally opposite to the reality here. The disappointment that the refugees experienced in the United States is reflected in the thoughts that they had in Iraq. They mentioned that, in their country, when people talk about United States it means a perfect life. The bias people have about life in America is based on the movies and agencies not telling them the reality of lifestyle for immigrants. Hussein said:

My expectation about my new life in the United States was all vice versa. I was seeing the United States in the movies, I was expecting to get a good job and working in my specialty field which is working with the charity and humanitarian organizations. My first problem in my first months of my new life in the United States was the dirty apartment from the

organizations and finding a proper job to improve my life here. It was so hard to find a job. My first job was working at a store to sell ladies stuff like jewelry and other things. In my culture, it is not nice to smile while working. In the United States, it is totally vice versa, my boss was always whispering to my ears to smile towards the customers. She was saying “Heshw, smile, smile, smile.” After few weeks, I got the technique of smiling towards the customers. I feel like I have challenging with making friends, maybe because selling is not my expertise, or I may still have not adopted the marketing culture perfectly.

She mentioned that her brother had been living in America a year before she came here, but she did not get enough information. For Hussein, she thought because she has a bachelor’s degree in Kurdistan, she will find a job easily. She said, “I thought it was easy to get a job here, but it wasn’t easy for us, and I thought that the health care system will be free here, like in Kurdistan.” Hussein came with many wishes, but soon after her resettlement she was fundamentally altered by the reality she discovered. Besides, Hussein was concerned about her work in the future here because she wants to find a job which is related to her field of study. Hussein faced another surprise moment when she found her job through friend networks not from the agency.

I was hoping to find a job through Commonwealth Catholic Charities (CCC), but it turned down very badly. I went to their office one day, I think it was after one month of reaching here, I talked with one of lady who was a head of the program. Okay, she said “what kind of job you are looking for?” I said any kind, I was working with (NGOs), and I know English. She said: “You cannot find the same job here” I said I am only looking for a normal job. She said: “We can find you a job which is cleaning a hotel” when she said that I was panicked.

Hussein is very much aware of the agency rules because she used to work with NGOs. She pointed out that it is very difficult to hear disrespect from an employer. She mentioned that when she went to CCC to ask for a job, she did not want a professional-level position, just work in general. Hussein has a bachelor’s in linguistics and, as stated previously, has background experience working with NGOs. Hussein feels that her academic background makes her more disappointed with the United States’ employment options. She stated that “some other refugees

who come with non-degree background is expected to find these kinds of work.” She thinks for someone like her coming with an academic background, being offered cleaning hotel job in America is difficult to understand. She chose to ignore options to find jobs through CCC, and instead found a job through one of her friends. She said, “Even though I used to work with an American company in Kurdistan, I thought this might help me get a job faster than other refugees, but unfortunately that was not the case.” Hussein’s expectations came from her background experience. She thought finding a job here might be easier for someone like her and knowing English from the beginning of her arrival.

Despite my good knowledge of English, and having Bachelor’s degree in Linguistics, also, having the experience of working with global organizations including the United Nations for several years, I still have difficulties finding a good job. But, in Kurdistan, if someone has bachelor’s degree, you can find a job easier.

For Hussein, not being able to find a job here with her experience working with NGOs felt very disappointing. She thinks it is racism and xenophobia in which people see foreigners as secondary in this country. She said “Here, they do not take your experience outside the United States in consideration Which means that, there is a lot of racism and islamophobia in the United States towards Middle Eastern people, while the story is totally reversed for somebody who comes from Europe or any other country.” Even though, she already found a job as a sales associate, she would prefer to work in an area more related to her professional field. This gap between skill and former experience and the reality of United States employment placement became a defining feature in the narratives about refugee resettlement.

