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Julia Meredith Hess

Brian Isakson

Matthew Nelson

Jessica R. Goodkind

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“My World is Upside Down”: Transnational Iraqi Youth and Parent Perspectives on Resettlement in the United States

Julia Meredith Hess,

University of New Mexico

Brian Isakson,

University of New Mexico

Matthew Nelson, and

A.T. Still University

Jessica R. Goodkind

University of New Mexico

Abstract

The U.S. war with Iraq led to the displacement of millions of Iraqis, many of whom have resettled in the United States as refugees. We explore the challenges Iraqi families face after resettlement, with a particular focus on the agency of refugees and challenges/opportunities of familial social reproduction in a transnational context. We conducted 181 qualitative interviews with 38 Iraqis (11 youth, 27 adults) and 5 service providers. Our findings highlight the importance of exploring refugee agency and illuminate how the interplay between structure and agency in transnational contexts is a useful framework for understanding transformations around social roles.

Keywords

refugees; resettlement; youth; agency; gender; families; transnationalism; social reproduction

Refugee Resettlement as a Transnational Experience

Because migration is central to the human experience, it has long been a subject for social scientists, who, through much of the twentieth century, studied migration within a framework that viewed nation-states as the natural order of things and people outside the borders of their state as problematic. Over the last two decades, transnationalism has become the predominant theoretical framework used to analyze international migration (Vertovec, 2009). As an analytic framework, transnationalism foregrounds the ways in which people, through migration (and other forms of transnational connection) inhabit new social worlds

Correspondence should be directed to: Jessica R. Goodkind, Department of Sociology, MSC05 3080, University of New Mexico, NM 87131, jgoodkin@unm.edu.,

Author Note

Julia Meredith Hess, Department of Anthropology, University of New Mexico; Brian L. Isakson, Department of Psychiatry, University of New Mexico; Matthew Nelson, School of Health Management, A.T. Still University; Jessica R. Goodkind, Department of Sociology, University of New Mexico.

and construct networks that extend beyond the nation-state. Although macro-analytic frameworks like Appadurai's (1996) have been helpful for analyzing transnational movement, Tsing (2000) warns that too much attention to structural aspects of 'flows' ignores the human agency that directs those flows. This is even more evident when considering refugees as a particular category of migrant that moves transnationally.

Refugees, defined as those who flee their home country because of a well-founded fear of persecution, and are thus not able to return, are recognized as a special class of migrant. As forced migrants, refugees are often considered to have less individual and collective agency than those classified as voluntary migrants. In 2016, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that 65.3 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, including internally displaced and stateless people, and 21.3 million were refugees, the largest number of displaced people ever recorded (2016). However, the distinction between different kinds of migrants (refugees, documented and undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, and temporary workers) is deeply political and less than obvious (Ong, 1999; Long, 2015). Refugees are distinct in terms of how the United States categorizes them, their receipt of federal funding, immediate work authorization after resettlement, and eligibility for citizenship. It is important to note, however, that fewer than 1% of those classified as refugees are accepted for third country resettlement in the United States or other country; most refugees remain in the country to which they initially fled or repatriate to their home country once it is safe to do so (UNHCR, 2016).

Much of the social science literature on refugees frames the refugee 'problem' as people out of place in a world of nation-states (see Malkki, 1992; 1995). Biomedical research on refugees has focused largely on trauma and its negative effects on refugees. Moreover, much of this research concerns traumatic experiences that refugees face fleeing their countries of origin, or in refugee camps. More recently, researchers have contended that post-migration experiences and stressors are important to consider when exploring refugee well-being post-resettlement (Carlsson, Mortensen, & Kastrup, 2006; Goodkind, 2005; Goodkind et al., 2014; Miller & Rassmusen, 2010). We view the movement and resettlement of refugees as part of a larger international framework of response to war and other humanitarian crises, and we see refugees as resilient actors and interlocutors who are shaped by and who shape their resettlement experiences as they encounter new discourses that intersect with their own understandings of self, community, well-being and belonging.

Although transnational theoretical frameworks have been applied to explorations of refugee adaptation in the past (Hess, 2009; Shandy 2009; Al-Ali, Black & Koser, 2001; Shami, 1996), we suggest that this framework has been under-utilized. We apply it here, in order to illuminate the ways in which refugees are immersed in, influenced by, and are influencing cultural, social, political and economic processes in a transnational context. In this way, we view the transnational context as transnational social spaces, which are, according to Faist (2000), "combinations of ties, positions in networks and organizations, and networks of organizations that reach across the borders of multiple states." (p.191). Transnational social space underscores the ways in which Iraqi refugees, in particular, actively work to re-establish social worlds through their own agency. Levitt and Glick Schiller's (2004) transnational theoretical framework suggests that in addition to recognizing processes that

extend beyond the nation-state, transnational analysis must highlight the interrelationship between social processes and institutions, which is what we aim to do here. They suggest that it is important to distinguish between “the existence of transnational social networks and the consciousness of being embedded in them” (p. 1006). In other words, it is necessary to address both structuration and agency. With this aim in mind, we show how resettlement policies, labor and welfare policies, and social constructions of race, gender, age and identity serve to channel and constrain agency in transnational contexts. This article contributes to the literature on refugees by simultaneously using a large-focus view of a transnational framework, while also looking closely at the intimate everyday processes of social reproduction to reveal the constraints and opportunities that refugees mobilize in order to recreate their lives in a new place.

