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A Bridging-Community (ABC) Project: A Community Building Social Participation Intervention Among Resettled Refugees in Boston

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Abstract
Given the complexities of displacement and resettlement in the United States (US), few resources have been invested in facilitating social relationships, social integration, and social support for recently resettled refugees. Studies indicate low levels of socialization and thus extreme isolation among refugees, suggesting the need to create additional safety nets that encourage social connectivity (Strang & Quinn, 2019). In partnership with a resettlement agency, university researchers developed a pilot study exploring the feasibility and impact of a social participation intervention for a target group of recently resettled refugees. Research facilitators from the A Bridging-Community (or ABC) Project hosted weekly social events for resettled refugees (N=12). Participants were split into three groups and attended social events either two, four, or six times over a four month period. To assess the experiences of participants in the program, survey data were collected at the beginning and end of the program, and semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted upon entry into the program and at the conclusion of the study. Findings suggest that the ABC Project helped cultivate new relationships and a sense of belonging among participants, with stronger results observed among participants who met four or six times. The overall effectiveness of the program was rated highly by all participants, indicating a need for additional research about targeted social interventions among groups at risk for social isolation.

Keywords Social networks · Social capital · Refugee · Integration · Social intervention

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that over 79 million migrants were forcibly displaced from their homes at the end of 2019

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(UNHCR, 2019). The number of forcibly displaced people around the world has risen significantly since 2010, doubling from 41.1 million in 2010 to 82.4 million in 2020. While there are various contributors to this increasing number, most displacement is fueled by geopolitical conflict, war, and environmental crises in Syria, South Sudan, Ukraine, Myanmar, Venezuela, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, and surrounding countries.

Generally, forcibly displaced individuals face two options: they may relocate within their home country, and are thus referred to as 'internally displaced persons' (IDPs), or request entry to another country, becoming 'refugees' after crossing an international border. Those who seek refuge from within a country where they have not yet been granted refugee status are referred to as 'asylum seekers', while those who flee to another country to wait for an opportunity for resettlement in a third country are called 'refugees for resettlement' (UNHCR, 2019). Applicants seeking entry to the US (or any other host country) apply for refugee status from outside the host country (whereas asylum seekers are already inside the country or at a port of entry). Resettlement involves the admission of individuals to a country that has agreed to provide them with permanent-residence refugee status if they can neither return to their home country nor live safely in neighboring host countries (UNHCR, 2019). According to UNHCR, a refugee is defined as "a person forced to flee their home country to escape war, violence, or persecution" (Capps & Fix, 2015; UNHCR, 2019).

Individual countries regulate refugee admittance differently; therefore, resettlement as described here refers exclusively to the US. The following sections provide a brief background of the US refugee resettlement program, and outline how social intervention strategies may facilitate new relationships.

This research highlights one pilot program, conducted with a local resettlement agency, aimed to increase social connections among refugees. Using a mixed-methods community-based approach to determine associations between frequency of attending social events, making meaningful social connections, and feelings of inclusion within a community, this program explored whether multiple shared experiences might foster new connections among resettled individuals.

Overview

Background: US Refugee Resettlement Program

The US refugee resettlement program is a partnership between the federal government, states, nine national resettlement agencies, and local nonprofits (e.g., voluntary agencies or support centers) that receive and place refugees in local communities (Brown & Scribner, 2018). The resettlement process seeks to place refugees near family members to ease integration (Fix et al., 2017). In cases where this is not possible, refugees are placed in cities and towns across the country irrespective of the accessible support systems, available resources, and individuals' specific needs, which can often lead to greater integration challenges (Pace, Al-Obeydi, Nourian,

& Kamimura, 2015). When placing refugees, the US resettlement program prioritizes housing and affordability, securing employment, and financial independence (Baugh, 2020). Limited attention is devoted to addressing mental health, social support, or social integration.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement suffered significant program closures under the Trump administration, harming programs aimed to improve English proficiency, afford recreational activities, and deliver legal aid to recently resettled refugees (McHugh, 2018). This decrease in funding came at a time when the number of refugees increased globally and funding for immigration enforcement (e.g., Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CPB)) was at a historic high (Costa, 2019; Meissner, Kerwin, Chishti, & Bergeron, 2013).