When it comes to employment issues, all of the refugees and immigrants have a lot to say. Rashid is another refugee participant in my study who has bachelor’s degree in Agricultural Engineering with a trilingual ability in Kurdish, Arabic and English. After searching for his dream

job to work in his specialty, he is now an Uber driver (taxi driver) in the informal economy. He recollected:

In Iraq, the organizations lied to us, they told us that they will pay for our apartment up to eight months, when we came, they just covered three months. This pushed us to look for jobs right the way. I contacted the organization to help me finding a job, later, I went to their office, when I started talking to them, one thing really hurt my heart, I will never forget that: back home, I was a manager in one of the governmental offices, over 150 employees were working for me. When that day at the organization's office they were talking to me in English, they asked me a very embarrassing question, they said "can you count until ten?" I was shocked. I said I have a college degree, I have studied my bachelor's in English, now you ask me if I can count till ten! I said, no I do not know how to count till ten. They knew that I got angry, but they did not apologize. It was like a mental fight they did against me. My struggle is with finding a proper job. I have applied to many openings in different places, but nobody even called me, except one interview. I have experience of decades working as a manager for the government back home, but here in the United States, they do not count experience outside the United States. Now, I do Uber, I have a flexible schedule, I can take care of my two sons when my wife is at work and I can work anytime I want. However, even Uber has its own headache. Sometimes, I face discrimination. One day, one of my customers reported me to Uber, he said that I was doing drugs and I was drinking alcohol, while it was totally wrong. When Uber contacted me, I said okay, I am ready to be tested at any clinic Uber picks, I will pay for the test, I have never done drugs, I even do not know how drugs are done, and I am a Muslim, I never drink. Besides, if it was true, why he has not called police?

My research suggests that encouraging the refugee degree holders to study a Master's degree in one of the United States universities helps a lot in getting better jobs to the refugee degree holders. Being busy with study for a couple of years, then getting a professional job is better than spending the rest of your life in depression.

Discrimination against refugees is a widely shared experience. They face discrimination at work, where their bosses sometimes abuse them and use them in an inappropriate way. Mahmood says that he has a hard time with his manager at work, saying that the manager does not behave equally between the foreigners and the American workers. He says that the manager is so rude with the refugee workers, he knows that the refugees do not know enough information about their rules. As a researcher, I have felt that the refugees know very little about their rights. It is the

governmentally-supported organizations' responsibility to clearly explain employment rules for the refugees and they should check on new refugees when they start their first job in the United States. This way, the refugees feel that there is somebody that has their back when they face discrimination. Some refugees, because they do not know English fluently, do not want to mess with filing employment abasement. However, one of the refugee participants, Ali, who is working in his specialty, said:

My challenge at the beginning was with my strong accent in English language, back home I studied welding in mechanical field, after getting my degree, I became a professional welder, then when I migrated to the United States, I was fortunate that my brother-in-law who is working for NASA helped me in finding a welding job. At the beginning of my work with that company, I was feeling that some of the employees were thinking that I do not deserve what I get paid while I was a professional welder but I was hired as an assistant welder. My boss was paying me as an assistant welder (helper) whereas I was doing all the welding by myself and they were surprised how good I do welding. The problem in the United States is that they look for reference and your experience in the United States, they do not account experience outside the United States, especially if one come from the Middle East. My specialty is welding, I am a professional welder, when I weld, it makes me happy. For my first work as an assistant welder in the United States, they did not account my experiences and references from Iraq. Eventually, when they saw how good I am, they promoted me to a professional welder, I worked as a professional welder for that company for five years, the company was 90 miles away from my home. Then I found a welding job with a better pay close to my home. At my work, I helped another Iraqi refugee to get hired, I supported him, I taught him welding, now he is a happy successful welder like me.

Ali's experience in the United States tells a lot. He has gone through some difficulties when his references and experience from Iraq were not considered in his interview, but he did not give up on making his dream true. After showing his talent, the company promoted him. It suggests that the refugees should be optimistic. Resettlement is not an easy process. It is hard to make everybody translate your resume and personal strengths, especially under stressful conditions. It is okay to start from the low positions to get a chance to show your talent in that position. When one gets experience in the United States, it is much easier to pursue a better position. With that mentioned, the refugees should help still each other. Ali was a big helper for one of the refugees

who was eager to learn a new professional skill. Ali was successful in teaching him welding and he was successful in finding him a welding position within the same company he worked for.