Out of Iraq: War, Migration and Resettlement

Refugee movements are by definition transnational and inextricably connected to colonialism, war, imperialism, and power (Sassen, 1996). The Iraq War, which began with the U.S. invasion in 2003, led to the displacement of millions of Iraqis. In 2008, UNHCR estimated that 4.7 million Iraqis had been displaced, within and outside Iraq’s borders (Congressional Research Service, 2009). Between 2007 when the most recent U.S.-Iraqi resettlement program began and 2015, over 128,000 Iraqis have been resettled in the United States as refugees (USCIS, 2016). Refugee status is designated by UNHCR. In order to be resettled in the United States, applicants go through extensive interviewing, screening and security clearances (American Immigration Council, 2015). The United States Office of Refugee Resettlement then contracts with private voluntary agencies to coordinate resettlement in towns and cities across the United States. As of 2016, 566 Iraqi refugees have been resettled in Albuquerque. The population of Iraqis resettled includes Muslims (Sunni and Shia), Christians, and Mandaeans.

The resettlement of Iraqi refugees in the United States since 2007 coincided with developments that have made it particularly challenging: a severe economic recession and rising anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment. The recession had a profound impact on the ability of Iraqis to find work and secure economic well-being. In this way, the economic crisis made more challenging the already difficult task of building a new life in a society with different cultural and institutional norms. Anti-Arab or Muslim attitudes post-9/11 have been well documented in the United States (Cainkar, 2009; Howell & Shryock, 2003). The effects of anti-Arab/Muslim discrimination have been found to have significant impacts on mental health, well-being, and migrant integration (Hassouneh & Kulwicki, 2007; Moradi & Hasan, 2004; Rippey & Newman, 2007). Research has also documented, however, that Iraqi refugees’ connection to their faith/spirituality and identity have contributed to their positive well-being and adjustment in the United States (Shoeb, Weinstein, & Halpern, 2007). Thus, it is particularly important to explore how individual, family, community, and societal factors interact to create contexts in which Iraqi refugees make decisions about rebuilding their lives in a new country.

Refugee Agency & Social Reproduction

In its simplest form, agency constitutes the ability of people to act in response to desire or motivation. In her discussion of theoretical constructions of agency, Ortner (2006) argues that agency is universal: a fundamental part of being human, and yet always socially and historically constructed. As forced migrants, refugees are often accorded little or no agency. And although we agree that there are many constraints on agency for refugees, refugees do act in ways that transform their lives. Applying for third country resettlement exemplifies such agency. Although most social theorists accord human beings with natural agency, it is generally agreed that the ability to act in ways that fulfill desires and intentions is culturally constructed, and shaped by one's place in the social hierarchy. Agency is understood to be in a dyadic relationship with structure. However, this is not an oppositional relationship. Ortner cites Giddens often in her discussion of agency, and states that far from being in opposition to structure, agency is constituent of structure. Structure generally comprises the social and institutional frameworks that channel people's actions.

Ortner's synthesis of approaches to agency distinguishes those that focus on agency as resistance and those that explore agency as the pursuit of 'projects.' For Ortner, 'projects' are closely related to desires and intentions. "'Intentionality' here is meant to include a wide range of states, both cognitive and emotional, and at various levels of consciousness, that are directed forward toward some end" (2006, p.134). For Ortner, 'projects' are the end goal that a series of intentions, desires, and actions are directed toward.

Refugees, through making a new life via third country resettlement, are pursuing a project of social reproduction. For many migrants, including refugees, the stated motivation for resettlement is to provide a better future for their children (Hess, 2011). Recreating social life in new contexts offers an opportunity to examine how agency is enacted and structured, in part because as agentive subjects, people are particularly sensitive to how their ability to act changes and under what conditions. This reflexivity around social reproduction makes recently resettled migrants extremely articulate about these change processes, their role as agents, and the types of constraints that they face. In this way, unconscious aspects of structure and agency become explicit in migrant contexts.

For example, Giddens writes that individuals' 'stocks of knowledge' or the practical knowledge that makes it possible to act within social and institutional structures, are grey areas that are not usually accessible to the consciousness of actors (1993, p. 91). Yet for refugees resettling in a new place, it is just such practical knowledge that they are acutely aware of *not* possessing. This type of knowledge of how institutions function—including laws and other forms of social order, as well as cultural norms—become pressing to acquire as soon as possible. Because the rules in new contexts are different, we see the ways in which refugees (re)channel their agency to produce desired ends. It also becomes clear, in refugee narratives of this process, when they bump up against new rules that change their ability to act and how this, in turn, is related to changing social roles. In other words, the rules of the game also change the transformational capacity of family members in significant ways, which can be both appreciated by some actors and discomfiting to others within the same cultural group.