Challenges in Refugee Resettlement

The US resettlement program is non-centralized (i.e., local supports and services are not always standardized across sites) (Capps et al., 2015). For example, some resettlement agencies may offer services such as health and wellness programs in partnership with a nonprofit. Larger communities generally offer more support and services and are more likely to share resettled refugees' nationality, religion, or ethnic group (Bose, 2014; Bose & Grigi, 2017; Huang et al., 2017).

The purpose of the refugee resettlement program is to help refugees "achieve economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible" (Office of Refugee Settlement, 2015). Consequently, the majority of integration services available focus on securing employment, learning English, and establishing self-reliance (Capps et al., 2015). Funding for programs that provide mental health treatment and opportunities for community integration are generally not part of the resettlement process (Pace et al., 2015; Schick et al., 2016). This is a staggering omission, given the US refugee resettlement program's initiative to admit the most vulnerable refugees, many of whom have experienced previous trauma.

Service Gaps and Accessibility

Due to a lack of centralization, the US resettlement program does not always provide consistent and uniform support services to refugees across the country. For example, in Boston, a local resettlement agency's Community Orientation Program may offer sexual and reproductive health education while a similar agency in Boise's Community Orientation Program may not. Refugees are granted short-term health insurance upon arrival in the US (though there are often barriers to accessing this care such as communication or cultural and political differences), but there are few options for mental health care which is a pressing need for those who may have recently experienced violence and/or trauma (Bogic et al., 2015; Pernice & Brook, 1996; Silove, 1999; Silove et al., 2017; Langlois et al., 2016; Priebe, Giacco, El-Nagib, 2016).

In the absence of formal mental health care, informal care from family or friends could provide alternative support to refugees. But in many cases, such networks are scarce. Resources that would assist refugees in transitioning to a new community during a critical time remain undeveloped and overlooked (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017; Murad & Versey, 2020).

The following sections review two conceptual frameworks: indicators of integration and social network theory. The frameworks elucidate why existing service gaps challenge refugees' social and psychological states, and what might be done to address this. We propose that community-led participation interventions may be one strategy to facilitate improved mental health and social connectedness.

Theoretical Considerations

Refugee Indicators of Integration Framework

Ager and Strang's (2004, 2008) "Indicators of Integration" conceptual framework defines refugee integration according to a four-category model. The first category represents four key indicators established as mediating markers for integration, including employment, housing, education, and health. The second category includes social connection or ways of connecting within a community through social bridges, bonds, and links. Categories three and four represent language, safety, cultural knowledge, and citizenship as a foundation for integration. Full integration relies on fulfilling all categories and having equal rights and entitlements afforded to others. Taken together, the model identifies the primary domains upon which refugee integration is based.

Social connection plays a "fundamental role" in "driving the process of integration at a local level" (Ager & Strang, 2008). While insufficient on its own, connection with others is a critical, yet neglected, aspect of integration (Zetter et al., 2007). Cultural knowledge, safety norms, language acquisition, and learning about employment opportunities, for example, are all facilitated by social connections.

For resettled refugees, there are several opportunities to build social connections outside of family (e.g., through ties with coworkers, religious communities, or individuals resettled through the same agency). Ties with other refugees are particularly important, as those relationships are within an individual's naturally-occurring support network. Naturally-occurring support, a type of informal social support, refers to relationships, like friendship, that can be developed at some point over the lifespan, not in the context of organized support provisions (Kindermann & Gest, 2009; Pettus-Davis et al., 2011; Sarason et al., 1990). Given shared immigration status, social connections among refugees based on common experiences or interests may lead to naturally-occurring support, guidance, and shared knowledge (Kindermann & Gest, 2009).

This paper focuses on the social domain, one of the primary domains from Ager and Strang's "Indicators of Integration" framework. Considering there is relatively little research that discusses when and how social networks for refugees are built and sustained, this paper explores how naturally-occurring networks may initiate

opportunities for social connection and belonging among refugees (Beirens et al., 2007; Kearns & Whitley, 2017; Murad & Versey, 2020).

