Little Syria: Syrian refugees in car town, Korea

Kyohee Kim¹ · Peer Smets¹

Received: 2 August 2020 / Accepted: 17 December 2021 / Published online: 9 February 2022
© The Author(s) 2022

Abstract

Due to the Syrian civil war, about 1,100 Syrians have applied for asylum status in Korea, and almost all have obtained humanitarian protection status. Receiving refugees is a relatively new phenomenon in Korean society and many refugees may experience a hostile environment. Although a small number of Koreans show empathy to refugees, the majority have expressed serious security and financial concerns about hosting refugees. This qualitative study therefore looks at Syrian refugees' sense of belonging in Car Town in Seoul, where approximately 50 Syrians have settled. Through interviews, informal talks, and observations, we investigate Syrians' everyday lives, and the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in the Korean society and in the local Syrian community. This study offers insights into different elements of belonging and how the politics of belonging and place-belongingness take shape, and in turn impact the sense of belonging of the Syrian refugees in Car Town and in Korea.

Keywords Syrian refugees · Syrian community · Sense of belonging · Inclusion · Exclusion · Seoul

1 Introduction

Due to the Syrian civil war that broke out in 2012, about 6.3 million Syrians were forcibly displaced from their original homes. About 80% of them are staying in neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, but the other 20% have settled elsewhere around the globe (UNHCR, 2018). About 1,400 Syrian refugees settled down in South Korea, far away from Syria (KOSIS, 2018). Most arrived prior to 2015, before the immigration control of Syrians became more severe. In reaction to the humanitarian efforts of many countries to host Syrian refugees, the Korean government granted humanitarian protection status to about 1,100 Syrians, including migrants who cannot return to Syria (Statistics Korea, 2019).

✉ Kyohee Kim
kimkyohee@gmail.com

Peer Smets
p.g.s.m.smets@vu.nl

¹ Department of Sociology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1081,
1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands

The distinctive characteristics of Syrian refugees in Korea and their position in Korea are as follows. First, many Syrian refugees had worked in the used car business and had therefore experienced Korean society before the war. Used cars from Korean automakers such as Kia and Hyundai are popular in the Middle East. Due to the demand for used cars in Syria and the Middle East, many Syrian entrepreneurs and technicians had worked in Korea with either a formal or informal (i.e., without a work permit) status. Second, Syrians with humanitarian protection status are allowed to stay in Korea but are not entitled to any social welfare benefits from the Korean government. Third, the residential permit must be renewed annually. Consequently, the position of most Syrian refugees does not differ from that of migrant workers in Korea. The main distinguishing factor is that Syrian refugees do not know when they can or should go back to their home country, or if it will ever be possible.

Korean society has less experience with embracing ethnic diversity. In Seoul, for instance, migrants make up less than 3% of the population (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2019). The Korean government started accepting a small number of refugees in 1994, but most Koreans did not notice that refugees were settling in Korea until 2018. In April 2018, about 500 Yemenites arrived on Korea's Jeju Island through the visa waiver program for tourists and then applied for asylum status. Many Koreans at the time protested against hosting refugees because of expected security issues related to extremists, and additional financial expenditures. For example, over 700,000 people signed an online petition against hosting refugees, which was given to the president (Office of the President, 2018). Moreover, Korean people tend to be more hostile toward Muslim refugees. A poll from a Korean newspaper showed that 53.2% of Korean people were favorable to hosting non-Muslim refugees, but only 28.7% were favorable to hosting Muslim refugees (JoongAng Ilbo, 2018).

Our study explores Syrians' everyday lives and their sense of belonging in Car Town in Seoul. Car Town is the largest auto aftermarket in Seoul, where about 5,400 people work at 1,700 shops related to various car businesses (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2016). An estimated 300 shops are owned by foreigners, though the exact number is unknown (The Korea Economic Daily, 2016). Approximately 50 Syrians have settled in Car Town. Our main research question is: How do Syrian refugees residing in Car Town experience everyday life and what are the features of their sense of belonging in Korean society and in the local Syrian community? We look into their sense of belonging because it provides insight into the everyday lives of a vulnerable group with a migration background as they deal with inclusion, exclusion, and discrimination (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016).

We begin with a literature review on the sense of belonging. This is followed by a description of our study methodology coupled with a reflection on the researcher's positionality during the field work. Next, we present the characteristics and everyday experiences of Syrian refugees in Car Town alongside their experiences of discrimination by Koreans and the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion within the Syrian community. Finally, we analyze Syrians' sense of belonging in Korean society and in the Syrian community in Car Town.

2 Migrants' and refugees' senses of belonging

The sense of belonging can be understood as having an emotional attachment, feeling at home, or feeling safe from the fear of exclusion or lack of membership (Antonsich, 2010; Lähdesmäki et al., 2016). Characteristics such as ethnicity, nationality, family background, job, and income configure one's sense of belonging, and these elements can be valued by themselves and in combination (Yuval-Davis, 2006). A sense of belonging is created in

the interaction between self and society, which is a dynamic and multidimensional process (May, 2011). Such interaction also develops around physical and virtual places as well as material objects (Gustafson, 2014; Kim & Smets, 2020). Therefore, a sense of belonging often contests and reconstructs its content concerning one's life history and desires for the future (Davis et al., 2018; Smets & Snee, 2017).