Gender and generational position (child, parent, elder) all come into play with respect to the cultural construction of agency. There has been increasing attention to gender in immigration studies, and this is important work that informs our theoretical perspective (e.g. Ehrenreich & Hoschschild, 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994, 2003; Pessar, 1999). As part of this trend, researchers have focused on migration and its impacts on kinship and gender roles (Boehm, 2012; Mahler, 1999) the transformation of the family (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002), and recognized that parental desire for a better future for children motivates migratory movement (Coe; Reynolds, Boehm et al., 2011; Dreby, 2010; Horton, 2008; Parreñas, 2005). Growing interest in the lives and experiences of children has also led migration researchers to consider the experiences of children as migrants themselves (Terrio, 2009; Uehling, 2008), as part of migrant families (Orellana, Thorne, Lam & Chee, 2000), or as those left behind when their parents migrate (Rae-Espinoza, 2011; Parreñas, 2005). Much more research needs to be done that focuses on the experiences and voices of children and youth.

Cole and Durham have done important work on age and generation with respect to migration studies (2007). Many others have examined the role of children and youth in migratory processes (Coe et al., 2011; Berry, 2006). Particularly relevant to the current study, Abu El-Haj & Bonet (2011) review a range of studies that report on identification and belonging among transnational Muslim youth. They suggest that in a post-9/11 context, youth identity must be analyzed and understood as being produced as much by interactions with larger economic social forces and discourses as by ideas endemic to their cultures of origin. Similarly, in their discussion of the role of gender in transnational Muslim communities, they argue:

If we fail to understand the ways that gendered identities are being constructed and enacted in relation to broader processes of globalization and imperialism, we often end up with a portrait of youth torn between cultures—a perspective that ossifies cultures and risks reinforcing the idea that there is a basic incompatibility between Muslim and Western ways of doing gender. (p. 43)

In this article, we highlight the ways in which changing gender roles and social dynamics between parents and children reflect transformations in social reproduction. Attention to gender and age are vitally important in examining how the social roles of women and men, youth and elders change through transnational migration, as well as in underscoring how the rules of the game, or ‘structuration,’ is different in different contexts. As we see actors respond to these changes, we are also observing up close the ways in which social reproduction is remade in refugee families.

Transnationalism is an important framework for understanding migration. However, as Morawska (2003) noted, there are discipline-specific approaches in anthropology, sociology, history and political science. In her review of these approaches, she called for more cross-disciplinary conversations and more systematic approaches to create robust theory applicable across disciplines. Morawska characterizes anthropological approaches as “transnationalism from below” (p. 614) and suggests that this perspective should be integrated with macro-structural processes, which is what we attempt to do here.

Foundational scholars of transnationalism proposed it as an antidote to assimilationist theorizing that predominated U.S. sociology and anthropology prior to the 1990s, coupled with the idea that an understanding of social lives cannot be achieved while limited to research conducted within the boundaries of the nation-state (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Different strands of transnational theory—including those that examine economics and finances, media, communication—consist of an examination of macro-processes. Tsing (2000) and Vertovec (2009) have cautioned, however, that a focus on macro-processes has interpretive limits. Thus, in this article we have attempted to view refugee resettlement as a transnational phenomenon, which includes influences from multiple social contexts, through an examination of refugee agency and the project of social reproduction on a micro-level. Levitt and Glick Schiller put forth a call for examining social aspects of transnationalism (2004). As Cole and Durham (2007) recognized, relationships between parents, children, youth and elders are pivotal in shaping how broad-scale processes of economic globalization and state structuring play out. “The drama is not between an outside global reality and the ties of a local set of beliefs, but is figured in the local negotiations of people’s everyday obligations and relationships as they struggle to shape livable presents and futures” (p. 6). Our research adds the perspectives of Iraqi youth and parents, and how local negotiations of re-establishing family relationships and livelihoods in a new setting illuminate global economic, social, political and legal processes. Highlighting refugee agency in the project of social reproduction, we examine three interrelated domains: 1) safety and security, 2) understanding and navigating institutions, and 3) reconfiguring family relationships. We show how these are simultaneously constructed in multiple spheres—within family systems, locally, according to the rules and structures of the societies from which they came, and informed by their new sociocultural context in the United States—all of which encompass a transnational field.

Method

The Refugee Well-being Project

This research was conducted under the auspices of the Refugee Well-being Project (RWP), a mixed method longitudinal community-based intervention study designed by the fourth author. The RWP involves testing an intervention for refugees, which is designed to alleviate high rates of psychological distress by addressing stressors related to resettlement, facilitating refugee incorporation into U.S. society, and promoting increased access to resources. Refugee youth and adults are paired with undergraduate students who engage in advocacy, cultural exchange, and one-on-one learning together. The RWP has been found to decrease psychological distress and improve English language proficiency, access to resources, and quality of life (Goodkind, 2005; 2006; Goodkind, Hang, & Yang, 2004; Goodkind, et al., 2014; Hess, et al., 2014).

The current study involves embedded qualitative research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) with all Iraqi participants from the first year Iraqis participated in the RWP (2009–2010). The research was approved by the University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center institutional review board. The rationale of the embedded qualitative component was to examine the resettlement experiences of recently arrived Iraqi refugees, paying particular

attention to the experiences of youth. Our research questions therefore asked: what are the experiences of Iraqi youth and parents in the first years of resettlement? How do the experiences of adults and youth differ? How are they mutually influenced? What are the dynamics in this transnational context that inform both refugee agency and structuration and how are these experienced in the early phase of resettlement? How does refugee agency re-establish social worlds in new contexts? How does a focus on agency among refugees in a transnational context highlight the interrelationship between social processes and institutions? For our youth focus, we added several components to the existing methodology, which included combined qualitative and quantitative interviews conducted at four time points (pre-, mid-, post- and follow-up) (see Goodkind, et al., 2014). For the embedded qualitative study we conducted participant observation during RWP implementation, and an additional semi-structured interview with each child and adolescent. We asked both adults and children about the positive and negative aspects of their migration experience. Questions were open-ended to encourage participants to offer and reflect on their own perspectives of the migration experience. We also interviewed refugee service providers regarding their experiences with refugee youth.