Social Networks, Support, and Social Capital Theory

Social networks are essential to social, psychological, and physical health (House et al., 1988; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). Social capital theory distinguishes identifies the importance of social networks for the fulfillment and creation of social capital–which can occur either through bonding (within groups) or bridging (across groups) (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 1993). The term 'bonding social capital' refers to a social network composed of people who are closely linked by similarities such as ethnicity, locality, or religious affiliation. These 'strong ties' can facilitate supportive relationships in times of need (Granovetter, 1973). The term 'bridging social capital', also described as 'weak ties', refers to the convergence of people from different backgrounds who can facilitate access to new resources and opportunities (e.g., employment, education, and social networking). Both types of social capital are important to establishing stability among refugees (Hanley et al., 2018; Lamba & Krahn, 2003; Marlowe, 2011; Marlowe et al., 2014).

The implication of having few social ties—strong or weak—is significant (Granovetter, 1973). Refugees typically arrive with small networks and little social support. Perhaps attributable to that fact, refugees frequently report difficulty navigating and accessing services and opportunities (Strang & Quinn, 2019). In addition, social isolation is widely reported among refugees (Ager & Strang, 2008; Ryu & Park, 2018). Acculturative stress, isolation, and loneliness can further jeopardize integration and lead to frustrations, distress, and depression that, when left unchecked, can exacerbate poor mental health (Correa-Velez et al., 2010; Crooks et al., 2011; Hynie, 2018; Hynie et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2018; Vinokurov et al., 2017).

Paxton (1999) suggests that network ties become social capital through positive and trusting relationships. Few ties indicate a low likelihood of converting relationships into friendships or social capital (Elliott & Yusuf, 2014). Broadly, support received through peer groups and other supportive relationships mitigates stress, increases engagement with mental health services, and improves quality of life, particularly following a stressful event (Behnia, 2003; Berkman et al., 2000; Hernández-Plaza et al., 2006; Puyat, 2013; Stewart, 2014; Webber & Fendt-Newlin, 2017). For refugees, social support can be formal or informal, but is defined by an enhanced sense of belonging and integration into a new community (Hombrados-Mendieta, et al., 2019; Webber & Fendt-Newlin, 2017; Webber et al., 2016).

Facilitating Social Integration

A robust literature indicates that friendship and social support are key to psychosocial health and integration for newly arrived refugees (Berry, 2006; Fox et al., 2017). Positive psychosocial outcomes occur when individuals are able

to embrace both their culture of origin and host (i.e., receiving) culture, resulting in biculturalism, or social integration (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Berry, 1980; Chen et al., 2008). While social integration is distinct from Ager and Strang's domains of integration, both rely upon a sense of social connectedness, bonding, and bridging ties with others (Behnia, 2007; Ryu & Park, 2018; Shaw & Funk, 2019; Simich et al., 2005). What remains unclear is how social connections that facilitate cultural fluency are established in the first place.

Social Connection Through Natural Networks

How do refugees make social connections that might turn into meaningful friendships? Among common types of social interventions, befriending (e.g., meeting with volunteers to share information, discussing emotions, or pursuing leisure/social activities) and community-based support (e.g., attending block parties or neighborhood events) historically yield the greatest number of social ties (Hanley et al., 2018; Lamba & Krahn, 2003; Mead et al., 2010). Once established, these ties can be converted to friendships through frequent contact.

Investing in naturally-occurring networks may also facilitate social ties. Establishing interventions in spaces frequented by newly resettled refugees (e.g., English classes or professional development trainings) might allow friendships to develop organically, last longer, and feel more authentic than befriending or community-based support interventions. Therefore, an untapped and likely effective resource for social intervention is networks of refugees with whom newly resettled individuals are likely to frequently interact with (Pinto, 2006; Snethen et al., 2012). While no study has yet examined naturally-occurring social supports among refugees, leveraging natural in-network relationships may be a promising direction for initiating social ties.

Previous research indicates that successful integration requires intentional action (Marlowe et al., 2014). Given the critical nature of social relationships and the challenges in building them, naturally-occurring social networks may be one way to cultivate meaningful social connections that lead to both strong and weak ties (Anderson et al., 2015; Birman & Taylor-Ritzler, 2007; Birman et al., 2005). Therefore, we call attention to the importance of social participation among refugees as an indicator of integration and belonging (Miller et al., 2002; Reynolds & Bacon, 2018; Schick et al., 2016).