Yuval-Davis (2006) identifies three elements that are needed to look into the sense of belonging: social locations, identifications and emotional attachments, and ethical and political values. One's social location is constructed along multiple axes of different social factors, such as gender, class, and ethnicity. These factors are mutually constitutive rather than existing independently. They also differ in their positioning regarding different historical and intersectional contexts. Next, constructions of belonging involve individual and collective identity narratives, but they are also reflections of the emotional investment and desire for attachment to particular social objects, which are manifested by individual and collective repetitive practices in a specific social and cultural space. Finally, focusing on the ethical and political values of belonging means paying attention to people's attitudes and ideologies. Here, inclusivity and the permeability of boundaries are emphasized by considering that belonging is often contested and adjusted.

In these late modern times, the dominance of social categories such as tradition, culture, and ethnicity has declined and individual autonomy has grown. In reaction to this process of individualization, contrastingly, nationalism also have increased (Bauman, 2000; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Moreover, considering that people cohesively reconstruct memories in ways that correspond to consequences and selective approaches, migrants' and refugees' senses of belonging in their host societies have inherent limitations because many people create social identities based on shared memories in particular social and cultural settings (Blokland, 2003). Given these perspectives, both the characteristics of a host society and the individual agency and initiative of migrants and refugees are important (Davis et al., 2018). Meanwhile, the sense of belonging is not a synonym of integration considering that the integration captures the process of formation of feelings of belonging with such process as learning a culture, acquiring rights, building relations toward the immigration society (Heckmann, 2005).

The characteristics and competence of individual migrants and refugees also influence their lives in a host society. Kim and Smets (2020) showed that refugees who had already developed communication skills and amicable personalities in their original homes adjusted better and integrated faster in their new environments. However, individual migrants' efforts to become integrated into a host society are not always successful in the long run because of "othering", an invisible form of exclusion that discourages migrants from feeling included in the dominate culture surrounding them (Ghorashi, 2014). For example, Eijberts and Ghorashi (2017) show that mastering the local language and participating in the labor market do not always increase migrants' sense of belonging in their host society, because they also enable migrants to recognize and understand the negative societal discourses and discriminatory rhetoric in public spaces. In this respect, Anthias (2018, p.157) argues, "If you are accepted in society, you are more likely to develop feelings of belonging". Therefore, the thresholds and frictions between newcomers and host societies should be examined.

The two distinctive perspectives to the sense of belonging are place (Duyvendak, 2011; Smets & Snee, 2017) and politics (Fenster, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2006). In this vein, Anton-sich (2010) suggests an analytical framework for studying belonging in two categories: politics of belonging and place-belongingness. Here, the politics of belonging refers to the process between those who claim belonging and those who have the power to grant

belonging. Key factors include the boundary discourse that separates “us” from “them”, the membership in a group, and the ownership of a place. Place-belongingness, then, refers to “feeling at home”, which is closely related to feelings that are attached to or rooted in a particular place. Place-belongingness is characterized by five types of factors: autobiographical (one’s history), relational (personal and social ties), cultural (language and other customs), economic (earning income), and legal (producing security). Antonsich (2010) argues that the absence of place-belongingness leads to exclusion, which can go together with loneliness, isolation, alienation, and displacement.

The attributes of a place support the place-sensitive understandings of a sense of belonging to that place, given that the term “place” already reflects both social and physical elements. According to Gieryn (2000), a place is a space filled with people, practices, objects, and representations, and it requires three dimensions: geographic location, material form, and investment with meaning and value. In addition, Najafi and Kamal (2012) show that factors such as the physical components of a place, the socio-cultural relationships within the environment, and the environmental behaviors or activities that take place there impact one’s place attachment. Furthermore, Inalhan and Finch (2004) suggest that attachment, familiarity, and identity are key processes that link people with their physical environment. By listing “the ownership of a place” as a key factor that separates “us” from “them”, Antonsich (2010) also reveals that his theoretical framework of the politics of belonging is intertwined with the notion of physical space.

Becoming familiarized with a certain geographic space or social atmosphere provides a feeling of home (Duyvendak, 2011; Boccagni, 2018). Utilizing the mobility lens, Kim and Smets (2020) claim that besides constructing a sense of home in a new environment merely by becoming familiarized with it as time goes by, migrants are also able to immediately bring a sense of home with them from their original homes. Here, elements of the past and present are brought together. For example, local spices are available elsewhere in the world, and some migrants are already fluent in a language used in the host society, which offers more possibilities for better communication. Also, the more commonalities they can find between their original and new societies, the easier it is for migrants and refugees to be integrated. Such understanding implies that migrants’ and refugees’ senses of belonging are influenced by not only the socioemotional atmosphere of a society but also the physical/tangible elements in a society, such as ethnic shops (see also Ghorashi, 2017; Hertzog, 2018).

However, the sense of belonging is also keenly influenced by the politics that surround and even shape the individual’s life. Here the importance of the notion of the politics of belonging emerges. For instance, the residential status of migrants and refugees also influences their senses of belonging. Uncertainty about their futures in a host society limits the lifespans of migrants and refugees, especially when they have to cope with short-term perspectives about their ways of living. For instance, Maury (2017) stresses that a temporary visa status leads to a limited and fragmented lifestyle for migrants. Also, Griffiths (2014) writes that an instable and precarious status causes mental and psychological anguish. Governmental policies therefore impact migrants’ and refugees’ senses of belonging.