Participants

The current study includes data from Iraq refugees who resettled in Albuquerque between 2007–2009 and participated in the RWP from 2009–2010. Iraqi refugees aged 7 and above who had arrived during this time period were invited to join the RWP. The study team worked with the local resettlement agency to identify potential participants, and they were contacted by Arabic-speaking interpreters who described the RWP and the study. Of the 46 people from 19 different families who were initially invited to be part of the study, 38 participants from 18 families agreed to participate. One family with five members refused to participate in the program, in addition three adults did not attend the intervention because of work conflicts and their data were not analyzed. Twenty-seven participants were adults (over the age of 18), four were adolescents (12–17) and seven were children (7–11). Five refugee service providers also participated in qualitative interviews. Service providers included two health care professionals who conduct health screenings, resettlement agency staff, and an Arabic interpreter who translated for Iraqis in school and health care settings.

Interviews

In all, qualitative data from 181 interviews were analyzed. Twenty-four preliminary interviews were conducted with potential Iraqi participants in order to ensure that the study and intervention were culturally appropriate, because this was the first year that Iraqis were included. In addition, participant completed four interviews at pre, mid, post-intervention, and follow-up time points with qualitative components, for a total of 152 intervention interviews. Multiple interviews with participants enable us to move beyond a one-time snapshot and examine how refugee understanding and engagement changes over time. Finally, the first author conducted five additional qualitative interviews with and refugee service providers. All interviews were conducted in English with Arabic interpreters (except for the service providers who were interviewed in English without interpreters).

Data Analysis

Qualitative interviews were transcribed, checked for accuracy, and imported into NVivo 8. We used a constructivist grounded theory approach, which incorporates a relativist stance with respect to ways of knowing and allows for the incorporation of interpretations by researchers and participants (Charmaz, 2009). The first level of analysis involved text-based coding, where team members read the text and marked recurrent themes. Thus, original research questions were included for analysis (for example, themes such as ‘Well-being and Health’), as well as themes grounded in the data (for instance, we asked no direct questions about gender roles, but created a thematic category ‘Gender Roles’ to capture participants’ discussion of changing gender roles post-resettlement). As the themes were developed, coders on the research team met to standardize and define them, to agree on a structural framework to elucidate the relationship of themes to each other, and to determine how they should be applied to the data. All of the interviews were then coded using the same coding framework. Next, analytical memos were created for the most prominent nodes and themes and those most related to our research questions. Patterns across the data by gender, age and other axes of identity were examined at this level of analysis (Richards, 2005).

Results

Our analysis of the data related to parent and youth perspectives on the first year of resettlement showed three overlapping domains: 1) safety and security, 2) explicit statements of the need to understand and navigate state institutions and structures, and 3) understanding and navigating different gender and social norms around family structure and relationships. The domains are not necessarily distinct from one another, but generally speaking these did follow a temporal trajectory. At the same time, these domains can only be understood using a transnational framework. In other words, each domain was discussed and understood by participants using referents from perspectives ‘rooted’ in multiple frames of reference, derived from ideas, values, and experiences from their ‘home’ cultures in Iraq, from temporary resettlement and from new contexts in the United States.

Safety & Security

The meanings of safety and security shifted for participants as they moved from the war, occupation and daily violence of Iraq and the insecurity of countries of first refuge, to the United States, which was marked by new forms of structural violence related to poverty and racism, but also ‘freedom’ and opportunity.

Initial youth impressions of the benefits of living in the United States reflected experiences of safety relative to living in war-torn Iraq. For the younger children, the entirety of their lives in Iraq were marked by occupation and violence. Anas,¹ an 11-year old boy, was asked what was different about his life in the United States compared to his life in Iraq: ‘It is safe here. In Iraq there is wars. There is people who calls you and kidnaps you. Here we cannot find these things. There is nothing here about these things.’ Anas regarded Iraq as home, but

¹Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of research participants.

for him, safety was a paramount concern. In response to a question about what is best in his life, Anas talked about not only playing, but also safety:

Interviewer: What is best about your life right now?

Anas: Safety. I feel happy when I play. That's all.

Interviewer: So, safety. Why is that the best thing in your life right now?

Anas: No one is insulting me or quarrelling me or do anything bad with me.

Anas's relief that no one is insulting him reflects his awareness of how ethnic and sectarian tensions that were the fall-out from war and occupation. affected daily life in Iraq. During pre-interviews, adults also described relief at being safe from the everyday violence of Iraq, which all Iraqis are aware of as they have 24-hour access to Arab-language television and internet news sources. Aamina, a 30-year old woman, in response to what was best about her life in the United States, recalled the pervasive uncertainty of life in Iraq:

Freedom, respect, safety, because in Iraq you don't feel that anymore We cannot tell what is going to happen the next minutes or there is a bomb or there is some people shooting and we are just in between so we don't know if we are going to come back safe. And there are times [in the United States] I wish there were jobs and to pay the bills and rent, and this is going to be available and very happy and feel safe and freedom.