All of the student immigrants work for ODU under different titles as teaching assistants, graders, graduate assistants, and research assistants. None of them have felt employment discrimination or racism. They are so happy working for ODU. Even though their income is low for what they do, it is a standard position for students not just in ODU, but roughly to all universities nationwide. Hussein says that he teaches two classes for his department but does not get paid even one-fifth of a regular lecturer who teaches only three classes. The students biggest concern is about after graduation. They all have concern about the inequality in hiring people. It is proven through a plethora of research that white men get paid more than black women. After black women, the international employees make up the lowest pay rates. Hussein says that after the last election, when Trump got elected as president of the United States, it got worse. He says that after getting his master's degree, he wanted to get a job in the United States. After applying to many positions in his field, he was not hired. Then he decided to go to the Ph.D. level. Jalil says that networking is the best method to get hired. He says that without knowing someone in the industry, it is almost impossible for Muslim people to find a job. Hussein and Jalil say that the Indian students after their graduation, gain access more easily to professional jobs. It means that the Indian connection is much stronger and they do not have the monster taboos that we have on Islam in the western countries.

Employment is the magic word that even the American always think about. When it comes to the refugees and immigrants having an Islamic background, it makes employment much harder for them. Even having a master's or Doctoral degree, it is not easy to find the job one seeks.

CONCLUSION

With the beginning of the Arabic Spring Revolution in 2010, the end of normal life of many people came all at once. Among these common people, Syrian and Iraqi people suffered the most. In particular, women had to sacrifice to create a new future for themselves and families. The Arabic revolution in Syria caused the emergence of terrorist groups like ISIS who became a threat to the entire planet. After occupying a large area in Syria and Iraq, some civilians tried to migrate to other countries like the United States. I focused on the experiences Iraqi refugees' economic struggles and the impact of networking in Hampton Roads, Virginia, in the United States. These struggles included their challenges finding jobs and facing discrimination as discussed in the face-to-face qualitative interview. This research is very crucial because many refugees have their own dreams about America before reaching it. However, a short period of time after relocating to the United States, they face difficulties, and many wonder if they had been more informed and had realistic views, whether they would still have decided to come to the United States at all. These findings are significant because this research can help people who plan to come to America familiarize themselves with what kinds of problems they will face. Throughout my interview and literature reviews, I found that it is not only Iraqi refugees who experience challenges due to problems such as Islamophobia, racism, culture shock, paying health and car insurance, finding professional jobs for the degree holders; these are common problems for the majority of resettled refugees. In addition, this paper indicated some of the strengths and weaknesses of the refugee agencies, as reported in the assessments of the participants. I also found that most of the refugees complain about the humanitarian and immigration organizations who help them to get resettled because they do not take much time to explain the struggles refugees will face in America. The student immigrants have suffered the least compared to the Iraqi refugees. The conclusion of my study shows that a driving force in one's experience is in the environment they deal with. The students

live, study, and work in an academic community. Because ODU is a very diverse community, it helps the students to be more successful and experience less social stress. However, the students are also worried about finding their dream jobs after their graduation. This means that both refugees and immigrants face challenges in finding a good job opportunity, but the refugees face this challenge with less awareness and support. This pattern can change through individuals and agencies working together to create and maintain strong networks to support refugees and students who wish to achieve their dreams in “the land of opportunity”. If we take this into consideration, the nuances of integration can be understood in direct relation to the various social locations of Iraqis.