Yuval-Davis (2006) explains the politics of belonging as follows. She first adapts Crowley’s (1999) understanding that defines the politics of belonging as “the dirty work of boundary maintenance”, elaborating that those boundaries “separate the world population into ‘us’ and ‘them’”. Then, she connects the politics of belonging with the notion of citizenship as well as the status and entitlements for belonging. Yuval-Davis’s understanding of the politics of belonging thus focuses on the national scale from the transnational perspective, however, does not pay attention to hierarchical positioning within small groups.

Moreover, her understanding of the sense of belonging and the politics of belonging is not place sensitive, despite the influence of place on an individual's social life. According to Gieryn (2000), physical place becomes a constituent element of one's social life by influencing hierarchies, power, and interactions between people. Antonsich (2010) also discusses Yuval-Davis's (2006) analytical framework, stating that "her discussion overlooks the notion of place, as if feelings, discourses, and practices of belonging exist in a geographical vacuum".

Conclusively, as an extension of the discussion elaborated so far, this paper investigates the sense of belonging of migrants and refugees from the place-sensitive perspective. In addition to looking into a national scale context of the politics of belonging, we focus on the hierarchical positionings within a small group in order to investigate how the sense of belonging takes shape in a micro-setting. Therefore, we look at how the characteristics of the migrants and refugees, and the characteristics of the society, and the policy stance of the government affect migrants' and refugee's senses of belonging.

3 Methodology

This research employed the following qualitative research methodologies: interviews, informal talks, and observations. These methods allowed us to be closely involved with the people and processes in our study as well as with the interactions among participants and social settings; they also allowed a flexibly structured study that sought to develop a contextual understanding and to investigate people in natural settings (Bryman, 2012). The field study is conducted in the Car Town area of Seoul, South Korea, from September to November 2018. The field study includes regular visits to Car Town about five times a week for interviews, casual talks, and observations, as well as volunteer works at an NGO located in the area that offers Korean language lessons, medical services, and Korean-Arabic translations for Syrians and other migrants in and around the case study area. The volunteer work at the NGO increased the knowledge and sensitivity to the positionality of the migrants and refugees in Korea and the supporting systems available there.

This research includes semi-structured interviews with fourteen Syrians and three Koreans and had informal talks with 28 Syrians and Koreans in Car Town. Interviews with Syrians were carried out in English, Korean, Arabic-Korean translation, or Arabic-English translation, according to each interviewee's choice; translations were provided by interviewees' acquaintances. Interviews were conducted individually, except for one group of two Syrian participants and one group of three Syrian participants. Interviewees often shared their thoughts and experiences during casual talks before and after the interviews; these casual talks provided information and insights for this research alongside formal interviews. The research also reflects the meetings with activists in other areas of Seoul and refugees from other countries; these meetings also provided insights into the lives of Syrians in Car Town.

Four of the fourteen Syrian interviewees were not under the refugee or humanitarian protection status but hold Business Visa. However, their everyday lives and experiences could not be distinguished from those of other Syrians in Car Town, especially in terms of experiencing protracted displacement. Like other Syrians in Korea, these four cannot return to Syria. Interviewees ranged in age from their twenties to their fifties, with a majority in their twenties. Syrian interviewees include eleven men and three women. However, most of the activities and behaviors detailed in this study apply primarily to Syrian men in

Car Town. This is because interviewed Syrian women hardly experienced social life with Koreans because they mainly focus on housework, and their life experiences in Korea were not specific to Car Town. Korean interviewees consisted of two leaders of NGOs helping refugees and one businessman in Car Town.

Syrian interlocutors were asked to describe such topics as their life trajectory before and after the Syrian war, experiences of inclusion and exclusion with Koreans, Syrians, and other Arabs. Moreover, difficulties in daily life and coping mechanism, as well as future plans were asked. Syrian interlocutors not only requested to state their own experiences and feelings but also the information they obtained from their friends and colleagues in Car Town.

Most interviews were recorded, after receiving informed consent, but three interviewees preferred to not have the conversation recorded. Most interviews were conducted after many small talks and visits. To increase the validity of the research, we applied methodological triangulation: that is, multiple methods or sources of data were used to enable cross checking (Bryman, 2012). The information derived from observations, interviews, and casual talks was consistently compared. The interview transcripts and field notes were repeatedly coded for significant themes and subthemes (Charmaz, 1996). Open coding was followed by selective coding, which offered the possibility of creating categories of and insights into the findings of this case study (Bryman, 2012). Along with the description about their everyday life, such topics as the experiences of discrimination and isolation in Korea, inclusion and exclusion among Syrians, and their coping mechanism were stood out.

4 Syrian refugees in car town

This study was conducted in Car Town, the largest auto aftermarket in Seoul, located in the center of the city (see Fig. 1). The first Syrian-owned business in Car Town was opened in the 1990s. Today, eight shops are owned by Syrians: four of those shops are neighbors on the same street, three are located nearby on another street, and one is about a fifteen-minute walk away (Fig. 2). Since the Syrian civil war began, the number of Syrians moving to Car Town has increased. According to Syrian interviewees, around fifty Syrians currently reside in Car Town, and they get along with the Syrian shop owners and some of the Arab businesspeople. Many of the Syrians in Car Town are single males in their mid-twenties. Most have lived in Korea for about five years. Only a few are married and living with their families.

It is not widely known that Syrians live in Car Town, although only a few newspapers have reported it (Hankyung, 2016; New & Joy, 2019). One of the reasons may be the low interest and understanding of migrants and refugees in Korean society. In this context, the background in which Syrians settled in Car Town, their daily life, and the social relationships within them is hardly informed. Therefore, this paper begins with an understanding of who they are and how their daily life consists.