Although Aamina is worried about economic uncertainty, she is able to look forward to a future where economic uncertainty will be alleviated and safety and freedom can be enjoyed.

Even early in the resettlement process, Iraqis were aware that in the United States they were accorded inalienable rights. Freedom was mentioned often in the interviews as a benefit of living in the United States. Meanings include freedom of speech, but also lack of authoritarian control, and a 'live and let live' ethos that participants ascribed to life in the United States related to an absence of concern about sectarian or religious affiliation. For example, Habiba, a 21-year old woman, explained what she had learned so far in the resettlement process:

Habiba: At the beginning it was so difficult, until I learned little things about it.

Interviewer: What things have you learned?

Habiba: The freedom we have here - the independence and things. No one knock your door, or told you anything - respects you. You do everything you want. That's from this point of view in the country in Iraq, it happens a lot - talking to you or insulting you, or something like that. We didn't see that here.

Most adults in our study were parents who stated that the most important benefits of resettlement were related to their children's well-being and future. Zaynab, a mother of two, had a very negative opinion about her life in the United States. When asked what was good about the United States, she replied, 'Nothing. I do not feel that there is anything that is good—only safety. I wanted my kids to be safe.' Adults who stated that their resettlement experience was not going well, or that they were not comfortable, said that if their children were doing well, this was what mattered.

The Need to Understand and Navigate Institutions

Iraqis shared appreciation of the intact infrastructure of the United States, which contrasted sharply with Iraq. For instance, Murad, a 24-year old man, said “Everything is easy in the United States. It’s the basic things for you, but it’s for us something important like ... the hot water. The streets are clean. I can have a license. I am safe here. I can find anything in the Wal-Mart.” Initial feelings and impressions of the United States were overlaid with wariness as newcomers began to realize challenges and barriers to feeling settled and realizing their dreams. Concerns included limited governmental support; confusion about educational and legal systems; social norms; and the safety of neighborhoods, the city, and the United States as a whole. In this way, the relief of being safe from the everyday violence of occupation, war and sectarian strife was supplanted with safety concerns that arose related to U.S. gun violence, and the safety of their neighborhoods.

Participants were acutely aware that they did not possess the ‘stocks of knowledge’ Giddens wrote about, the often unconsciously held ways of being and doing that people acquire in any given society. Malik, an Iraqi woman in her 60s stated:

Too many things I see as difficult here because I don’t know or understand English. When I call to make appointment at the doctor or anything, I can’t understand when they answer the phone. The transportation, I don’t know how I can get it. If you want to go to a place, I don’t know how to use the transportation here, the buses. I don’t know how goes this area because I don’t know how I can walk or where I want to go. I don’t know the places very well.

The refrain of all the things she doesn’t know relayed an unease and the ways in which agency is constrained that mark early stages of resettlement.

Applying for and maintaining governmental benefits was a bewildering process for many newly arrived refugees. Latifa, a 47 year-old mother of three, described her struggle as she responded to the question, ‘How is your life going in the United States?’ ‘I am so tired,’ she replied, ‘mentally, physically, spiritually.’ She continued,

Because I am so scared, I have no money. If anything happened to one of my sons, and they need to go to the hospital, I have no Medicaid, I have nothing and I have no money to take care of them, so that scares me a lot. So I’m scared. I’m not comfortable at all.... America brings us here to have a better life, but it seems like she want to destroy Iraqi people. If I don’t have Medicaid, if I don’t have a food stamp, and I have to pay my rent after three months. So what should we do? Why she bring us here, America, to destroy us? If they give us the time, the food stamp, the Medicaid for at least five years, so that we can have money. We can resettle ourselves, to get used to the new life here, so that we can in that time help ourselves and not depend on others. So why she bring us here if she want to destroy us, why? I prefer to go back to Iraq and live there rather than to be here under the Americans and be destroyed. You said that hell is in Iraq but I have happy there, and I cannot enjoy the happy here.

As Latifa’s distress is vividly conveyed through her words, other recently resettled families also discussed fears about what would happen if they were unable to find work or to access

benefits. Even though third country resettlement is designed to be a permanent option for refugees, dire circumstances and the fear of being relegated to poverty, made returning to Iraq ponderable even given the ongoing violence and instability.

Akeem, a married male in his 30s with one child, described the gap between his dreams and reality he and his fellow Iraqis faced attempting to execute plans in the United States:

They want to have better life, better jobs, but they don't know how. Nobody wants to stay at home and sleep on the sofa all day. But how to do that? We want to do something here. We want to have our jobs here. In Iraq, each one, everyone was working. Everyone has his own job as a businessman or with the government, or other kinds of things.... This is against our nature. We want to do something here.

Adults quickly became aware of the necessity to work and be self-sufficient in the United States, and it became clear to many that the participation of women, including mothers, in the workforce might be required for family survival in the United States.