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APPLIED RESEARCH: DIRECT SERVICE TO REFUGEES IN HAMPTON ROADS

My Journey to refugee studies

In the spring of 2016, I took a class called “Refugee Studies” with Dr. Frydenlund, which was the first class I had taken in the Master’s program. This class opened my eyes to refugee issues. I felt so depressed for the refugees when I saw most of the countries closing their doors towards them and seeing them as a threat. This class pushed me to work and help refugees as much as I can. I decided to continue doing research into refugee’s studies, with particular interest in the experiences and needs women refugees. I concentrated on refugees in Hampton Roads because I live in the same area, which made it easier to reach out and help them. In the spring of 2017, the moment I heard ODU was offering a service-class in the Women’s Studies Department on refugees, I registered for it without hesitation. The theme of the class was “learning by helping.” I thought this class would suit me best due to the background knowledge I have from my previous refugee class, my research interests, and the passion I have for supporting refugees. Furthermore, being fluent in Kurdish and understanding both Farsi and Arabic made me a good resource for the class.

Standpoint theory:

My own position as a refugee is integrally woven into this research and its applied dimensions. I have been in the United States for seven years. I am an asylum seeker and I understand how refugees feel as they resettle into a new area. It took me a long while to find my way in a new society which was so different from my hometown and culture. I still remember the help I received from others, which allowed me to reach successful resettlement. This is why I want to be available and operate as a navigator and resource for new refugees as much as I can. I understand the struggles they have been through during their transition to Western culture as well as the struggles they have while resettling in the United States specifically.

Educational guidance:

I started my work with the Commonwealth Catholic Charities (CCC) organization in the spring of 2017. My position was working with families for the first half of the semester and then teaching an English class at CCC for the second half of the semester. I was able to visit refugee families in order to understand their necessary needs. This included things like finding transportation, discerning and filling out important forms, making appointments, etc. Whenever new refugees introduce themselves to me, my first goal is to be an educational guide for them. The first question I ask them is, "What is your educational background?" so that I may show them the opportunities they will have here. Most of the Syrian and Iraqi refugees come with a bachelor's degree. If there is not a navigator to assist them in seeking educational opportunities, they will continue to work as an employee in a store or in a mall instead of potentially acquiring a better job in a professional area.

Language school:

In my direct service to refugees, as both an organizational volunteer and a translator, I found that the majority of the refugees I come in contact with are hindered by language barriers. They do not know the English language, or they know only basic English. Because of this, it is often very hard for refugees to find a proper job that can better provide for their daily needs. However, the group of Iraqi refugees with college degrees fully understand the English language. Despite this, it is important to highlight that not all refugees from different countries have college degrees. Due to their lack of English proficiency, refugees face difficulties such as finding jobs, understanding apartment rules and regulations, understanding cultural behaviors, etc. After my professor established a service learning class for ODU, American students began to learn more about different cultures and allowed them to help refugees at the same time. I was one of the first students to participate in the class, where I learned a lot about the reality of life that refugees face here. It is a completely different perspective for someone to personally experience an issue rather than reading about it in classroom. Soon after the first semester was over, my professor and a few students gathered to discuss the most important priorities for refugees. What can we do to better serve them and, at the same time, to reduce the huge workload on CCC? Moreover, how can we think about how we apply the plan we create among refugees? After our deep observations throughout the first semester, we decided that providing a long-term plan for learning English is the highest priority humanitarian work we can do for them. As I mentioned above, the language program offered by CCC in Newport News is not sufficient because the 3-month duration is simply not long enough to learn the English language. The refugees complain that they do not understand the instructor because the instructor is American, and they need translation during the class in order to fully understand the lessons. When I was assisting an American teacher at CCC for the first semester, I realized how happy the students were to see me in the class. Because I know Kurdish