Syrians in Car Town differ in how they came to be a refugee in Korea. Some Syrians were already in Korea when they became refugees. Their original plan was to stay in Korea for a few months for their work. But after the Syrian war broke out, many of them decided to stay in Korea, mainly for safety reasons. Syrian refugees in this group have experienced separation from, or even loss of, their families and friends during their stay in Korea, as well as the destruction of their hometowns and their houses. Other Syrians fled to Korea as

Fig. 1 The location of Car Town in Seoul, South Korea (left), and a satellite image of Car Town and the surrounding area (right) (Map from Seoul Research Data Service; satellite image from Google Earth)

Fig. 2 The Car Town street where four Syrian-owned auto parts shops are located

Fig. 3 Ornaments in Syrians' home

refugees after the war began. However, most of them had already been coming and going between Syria and Korea for the used car business. Because they had established networks and a means of making a living in Korea, they chose to flee there, even if their families or friends decided to flee to neighboring countries or to distant places such as Europe or America. Among this second group, only a small number of people had never been to Korea before the war, but they at least had friends or family members who were staying there, or they had worked in the used car industry in Syria. Most Syrian refugees in the second group used their networks to start working soon after they arrived. When it comes to the interviewed Syrians, ten people came before the Syrian war, and four people came to Korea after war.

Syrians in Car Town are either intermediate wholesalers between Korea and Arab countries or retailers who collect auto parts from Korean shops and sell them to the Syrian intermediate wholesalers. They can be divided into four categories based on their jobs: those who run an auto parts shop, those who are employed at a shop, those who supply small quantities of auto parts to the shops, and those who do not have a shop but store auto parts in suburban areas and supply them to shops in large quantities or export them directly. Regardless of what category they are in, the Syrians in Car Town have to cooperate with each other because the auto parts business requires various jobs that cannot be done alone. However, it is undeniable that the different roles in the car business create different positionalities among them.

Those who run an auto parts shop have leadership roles among other Syrians. Running a shop implies that the owner has enough capital to afford the space and has networks in Korea and abroad for intermediary trading. In addition, positionings such as purchaser and supplier create *de facto* employee and employer relationships. In Car Town, capital and network become tangible sources of power and authority among Syrians. Furthermore, shop owners often hold Korean business visas, which gives them a different residential status from other Syrians, although every Syrian experiences protracted displacement because they cannot visit or go back to their original home.

The Syrians in Car Town are composed of several social groups. In Car Town, there is a leader who settled first, well-established the business, speaks fluent Korean, and religiously respected. The largest group is centered by this leader. This largest group can be found along the street where the four shops are located. Syrian interlocutors met in the street said that “every” Syrian in Car Town comes to this street to hang out. However, some Syrians do not have close ties to this group and instead form different small groups. Some Syrian interviewees distinguished between Syrians who drink alcohol and eat non-halal food and those who refrain from such behaviors. One Syrian interviewee identified cultural differences among Syrians according to their region of origin. The consequence of different religious practices and backgrounds is that some Syrians actively interact with other Syrians in Car Town, while others only maintain superficial relationships. Furthermore, conflicts and a rivalry mentality have resulted from competition in the car business. Some Syrian interlocutors have been critical of other Syrians’ lifestyles and business ethics, which has caused friction within the Syrian community.

Six Syrian houses were visited for this study. The conditions of houses that Syrians lived varied. They lived in rented houses. The type and size of houses also depends on the individual characteristics: some lived alone, with friends, or with family. Depend on their financial status, some live in a high-rise apartment house, some live in a low-rise multiplex house. In Korea, a high-rise apartment house is more expansive than a row-rise multiplex house in most cases. The size of the house varied by the number of families. The distinctive features of the living conditions were difficult to define, other than having a picture

Fig. 4 Waterpipe in a Syrian's shop (left) and the Arabic text on the wall at a Syrian's garage (right)

frame or scroll of Arabic text, or Arabic spices found in kitchens (see Fig. 3). Even the dining style varied. There were people who ate on the carpet, and other people ate on the sofa or on the dining table. Likewise, remarkable physical characteristics were not found in the Syrians' shops other than the Arabic writing on the sign.

The term housing emphasizes the physical aspects, while the term home emphasizes the social, emotional, and relational aspects. From the perspective of home, it is emphasized that even similar housing or the built environment can be filled, decorated, and experienced differently depends on the user (Buitelaar & Stock, 2010; Duruz, 2010; Eijberts & Ghosh, 2016; Kim & Smets, 2020; Kusenbach & Paulsen, 2013). In Car Town, the Syrians' home and shops display their everyday lives with cultural, economic, and relational elements, such as the Arabic language, Syrian foods, card games, and Arabic media, and these elements reveal who it belongs to (see Fig. 4).

5 Everyday life and the sense of belonging of Syrians in car town

Most Syrians in Car Town start work at about 9 AM. However, their working hours are not always punctual or fixed. During the day, Syrians are generally busy collecting and delivering auto parts by pick-up truck or moving these items to warehouses in suburban areas of Seoul. During breaks, they often watch Arabic video clips from YouTube, Facebook, or other media streaming services, such as Farfeshplus.com. Sometimes they read Arabic news articles or other written content from Facebook and other online sites. At night, many Syrians come to the street again after dinner. People start showing up around 9 PM, but the gathering time seems to be flexible. Sometimes about 15 people come to play a card game, smoke shisha, or watch TV together. Usually, though, 4–6 people gather at a shop and play Tarneeb, a Syrian card game. People often hang out past midnight. Thus, the street functions as a central community for most Syrians in Car Town. It is a place where they can acquire and exchange information, relax together, and share their daily lives. Syrians living in other areas, and even other Middle Eastern visitors, are welcome to join. The street and the Syrian-owned shops thereby become a place where Syrians and Arabs feel at home.