Reconfiguring Relationships, Family and Gender Roles

For many, the confusion and bewilderment of the first months was allayed as Iraqis improved their English and navigated new settings. However, parents and youth also realized how social, institutional and cultural norms in the United States might impact their own lives, their children's lives, their family structure, and consequently, their future in the United States. Increased autonomy for youth and different gender norms were prominent among the cultural differences Iraqis became aware of during this phase.

An exchange between an Iraqi father, an interviewer, and an interpreter exemplified the ways Iraqis began to identify longer-term concerns related to parenting in a new sociocultural context. The father, Gabir, a man in his late 30s, related that his 4-year-old son was talking about having a girlfriend at pre-school. The father explained, '[in] our country we don't talk about that, especially when you are baby. We still look like this age [as] baby; we do not talk about girlfriend.' The interviewer encouraged him to talk to his child's teacher, saying that she might not have witnessed any behavior, but that she would undoubtedly address the issue if she were made aware of it. But the father articulated something important when he elaborated, 'Yeah, but I am afraid from this idea now, he [has] this idea. But in my country, they don't talk, never like this. And it's just...difficult to deal with.' The father recognized that the circulation of the idea of boyfriends and girlfriends even among young children, is a major discursive shift from his experience growing up and parenting in Iraq.

Dema, age 28, was also the mother of a preschooler. She voiced concerns about drugs and other negative influences that her daughter might be exposed to by members of her peer group:

We don't have as a culture in Iraq, and some of the boys having the drugs, and we don't have that in Iraq, so that scares me a lot. When I took her to the daycare, I feel very afraid, maybe she will learn from them these bad things, and I don't know how to protect her from these things. When she will be 16, and she want to leave

my home, what can I--how can I prevent her from doing that? I don't like this, the rules here about this specific thing exactly.

Having observed how autonomy and individualism are valued in the United States, Dema articulated fears about how these might influence her relationship with her daughter in the future.

Basma, age 34, a mother of four, one of whom was a teenage boy, described the rapidity with which her son adopted U.S. cultural mores, ascribing the problem to 'too much freedom:'

Interviewer: What has been most difficult about life in the United States?

Basma: Actually, because we have too much freedom. To me there is a problem with my kids because my kids go out and they have many things that need to be clear to them. He chooses clothes not like Arab or Iraqi, [his clothes are] very modern here, like a teenager here. And sometimes you walk and move, yeah, like people here, not like Arab people or Iraqi people. I don't want change too much, too many things with him. I need to keep everything about my culture.

Thus, although 'freedom' was recognized as a positive aspect of life in the United States, as the participants began to see how such a concept would affect the everyday life and changing attitudes of their children, they had misgivings about it in practice. Basma articulated the need for 'keeping culture' as a strategy to protect her family from these rapid transformations.

Youth, like their parents, were aware of the differences between their resettlement experiences. Several youth said that while everything was good or easy for them, they recognized their parents' struggles. For example, one teenager, Hakeema, was very positive about her own life, but said of her parents:

I feel sad for my dad and mom. I am going to school; I am learning English. But unfortunately, both of them, they don't speak English For my dad, he had really good business back home and now, he is not having a good job, is relying on his savings. For my mom, it's not only the language problem because she is veiled, and she can't do other kinds of things ... My mom does not have any problem getting outside or getting around. Her problem is only getting the job because she is feeling bad—despite she is educated, only because of her veil ...

Hakeema and her mother recognize that wearing a *hijab* makes it difficult to find employment. Some participants were acutely aware of how phenotype, country of origin, religion, and dress contributed to how their new neighbors perceived them and treated them, as well as discriminatory actions on the part of employers or government employees.

Hakeema continued, saying, 'Despite that, my mom's still convinced to continue with her veils and she even suggested to me to get that veil despite the difficulty getting the job. She is convinced.' The interviewer followed-up, 'You just say 'no'? And Hakeema replied, 'Not *no*, but later.' This discussion shows how adults and youth are negotiating customs and

values in light of the political, economic, and social realities of their new society and the ways these might impact family relationships.

Refugee service providers noted familial tension in relation to differing cultural expectations around gender and parent-child roles. One provider said she exhorted mothers to learn English so they would be able to communicate and understand the social demands and experiences of their children. She spoke of the complicated identities many teenage girls develop, giving the example of the respectful, docile, obedient girl who takes off her head covering as soon as she is beyond the purview of parental control:

Provider: Yes. I have seen it myself. I have seen it with other families – not the newcomers, but the ones that have been here for a long time. And it's major. Their kids talk to me and [I] think of the things they tell me, their daughters, in front of them [parents]. They [the parents] would have a heart attack.... I know these families are very conservative. All the girls are covered only in front of the parents. And as soon as they go out – in the car [they remove the *hijab*] and I know that for a fact.... And, I think ... they are having this double personality.

This interview underscored the intergenerational tension in refugee and immigrant families that results from the positive societal value placed on independence in the United States that is often at odds with family norms that reinforce parental authority and familial cohesion.

In our interactions with Iraqi boys, most of whom were between the ages of 10–14, we were struck by the distinction between their public attitudes of unruliness, disrespect for authority—especially female authority—and their behavior at home, which was charming and respectful. Refugee service providers expressed concern for Iraqi boys, for example, a service provider knew of two boys who had been expelled for sexually harassing a teacher.