Current Study

This paper discusses a pilot social intervention for a group of recently resettled refugees (in a naturally-occurring network) in the Boston metropolitan area. Community-based programs have been successful in enhancing social connections; however, the most pressing weakness regarding this body of research is the limited number of studies available that measure program efficacy (Kale, 2017; Shaw & Funk, 2019; Simich et al., 2005; Thompson et al., 2018).

The A Bridging-Community (ABC) Project is a pilot program for community building among recently resettled refugees. The ABC Project aims to connect individuals within the refugee community through community lunches, participant-led activities, and events. Using a collaborative and community-partnered approach (see Mahoney & Siyambalapitiya, 2017), academic researchers worked with a partner resettlement agency and participants to strengthen the scope of the project.

Methods

Recruitment

A working group of resettlement agency staff and academic researchers collaborated on the recruitment strategy, communication method for scheduling participant gatherings, and survey development. Members of the academic research team built upon existing relationships with the resettlement agency to inform recruitment, allowing for greater trust, communication, and engagement.

Participants were recruited through flyers, sign-up sheets, and word-of-mouth referrals at the resettlement agency site. Researchers identified forty-seven potential participants from a sign-up sheet and followed up through phone calls, reaching twenty-six clients. Inclusion in the study was based on English-speaking proficiency, and availability to attend the Wednesday afternoon sessions planned as part of the pilot program.

While both men and women expressed interest in the study, only men participated in the final program. Conversations early on suggested that participants would be most comfortable in same-gender groups. Considering this feedback, the limited availability of women during the planned sessions, and the fact that largely single men are resettled in the Boston area, the pilot was limited to men only.

The ABC Project

Community-based, mixed-method research has been used with increasing effectiveness among refugee populations, creating outputs for research while gathering information to improve local practices and support systems (Johnson et al., 2009; Seifer & Greene-Morton, 2007). A core belief of community-partnered research (i.e., between academic institutions and community members) is that participants possess inherent skills, strengths, and resources that facilitate and promote their own health and well-being (Bates et al., 2012; Denzongpa et al., 2020; Oppenheim et al., 2019). Since this approach is well-established and recommended as a method to address issues impacting marginalized groups by enhancing trust in research (Israel et al., 2010), we used a partnership model that involved community members, agency staff representatives, and academic researchers in an effort to increase the strength, design, and feasibility of the ABC Project. The ABC Project is a social intervention

that examines how well participant-led leisure time activities among a naturally-occurring group encourages connectedness.

Participants were told that the study was an opportunity to participate in a number of social events throughout the Boston area. Eligibility was limited to agency clients who had either been resettled by the organization or had previously used their services. Additional eligibility criteria included that participants be at least eighteen years old, able to understand and speak the English language, and able to provide consent to participate. Participants were paid $10 for each meeting attended to compensate for the cost of transportation to and from the agency location. Twelve participants enrolled in the final study.

Using a tiered approach, the ABC Project hosted weekly events over a four month period. All participants were contacted twice prior to the first meeting: once to conduct a pre-study survey, and once to remind participants of initial meeting details. Once participation was confirmed, respondents were randomly assigned to one of three groups, each consisting of four individuals. The first group of four was assigned to attend two meetings, the second group of four to attend four meetings, and the third group to attend six meetings. All recruitment and study protocols were approved by the University Institutional Review Board.

Although the initial intention of the program was to gather over a potluck meal as a means to build social connections, the majority of participants did not cook, nor did the time of day allow for this format (i.e., sessions were held during the afternoon). Therefore, the activities planned during each meeting were discussed and agreed upon by the participants in each group, considering their interests. Following a participant-led approach, researchers integrated feedback from participants when designing the study. The ABC Project provided lunch and the partner resettlement agency provided community space for use.

At the first meeting of each group, researchers discussed ideas for activities, including group sports and sightseeing. A weekly agenda for each Wednesday group meeting was devised with participants' input (e.g., group-organized sports in local parks and visiting places around the city of Boston). Most activities were free and took place in public locations (e.g., parks, libraries). One excursion, a trip to the aquarium, required an entrance fee, which was paid for by the ABC Project. Researchers accompanied participants on all activities, primarily to record field notes and for observation purposes.