In Car Town, only a few Syrians can speak the Korean language. Most can only use simple phrases such as “How are you?” and “I am fine”. Syrian interlocutors said that even though they barely speak the Korean language, they do not have any problems in everyday life. For business interactions, they use only simple expressions, such as “How much is it?”, and they use numbers for price negotiations. They said that they are too busy to learn the language or too tired after working all day and that Korean is too difficult for Syrians to learn. The language barrier has created friction between Syrians in Car Town and Korean society. One Syrian interviewee said this about the language barrier:

[For] living, I can live with few sentences, few words, few vocabularies, ... [when] I want to buy something or want to go somewhere, I can speak Korean. But other things, like to make friends and to communicate [about certain] subjects, it is difficult.

Moreover, most Syrians do not see their future in Korea, and they expect to return to Syria when the war is over, so they do not have a strong motivation to learn the Korean language. Consequently, they rely on the few Syrians who speak fluent Korean when they face situations that require Korean, such as visiting a realtor to find a house to rent or seeing a doctor at the hospital. When asked about the lack of Korean fluency among Syrians in Car Town, one Syrian interviewee argued that the Syrians in that area are “blue-collar workers”—he used the word “grease merchants” as a derogatory term—who are not highly educated; they therefore do not live a sophisticated life but live from day to day.

Regardless of their lifestyles or self-identifications as working class, Syrians’ lack of knowledge about the Korean language causes uncomfortable situations in their daily lives. Syrians in Car Town do not just stay in Car Town; they travel in and out of the area to collect auto parts or to store those items in garages in the suburbs. Thus, they face various unexpected or unprepared for situations such as car accidents, injuries, and legal disputes. Moreover, they may experience hospitality as well as discrimination from Koreans. Nevertheless, most of them lack the motivation to invest in becoming integrated into Korean society. Syrian interviewees mentioned three reasons that hinder their motivation to integrate: their precarious residential status, societal discrimination, and cultural differences.

Many Syrian interviewees are unmotivated to integrate into Korean society. They feel the Korean government did not welcome them, because it granted them a humanitarian protection status instead of a refugee status. Humanitarian protection status holders in Korea are granted a one-year residence permit that must be renewed annually. The permit’s short duration means that many Syrians face the fear of deportation. Comparing themselves with their friends or family members who settled in European countries, Syrian interviewees complained that the Korean government would not grant them citizenship or permanent residence permits even though they have been living in the country more than five years without causing any problems. It has therefore been difficult for them to establish long-term-stay plans, and thus they have less motivation to learn the language. One Syrian refugee explained:

Korean society didn’t accept me. When I applied for the refugee status, they didn’t accept. So, I am just living here [rather than belonging to Korean society] ... [If] they accepted me, they would give me a refugee status and they would try to change the way they treat me.

The Syrian interlocutors precisely expressed their negative feelings for the questions about the discrimination they have experienced in Korea. Discrimination is another factor that limits Syrians’ desire to integrate. Syrian interlocutors talked about their experiences of

exclusion and discrimination by Koreans just because they look different. They also talked about prejudices against the Islamic culture in Korean society as well as distorted information about Syrians. One Syrian interviewee said that when he meets Korean people, the first question they ask is “Where are you from?” This question creates a sense of otherness (see Davis & Nencel, 2011) and reveals the absence of inclusivity toward different ethnic groups in Korean society. In addition, he said that some Koreans connect Syrians with the IS (the Islamic State) and therefore hesitate to get along. In such situations, he does not feel comfortable among Koreans, even at downtown pubs. Regarding such prejudice and discrimination, an interviewee said:

When I visit a provincial town, I see people are afraid of foreigners. Why? Am I not a human being?

As a result, most Syrians do not have Korean friends. Although some Syrians have had a Korean girlfriend, the relationship did not expand to her friends.

Finally, cultural differences make Syrians’ lives difficult in Korea and influence their willingness to integrate. Interviewees said that “everything” is different. Most criticized the Korean culture for being too individualized. They especially complained about the lack of interactions with their neighbors. According to one Syrian interviewee:

Korean culture and our [Syrian] culture are different. I learned that Korean people helped each other and visited each other a long time ago. But now, it’s different. Syrian culture is similar to the old-time Korean culture.

Saying that he learned from his Korean language class that Korean people used to have a strong sense of community in the past, this interviewee claimed that the old-time Korean culture is better than the contemporary Korean culture. For many Syrians, the contemporary Korean and Syrian cultures and value systems are too different to overcome. In the individualized Korean society, Syrians do not experience acceptance from the people they encounter in everyday life. They therefore prefer to maintain their own community-oriented culture rather than adapt to Korean culture.

Thus, instead of integrating into Korean society, many Syrian refugees find a sense of belonging among fellow Syrians in Car Town. Because Syrians are familiar with the physical environment of Car Town and the people in that area, they feel safe and comfortable living there. They can develop affective, intimate, and convivial friendship relations with other Syrians and can provide mutual support and care (see Kathiravelu, 2013; Kathiravelu & Bunnell, 2018). Moreover, their friendship networks also include Arab business partners: as one Syrian interviewee described, those relations are “business during the day, hang out during the night”. Although Syrians know many Koreans in Car Town and visit their shops frequently to buy auto parts, those relations remain only as business networks due to the language barrier and different lifestyles.