During the course of the RWP, we witnessed and heard from parents and student advocates about family struggles with discipline. Teachers, health care providers or others who suspect abuse at home must initiate state intervention into parental disciplinary tactics. This kind of intervention is surprising for people from countries where the use of physical punishment is socially acceptable by parents, teachers, or others in authority. Once youth are aware of these differences in the legal system, they may use the threat of state intervention to change their parents' disciplinary tactics. Uncertain about their usual disciplinary strategies, and the challenges that resettlement in a new society brings, many parents were confused about how to discipline their children. One refugee provider remarked that the threat of state intervention made parents afraid to discipline their children at all, and as a result they were 'running wild.'

Although there were only three girls who participated in the RWP in 2009–2010, their descriptions of school and their future educational plans shed light on how girls may view resettlement as a boon for broadened opportunities. Girls described their experiences in school and the school system itself as the most positive aspect of their lives in the United States. They repeatedly described school as 'easy' and were planning on obtaining a college degree with the goal of preparing for a profession. They expressed great optimism about their future in the United States.

Discussion

Our analyses of in-depth interview data from 38 recently resettled Iraqi refugees ranging in age from 7–65, highlight the importance of utilizing a transnational framework (and its emphasis on agency and structural constraints) to understand the ways in which refugees coming to the United States adapt to their new communities. In particular, we found three areas of primary concern and challenge for Iraqi refugees: safety and security, the urgent need to understand and navigate state institutions and structures, and transformation of family norms around gender and intergenerational relationships. Examination of these three areas demonstrates the ways in which our participants were “transnationally situated” (Kilkey & Merla 2014). In discussions of safety, participants were acutely aware of the lived reality of Iraq and being safe in the United States from the everyday violence of war and conflict. In their discussion of institutions, Iraqi participants were acutely aware that their stocks of knowledge of how institutions functioned in Iraq (e.g., infrastructure, notion of dictatorship) did not apply in the United States, and thus articulated a need to understand local customs and systems to ameliorate their situation. In the second realm in particular, constraints on their agency were underscored, echoing Hess and Shandy’s (2008) point about not celebrating agency in situations where state institutions are preeminent, or, in this case, opaque. It is in the third area, of social reproduction, where we see the most evidence of refugee agency in directing processes of social reproduction. It is here where parents are often perceived by children to be limiting their own agency, and the friction between different social value systems is heightened. Youth agency, in this area, is particularly important to recognize.

Although it has been our goal to highlight how refugees act to re-establish social worlds in a transnational context in an effort to demonstrate that depictions of refugees as being without agency are unfounded, it is also important not to have an overly celebratory view of agency, which is why we have attended so much to structuration and the way it both constrains and channels agency. Similarly, it is important to consider transnationalism in the same vein. Although transnationalism is an important theoretical framework for the analysis of migration, Ong’s work on ‘flexible citizenship’ (1999) reminds us to ask if transnationalism is equally accessible to everyone, everywhere. As we noted earlier, only 1% of refugees are resettled in a third country. The refugees in our study have access to mobility, residency and work authorization that are open to very few. Our results demonstrate the salience of both agency and the structures that limit refugee choices. Thus, our results are consistent with anthropologists’ insights gleaned from ‘transnationalism from below,’ which has been fruitful in showing the ways in which globalization is a multi-directional process that reaches the vast majority of people in the world, while also attending to the ways in which violence and structural violence limit the opportunities of many to live transnational lives. Therefore, these findings have important implications for our understanding of refugee resettlement and for the development of programs and policies that can facilitate the well-being and integration of the growing number of Middle Eastern refugees throughout the world.

Refugee Resettlement as a Transnational Experience: Implications for Policy

To situate our research on Iraqi refugee resettlement, we note how U.S. refugee resettlement policies, in a broad sense, reflect an assumption that refugees can and should be incorporated into the body politic as economically and socially productive citizens. At the same time, the contradictions and paradoxes of the U.S. Resettlement Program are readily apparent to scholars and social service providers familiar with the program and who work with refugees. For example, over recent decades, an effort has been made to resettle the most vulnerable refugees (Patrick, 2004), whose multiple mental, physical and social welfare needs are challenging for resettlement programs to meet (Dawood, 2011). At the same time, the U.S. Refugee Resettlement program is structured around the mandate that refugees become economically independent within months after arrival (ORR, 2012). Thus, for the small percentage of refugees offered third country resettlement in the U.S., they are recognized as agents of change and potential productive citizens, which is undoubtedly an improvement over the ‘bare life’ conditions of camps or countries where refugees have no official status (Agamben, 1998).

Yet, in the United States, in contrast to some other third country resettlement states, there is little proviso for a transitional period before economic self-sufficiency is expected. The rapid transformation from one to the other may increase the chance that refugees become marginalized and poor, as well as have negative repercussions for their mental health and well-being since poverty and lack of access to resources may make it more difficult to heal from past traumas, and may even inflict new ones. Policies of rapid self-sufficiency, and requiring volunteer hours to receive aid from programs such as Temporary Aid for Needy Families, contribute to the transformation of gender norms around work and caregiving. These policies are part of the structure that shapes refugee agency.