Pre-Assessments and Post-Assessments

The use of quantitative and qualitative methods in a sequential design addressed two separate research questions. Pre- and post-study surveys were used to measure change in participants' attitudes over the course of the program. Qualitative interviews were used to document the participants' experiences establishing new relationships. The interviews, administered at the end of the study, probed aspects of the program, resource needs, and potential feasibility of a full-scale program. Since all participants were proficient in English, formal translation services were not used; multilingual researchers and agency staff addressed any communication issues that arose.

Data Analysis

Surveys

Surveys were conducted verbally one week prior to the first event. Questions assessed social aspects of participants' lives, including family, friends, and other network members. Items included the World Health Organization Quality of Life-Brief (WHOQOL-BREF) questionnaire, a well-being measure with four domains: physical, psychological, social relationships, and environment (WHO, 1996). Additionally, questions about social networks, happiness, perceived social isolation, and experiences since resettlement were included. Items measuring desires, motivations, and obstacles to developing new relationships were also included (e.g., "To what extent are you interested in making new friends?"), measured on a 5-point Likert scale, where response options ranged from 1 "not at all" to 5 "extremely interested." On average, introductory surveys took approximately twenty-five minutes to complete, and exit surveys lasted slightly longer (on average thirty-five minutes).

Interviews

All interviews were administered, audio-recorded, and transcribed by university researchers. Examples of open-ended questions that helped researchers understand how participants viewed social relationships included "What does the word 'friend' mean to you?" and "What does community mean to you?" Additional questions explored the types of activities typically pursued in leisure time, and whether those activities were done alone or with friends and/or family.

Researchers used a grounded theory approach to analyze and interpret qualitative data. Grounded theory is a systematic, yet flexible method for constructing theories grounded in the data (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Coding involved labeling data in an initial phase to define high-level categories, followed by a selective phase where codes were drawn together and organized to interpret their meaning (Charmaz, 2017).

An iterative process facilitated coding and category development of main themes. Three rounds of coding (i.e., initial, intermediate, and selected) were conducted by all authors to generate an understanding of the data and create a storyline about experiences throughout the intervention period.

Introductory and exit survey items remained the same (pre- and post-) to determine level of change (i.e., impact) over the duration of the program (i.e., for two, four, and six weeks respectively). Interviews conducted at the end of the program asked about the usefulness of the program, desire to stay or move away from the US, and thoughts about integration into American society.

Results

Demographics

A total of twelve respondents participated in the program, and were assigned to one of three groups. All participants were male, ranging between twenty and thirty-nine years of age. Nine of the twelve men were employed at the start of the program, and two were currently married. While every participant spoke conversational English, five participants self-identified as intermediate English speakers, four self-identified as high-intermediate English speakers, and three self-identified as fluent English speakers.

Participants joined the program with various levels of education. One participant held a doctoral degree, one participant had graduated from university, one participant completed some university, four were high school graduates, four completed some high school, and one participant's highest level of education was primary school. Together, participants represented eight different countries and spoke nine different languages. Respondents were asked to self-identify ethnic background in an open-ended item. Ten participants identified as Black or Somali and two participants identified as white and ethnically Arab. All participants had lived in the US for more than one year and fewer than five years (Table 1).

The following themes emerged from qualitative interviews, where participants explained changes in social networks over time from their perspective, yielding the following main themes: social networks, acculturation, close relationships, and impact. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect respondents' identities. Where applicable, descriptive data from surveys is added to provide additional context.

Social Networks

The size, density, and extent of social networks emerged as a primary theme. When asked about their family members in the US, five participants reported having no family, four participants had five or more family members, and the remaining three had one family member. However, most participants described their community as extra-familial, the people with whom they lived and worked. As one participant explained, "My community? It's the people I live with. The others, I work with them." Another participant responded that he had no friends, then mentioned a roommate as someone who might become a friend.

> Friends? I don't have any friends. Bryan lives in my house and he may become a friend. We go to the gym together and sometimes we go downtown, shopping and chilling. (Shawn, age 28)

All twelve participants expressed a strong desire to make new friends. Only a third of the participants reported seeing friends outside of school or work more than once a month, with the majority indicating that they do not see friends at all. John described not seeing friends outside of work hours, highlighting potential boundaries between friendships and work.