Though Car Town provides a sense of belonging, the different Islamic regulations practiced among the Syrians there also create dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in a way that Syrians create various gathering groups upon the situations, as social activities are valued and judged by those regulations. Activities allowed by Islamic regulations tend to have more participation and open invitations. For example, when Syrians play a card game or watch a football game (mostly English Premier League or Spanish La Liga), anyone interested can join that event. These activities take place in Syrians’ shops, which can be seen as semi-public spaces where Syrians and Arabs are welcomed. In contrast, some activities, especially those with drinking, involve smaller, closed groups. These activities usually take place in downtown Seoul in order to avoid fellow Syrians.

The Islamic regulations also influence the lives of Syrian women in Car Town by setting a boundary between men and women. Syrian women in Car Town are mostly isolated in their houses and focus on homemaking. Marriage status is another factor that creates dynamics of inclusion and exclusion among Syrian men in Car Town. One Syrian interviewee who lives with his family said that he cannot invite other Syrian men to his house because his wife cannot be seen by other men. He explained that this traditional cultural background, which is aligned with Islamic regulations, allows only single Syrians to visit each other's houses; in contrast, married men meet people in public settings, such as in the shops. This spatial distinction between men and women means that the street where the Syrians' shops are located becomes more vibrant and active at night, especially given that the men can talk loudly without bothering neighbors.

6 Reconsidering senses of (spatial) belonging

We have focused on the narratives and positionality of Syrians in Car Town. Although they have experienced a narrowing of choices or partial disconnections, their everyday lives as refugees are similar to their everyday lives before the Syrian war. When the Syrian war broke out, they chose to remain in or flee to Korea, relying on their experiences or networks. Because they have basically continued the business practices they had in Syria, they have not experienced significant changes in their daily lives in Korea. This peculiarity of Syrians in Car Town differs from the previous understanding that refugees experience the absence of choice (Taylor, 2013) or being cut off from the past (Lacroix, 2004).

The positioning of Syrians in Car Town reveal inherent limitations regarding the sense of belonging in a host society. For this group, Islamic regulations have a crucial impact on their lives because they play a central role in the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Their dominant culture is aligned with traditional Muslim culture. In Korea, however, an anti-Islam sentiment coupled with ethno-nationalism is pervasive (Eum, 2017). Many Koreans are hostile to Muslims. Syrians in Car Town still stick to their Muslim identities and religious practices, and it is difficult for them to claim their belonging in Korea. In addition, the politics of belonging operate among Syrians in such a way that they create hierarchical positionings among themselves. Here, we found tangible sources of power. Although Syrians work together in the auto parts trading business, the different roles of purchasers and suppliers create different positions. Such settings generate the power dynamics of leadership and subordinate positionings as a natural consequence.

Moreover, dynamics of inclusion and exclusion were created among Syrians in Car Town. Here, traditional Muslim culture played a crucial role in creating social and spatial boundaries among them. Regarding the inclusion and exclusion centered by Muslim culture, an NGO activist who is taking care of Syrians' legal issues, medical conditions, and everyday life in Car Town stated as follows.

Because of drinking, many Syrians in this town drive under alcohol, so they got canceled drivers' licenses. [...] Some people despise those guys who drink alcohol, so some people disguise other people like they don't drink. But sometimes they come across at Hongdae area (a popular night-spot in Seoul). Weird culture is here.

Syrians in Car Town have also not developed a full-fledged place-belongingness in Car Town or in Korea. Syrians in Car Town are deeply interrelated with Koreans, especially with those in the used car and auto parts industry. They frequently meet with Korean auto

parts dealers to buy new and used items. Moreover, their business networks extend even to the informal sector in Korea. However, although they may know many Koreans, their relationships with them stay at the business level. Syrians in Korea also have to stand the fear of deportation, as well as the lack of relational, cultural, and autobiographical elements. In addition, discrimination by Koreans and cultural differences between Syrians and Koreans have hindered Syrians' efforts to integrate into Korean society. As a result, they have established a fragmented place-belongingness but only in the specific places they choose to belong to or in those places that grant belonging to them. Because they can easily visit different places in their cars, they can selectively experience places they want to belong to, such as a friend's house or the street with Syrian-owned shops. Together with inclusion in the Syrian community, physical and virtual mobility opportunities reify Syrians' exclusion from Korean society.

Syrians' fragmented place-belongingness and their behavioral patterns associated with mobility are aligned with the concept of the SUV model of citizenship suggested by Mitchell (2005). He used the analogy of the SUV (sports utility vehicle) to describe the individualized lifestyle of privileged people that minimizes undesirable contact with fellow citizens as if they were living in a bubble (Mitchell, 2005). Our study shows that in addition to the Korean society's hostility toward Syrians, the Syrians in Car Town are reifying their isolation in Korea. They are living in a bubble. This finding shows that researchers should consider not only the host society's characteristics but also the newcomers' characteristics and their perspectives on becoming part of the host society as important factors that influence migrants' and refugees' senses of belonging. In other words, the permeability of migrants' and refugees' boundaries is as important as the inclusivity of the host society.