In addition, the transnational context is important for understanding the existence of refugees as a category of people, but also in order to analyze their migratory trajectory and the meaning and experience of resettlement. Theorists of transnationalism who emphasize a macro-perspective on global processes (e.g. Appadurai, 1996) highlight interrelated dynamics of economics, media, technology, politics and people as a way of understanding globalization. Looking at the reconfiguration of intimate family relationships and gender dynamics through the prism of one specific group of people—Iraqis in the United States—reveals how transnational processes affect the lives of people, and gives us insight, in turn, to how these same people may respond to local, national and transnational structures that shape these same dynamics.

Iraqi Refugee Agency & Social Reproduction

It is in the realm of social reproduction where we see agency enacted more forcefully, by both parents and children, as well as pushing back against both opportunities and constraints of the new social context. These responses are particularly notable with respect to gender roles. For example, the ways in which Iraqi families responded to the pressure to become economically self-sufficient in a short period of time had gendered dimensions. Kids recognized, in the words of one boy talking about the reversed economic roles of his parents, that his new world was ‘upside down.’ Mothers were more likely to work outside the home

in the United States, and fathers' economic roles were diminished. Men were also more likely than women to place importance on pursuing former professions they held in Iraq. This led to frustration for many as obtaining credentials proved difficult, and many men felt affronted by scarce opportunities for work they deemed beneath them. Women, by contrast, seemed more willing to avail themselves of educational and occupational opportunities that arose and seemed more open about deviations from their previous careers, echoing the findings of other researchers who have examined gendered dimensions of transnational migration (e.g. Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003).

Mirroring much of the research on migrant families, the well-being of children is one of the most important motivating factors for transnational migrants, including refugees. Consequently, once families resettle, concerns about how different cultural norms will impact children and family dynamics come to the fore. For Iraqis, parental concern about more permissive societal norms for girls, and increased individualization for both genders, was dominant in discussions about the impacts of resettlement. These concerns explain gendered parental responses towards children in the domains of education, career choice and personal freedom. In turn, these gendered responses may work to explain why educational success differs for boys and girls from immigrant and refugee families. While the girls continue to experience high levels of parental monitoring and constraints on their freedom outside of school, school is a place where they can focus their energy and talents. Boys have more individual freedom, and thus may chafe under restrictive norms for behavior in schools. These findings are similar to other research that has examined gendered aspects of migrant youth experience in schools (e.g. López, 2002; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2002). Parents are often confused and cowed by different disciplinary regimes in U.S. schools and the possibility of state intervention in the form of child protective services agencies. Children recognize these differences and sometimes attempt to subvert parental discipline by threatening to invoke state intervention in parental discipline (Renzaho, McCabe, & Sainsbury, 2011; Ong, 2003 also discusses this with respect to intimate partner violence and refugees). By examining the project of social reproduction as a whole and the agency of migrants as not only constrained but enabled by structures, we are able to see the ways gender, age, and religion intersect with policies in the creation of a process that is not reducible to resistance or assimilation.

Existing research suggests the importance of attention to gendered dimensions of migration and the experiences of youth because they are understudied and constitute a rich portal to understanding societal forces that shape transnational migration and resettlement. However, putting these transformations in a context of agency and structure, we see the complex interplay among and between multiple axes of identity such as gender, age, ethnicity and religious affiliation. Anthropologists have pointed out that assimilationist and other models that rely on generational distinctions such as first and second (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001; Portes, Fernández-Kelley, & Haller, 2005), and even 1.5 generation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001) do not account for migrant agency on individual, family or macro levels, nor do they examine the experience of transnational families (Boehm 2012; Glick Schiller & Fouron, 2001; Hess, 2011). Our analysis, with its focus on agency in a transnational field adds an important dimension to analyzing social reproduction among transnational migrants.

In light of these many analytical strands, we suggest that refugee adults and children welcome opportunities to not only improve their individual circumstances, but are also open and eager to learn to function within new sociocultural, economic and political systems. The way refugees respond to ideas such as ‘freedom,’ which are both compelling and subversive, depends on context. Providing mechanisms that help refugees understand these norms and systems so that they more consciously guide their children may improve parent-child relationships during this process. By looking at the intimate everyday of social reproduction across generations, our goal was to provide some insight into the particular stressors that families face, from the perspective of youth and parents. Although many Iraqis greatly appreciate the focus on human rights and freedom they find in the United States, their understanding of how this might affect their children’s well-being and the social cohesion of the family makes the idea of ‘too much freedom’ important to grasp.

Conclusion

The ‘project’ of social reproduction serves to highlight the way gendered and generational shifts in agency, structured through institutions, policies and societal norms, transform in new contexts. The desire for children to have a good life and to be productive remains constant regardless of context; however, the outcome or what it means to achieve that goal is sure to transform over time. The transnational context is important as exposure to global discourses means that migrants are often exposed to ideas in theory before they know how living them will impact their everyday lives. Highlighting social reproduction as an agentic act illuminates the ways that refugees incorporate, reject, and build upon many worldviews and values within particular institutional and structural frameworks in order to construct social worlds that reflect their desire for a better life, particularly for their children. It is our hope that through increased understanding, those that provide services to refugees and those that make policies related to refugee resettlement recognize these particular challenges and develop services and policies that support positive trajectories of change as refugees work to establish new lives in the United States.

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