very well and comprehend Arabic and Farsi, I was able to help them understand the class much better than before when there was no interpreter in the room. It was so clear that the eagerness they have to learn the English language came from their motivation to get jobs more easily with this vital skill. As Ying Zhen discusses, the importance of English proficiency among recent immigrants in the United States allows them to get employed sooner. After we decided to provide an English class, we faced challenges in finding a convenient place for refugees and an affordable place for us to handle the price. We asked CCC's main office to give us a model apartment which they have as a sample for prospective tenants. Fortunately, they were happy to give us one hour and a half every Friday to use the apartment in order to teach English. Hauck et al. shed light on the effects of English language proficiency towards three groups of refugees in central Virginia Hauck et al. They discuss refugees' happiness to immigrate in the United States and also how language difficulties have affected them to find education and employment in the new life in the United States. It has now been three semesters that we have conducted our English class in that apartment with our special curriculum. I am very pleased to have founded a specialized English class curriculum for refugees as both a volunteer for CCC and an ODU ambassador. I feel that all of our adult students are now a part of my own life. Every Friday, I am eager to go to Newport News and teach them English and speak with them, sometimes in their native language(s). Nothing stops me from doing this humanitarian work. I now feel that it is mandatory for me to be there every week because they want me to be there; I help them refine their English skills while at also explaining American culture to them so they will better mediate with the culture shock that comes with resettlement.

This semester, my husband's schedule conflicted with my schedule, meaning that no one would be at home to take care of my one-year-old child. I decided to take her with me to the class so I would not miss the opportunity to work with the refugees again. When I went there and

taught while having a small baby, I symbolize motivation for them as well. They always tell me that they are proud to see me every week; to be there full of energy while I teach as I am holding a small baby. My plan is to continue doing this work as long as I live in this area. I hold the greatest motivation to continue doing this work is because I am homesick as well as an asylum seeker. Therefore, I feel their pain and I know how important it is to have someone to advocate for you in this exile.

Every Friday, for an hour and a half, I teach with one of my colleagues. We have about 12-14 adult women students every week, mostly from Syria and Afghanistan. Each week, we introduce new topics to the class and conduct small conversations related to that week's topic. For example, last week, our topic was about job interviews, and our vocabularies were covering job titles available in Hampton Roads such as cashier, housekeeper, cleaner, waiter, etc. Also, small conversation tips were taught on how to talk at a job interview. In this sense, we try to provide details on certain topics and allow the students to discuss them in a way that benefits their daily lives and future well-being.

Goals of the English class:

Our first goal for this class is to offer a free opportunity to learn English. I believe a priority for refugees is learning English. As I mentioned previously, refugees can go to CCC's English class only for the first three months of their arrival. However, most of the time they cannot attend these classes due to transportation issues. For refugees, it takes some time to be familiar with the schedule of the poor transportation in Hampton Roads. It takes also takes time in order to acquire a driving license. In addition to this, CCC's English class does not provide an interpreter to make the class easier for non-native speakers. Based on my observation in CCC classes, I have realized that it is very hard for new students to learn in class without a translator. In our class, besides

teaching, my colleague and I both translate in Arabic, Farsi and Kurdish. I have heard from our students many times that without translation they do not want to come back to the class because it is too difficult to understand the lessons.

Our second goal, as members of the Women's Studies Department, is to create a social environment to see each other and share emotional feelings with other ethnicities. The hardest struggle refugees face soon after their resettlement is homesickness. By coming to the classes and seeing multi-ethnic people and folks of other ethnicities, they encourage each other to tolerate the same problems they face.

The purpose of teaching English to the refugees is learning about the refugees themselves and seeing other ethnicities inside the United States. This is a good opportunity for American students to see other ethnicities and races that used to live thousands of miles away from Hampton Roads. Also, it is a great opportunity to learn about different cultures and religious traditions that they may be unfamiliar with.

Summary

These projects demonstrate my belief in scholar-activism. As a graduate of the Women's Studies department, I believe that knowledge must be applied to improve the human condition. In the larger scale of refugee resettlement needs, our language class is a tiny oasis that supports a fraction of the crisis. Yet, what we envision and realize collectively each week makes concrete the larger vision for peace, community harmony, and the full potential of human beings.