7 Conclusion

Korean society has a short history of hosting refugees, and refugees in Korea have so far not been recognized as members of Korean society. This study portrays the sense of belonging of the Syrian refugees in Car Town in Seoul and, more specifically, describes their everyday lives. Most Syrian refugees in Car Town had experienced Korean society before the Syrian civil war, and they therefore chose to stay in or flee to Korea. Though they have not experienced a dramatic change in their everyday lives, they have experienced a protracted displacement. They feel the Korean government has put them in a precarious position by giving them only short-term residence permits. In addition, discrimination from Korean people and differences in Korean and Syrian cultural values have hindered their integration.

We investigated the social locations, identity narratives, and contestations of Syrian refugees in Car Town to understand their sense of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006). The Syrian community in Car Town consists of several social groups. In addition to having different narratives, Syrians have positioned themselves differently, as leaders or subordinates, thus producing a power dynamic among them. Islamic regulations have also played a central role in creating mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion among them. However, although these Syrians differ in individual characteristics, including their social norms, many Koreans merely consider them as foreigners, especially foreigners who are Muslim, which leads to exclusion.

As described in the theoretical review, we approached the sense of belonging of Syrians in Car Town in two different analytical frameworks: the politics of belonging and

place-belongingness (Antonsich, 2010). However, our findings indicate that these two categories are interconnected and interactional. Specifically, in this study, we noticed that social discrimination led to spatial isolation, which in turn reified and solidified the social and spatial demarcation of Syrian refugees. From the perspective of politics of belonging, Syrians in Car Town have experienced exclusion by the Korean government and the Korean people. Frustrated by this, these Syrians do not even claim their belonging in Korea. Boundary discourses and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion remain only within their group. Thus, instead of integrating into Korean society, Syrians have formed an ethnic community in Car Town, which implies that they have established a place-belongingness there. However, they have not developed a full-fledged place-belongingness, even in Car Town, because of the lack of security as well as relational, cultural, and biographical elements. Instead, they have established a fragmented place-belongingness in Car Town and Korea, as if they lived their lives in a bubble.

This paper disentangles the narratives and positionalities of Syrians in Car Town in Seoul, South Korea, and describes how their senses of belonging take shape. This study showed that an extremely hostile environment can frustrate newcomers' motivation to integrate. In addition, such a hostile environment rules newcomers out from the politics of belonging at a national level. However, we suggested that politics of belonging take place not only at a national level but also within small groups. Finally, in constrained situations, such as that in Korea, newcomers establish a fragmented place-belongingness in association with living their lives in a bubble. Here, we found that the SUV model of citizenship was applicable to the Syrian refugees in Korea.

The societal implications of this study can be summarized as follow. First, the Korean government's policy stance imposes a precarious status on Syrian refugees in Korea. The duration of the residence permit for humanitarian status holders should be reconsidered. Second, Syrian refugees experience discrimination and exclusion from Korean people. This implies that social inclusivity in Korea should be improved. Third, Syrian refugees are less motivated to integrate in Korea, partially because of their negative perception of the Korean culture. We therefore emphasize that mutual effort from both the host society and newcomers is important for enhancing newcomers' sense of belonging.

Funding Not applicable.

Declarations

Conflict of interest Not applicable.

Data availability The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to the privacy of the research population but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Code availability Not applicable.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not

permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Antonsich, M. (2010). Searching for belonging—an analytical framework. *Geography Compass*, 4(6), 644–659.
- Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid modernity*. Polity Press.
- Beck, U., & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002). *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*. Sage.
- Blokland, T. (2003). *Urban Bonds*. Polity Press.
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods*. Oxford University Press.
- Buitelaar, M., & Stock, F. (2010). Making homes in turbulent times: Moroccan-Dutch Muslims contesting dominant discourses of belonging. In H. Ghorashi & H. Moghissi (Eds.), *Muslim Diaspora in the West: Negotiating Gender, Home and Belonging* (pp. 163–179). Ashgate.
- Charmaz, K. (1996). Grounded Theory. In J. A. Smith, R. Harre, & L. van Langenhove (Eds.), *Rethinking Methods in Psychology* (pp. 27–49). Sage.
- Crowley, J. (1999). The politics of belonging: Some theoretical considerations. In A. Geddes & A. Favell (Eds.), *The politics of belonging: Migrants and minorities in contemporary Europe* (pp. 15–41). Ashgate.
- The Korea Economic Daily (2016, December 6). Dapsipri car part street transformed into 'Islam town'. <https://www.hankyung.com/society/article/2016120639181>. Accessed 01 August 2020.
- Davis, K., & Nencel, L. (2011). Border skirmishes and the question of belonging: an autoethnographic account of everyday exclusion in multicultural society. *Ethnicities*, 11(4), 467–488.
- Davis, K., Ghorashi, H., Smets, P., & Eijberts, M. (2018) Introduction to contested belonging: Space, practices, biographies. In K. Davis, H. Ghorashi & P. Smets (Eds.), *Contested belonging: Spaces, practices, biographies* (pp. 1–15). Emerald.
- Duruz, J. (2010). Floating food: eating 'Asia' in kitchens of the diaspora. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 3(1), 45–49.
- Duyvendak, J. (2011). *The politics of home: Belonging and nostalgia in Europe and the United States*. Springer.
- Eijberts, M., & Ghorashi, H. (2017). Biographies and the doubleness of inclusion and exclusion. *Social Identities*, 23(2), 163–178.
- Eum, I. (2017). Korea's response to Islam and Islamophobia: focusing on veiled Muslim women's experiences. *Korea Observer*, 48(4), 825–849.
- Fenster, T. (2005). The right to the gendered city: different formations of belonging in everyday life. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 14(3), 217–231.
- Ghorashi, H. (2014). Routed Connections in Late Modern Times. In Y. M. Vieten (Ed.), *Revisiting Iris Marion Young on Normalisation, Inclusion and Democracy* (pp. 49–66). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ghorashi, H. (2017). A shifting quest for a sense of home. In S. Dijkstra, L. van Doorn, & J. C. Van Pelt (Eds.), *Seeking Home in a Strange Land: True stories of the changing meaning of home* (pp. 135–154). Stili Novi.
- Gieryn, T. F. (2000). A space for place in sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26(1), 463–496.
- Griffiths, M. B. E. (2014). Out of time: the temporal uncertainties of refused asylum seekers and immigration detainees. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 40(12), 1991–2009.
- Gustafson, P. (2014). Place attachment in an age of mobility. In L. C. Manzo & P. Devine-Wright (Eds.), *Place attachment: Advances in theory, methods and applications* (pp. 37–48). Routledge.
- Hankyung (2016, December 6). Dabsib-ri street which has changed into Islam town. <https://www.hankyung.com/society/article/2016120639181>
- Heckmann, F. (2005). *Integration and integration policies*. Bamberg: European Forum for Migration Studies.
- Hertzog, A. (2018). Bartering for belongings: Ethnic trade in Belleville, Paris. In K. Davis, K. H. Ghorashi & P. Smets (Eds.), *Contested belonging: Spaces, practices, biographies* (pp. 183–208). Emerald.
- JoongAng Ilbo. (2018, August 6). Favorable to refugees 51%, hostile to Muslims 67%... Islam Phobia. <https://news.join.com/article/22861425>, Accessed 01 August 2020.
- Inalhan, G., & Finch, E. (2004). Place attachment and sense of belonging. *Facilities*, 5(6), 120–128.

- Kathiravelu, L. (2013). Friendship and the urban encounter: Towards a research agenda. *MMG Working Paper 13–10*. Göttingen: Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity. https://www.mmg.mpg.de/60790/WP_13-10_Kathiravelu_Friendship.pdf. Accessed 01 August 2020.
- Kathiravelu, L., & Bunnell, T. (2018). Introduction: urban friendship networks: Affective negotiations and potentialities of care. *Urban Studies*, 55(3), 491–504.
- Kim, K., & Smets, P. (2020). Home experiences and homemaking practices of single Syrian refugees in an innovative housing project in Amsterdam. *Current Sociology*, 68(5), 607–627.
- KOSIS (2018, August 16). Status of Foreign Residents by Nationality, Region and Status of Residence. http://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=111&tblId=DT_1B040A5A&vw_cd=MT_ZTITLE&list_A8&seqNo=&lang_mode=ko&language=kor&obj_var_id=&itm_id=&conn_path=MT_ZTITLE. Accessed 01 August 2020.
- Kusenbach, M., & Paulsen, K. E. (2013). Home: Introduction. In M. Kusenbach & K. E. Paulsen (Eds.), *Home: International Perspectives on Culture, Identity, and Belonging* (pp. 1–21). Peter Lang.
- Lacroix, M. (2004). Canadian refugee policy and the social construction of the refugee claimant subjectivity: understanding refugeeeness. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 17(2), 147–166.
- Lähdesmäki, T., Saresma, T., Hiltunen, K., Jäntti, S., Sääskilahti, N., Vallius, A., & Ahvenjärvi, K. (2016). Fluidity and flexibility of “belonging” Uses of the concept in contemporary research. *Acta Sociologica*, 59(3), 233–247.
- Maury, O. (2017). Student-migrant-workers: tempora; aspects of precarious work and life in Finland. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 7(4), 224–232.
- May, V. (2011). Self, belonging and social change. *Sociology*, 45(3), 363–378.
- Mitchell, D. (2005). The S.U.V. model of citizenship: floating bubbles, buffer zones, and the rise of “purely atomic” individual. *Political Geography*, 24, 77–100.
- Najafi, M., & Kamal, M. (2012). The concept of place attachment in environmental psychology. *Elixir International Journal of Sustainable Architecture*, 45, 7637–7641.
- Newsnjoy. (2019 June 13). A village that gives hope to refugees who have been evacuated by war. <https://www.newsnjoy.or.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=224007>
- Office of President (2018, July 13). Petition. <https://www1.president.go.kr/petitions/269548>. Accessed 01 August 2020.
- Seoul Metropolitan government (2016). Jangnpyung Auto Aftermarket. <http://love.seoul.go.kr/asp/articleView.asp?intSeq=2247>. Accessed 01 August 2020.
- Seoul Metropolitan Government (2019). City overview. <http://english.seoul.go.kr/get-to-know-us/seoul-views/meaning-of-seoul/4-population/>. Accessed 01 August 2020.
- Statistics Korea (2019, July 30). Status of refugee statistics. http://www.index.go.kr/potal/main/EachDtlPageDetail.do?idx_cd=2820. Accessed 01 August 2020.
- Smets, P., & Sneep, K. (2017). Tenure mix: apart or together? Home-making practices and belonging in a Dutch street. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, 32(1), 91–106.
- Taylor, H. (2013). Refugees, the state and the concept of home. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 32(2), 130–152.
- UNHCR. (2018). *Global Trends 2017*. UNHCR.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Belonging and the politics of belonging. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 40(3), 197–214.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.