Table 1 ABC Participant Descriptives ($N=12$)

	Percentage	Number
Gender		
Male	100	12
Female	0	0
Employment status		
Employed	75	9
Unemployed	25	3
Age distribution		
20–29 years	58.3	7
30–39 years	41.7	5
Marital status		
Married	16.7	2
Single	83.3	10
English level		
Low intermediate	41.7	5
High intermediate/Fluent	33.3/25	4/3
Highest level of education		
Primary school	8.3	1
Some high school	33.3	4
High school graduate	33.3	4
Some university	8.3	1
University graduate	8.3	1
P.H.D	8.3	1
Race		
Black	83.3	10
White	16.7	2
Of Arab descent	16.7	2
Years since resettlement in the USA		
0–1 year	0	0
1–2	75	9
2–3	16.7	2
3–4	8.3	1

> I normally don't spend time with them, they are friends from work. (John, age 29).

The most frequently reported barriers to initiating and maintaining new relationships were time, distance to travel, and cost of transportation.

> I don't really meet friends. I'm busy up to...late at night so I don't see my friends. I am too busy. I wish I had more time to see my friends. (Ralph, age 27)

Ralph described having friends, though lacking the time to see them due to a busy schedule. When asked "What have you enjoyed least about your time in the United States?" three men responded "nothing" and an additional five respondents reported that they least enjoyed feeling socially isolated, followed by living expenses, having no friends, and having no time. At the end of the ABC Project, the majority

of participants mentioned that coworkers and other participants in the ABC pilot program comprised their community. In post-study interviews, when asked why ABC project participants are now considered community members, participants responded that the frequency of their interactions and shared experiences helped to facilitate new friendships. For example, Arif, Micah, and Paul describe a broadened view of community following participation in the ABC Project:

> I have more people inside my community now. I see more what my community could be - like ABC, and more people around Boston, etc. (Arif, age 32)

> Yes, for me, it [community] has changed a bit. Before, I was the kind of person that stays home but now I am free to go visit my friends that I met in the program and have some time with them. (Micah, age 21)

> It has changed because…it is good to stay in the community now. Like the people I meet here, we are now good friends…sometimes I go and meet them. Now I include these people in my community. (Paul, age 22)

One third of respondents mentioned meeting people they considered part of their community at work, followed by meeting others through the ABC Project or English classes.

Acculturation

Acculturation is defined as the changes that take place as a result of contact with culturally dissimilar people, groups, and social influences (Gibson, 2001). Acculturation is often considered "the confluence among heritage-cultural and receiving-cultural practices, values, and identifications." Frequently, "international migrants with more exposure to the receiving cultural context report poorer mental and physical health outcomes" (Schwartz, 2010).

In preliminary interviews, when asked about barriers to developing meaningful social relationships with local (host) community members, cultural differences were cited. For example, in response to the open-ended question "Is language a barrier to making new friends?", one participant responded:

> It depends on the other person. I think my English is good enough to communicate, but sometimes at work when I see Americans discuss something I am not aware of I feel stupid. It's mainly political stuff or songs/movies I don't know about. I wasn't sure if it's because of my English or because I wasn't familiar with what they were discussing. So that is why it makes me feel like it's not easy to make friends because we don't share culture or interests. (John, age 29)

While these concerns may be common among refugees, feelings of exclusion in the workplace may be particularly alienating for individuals with fewer connections outside of their work. When expected to be familiar with American

popular culture, sports figures, or current events in order to feel included, recently resettled individuals may feel a greater sense of isolation.

Another participant explained that it is “not language but culture” and “what people think is acceptable in different places” that isolates people from one another. Perhaps as a result, most participants cited a tension between preserving their ties to their culture of origin and experiencing American culture. Participants cited a need to understand popular culture in order to build relationships and feel accepted. In response to the question “How attached do you feel to your culture and cultural practices?”, one respondent explained:

> I do not feel too attached because this is a new country for me, and I need to learn more and I need to know the American story. I cannot be attached to my culture because then I cannot know as much about America. (Nabil, age 25)

Participants commonly expressed a need to adapt to American norms in order to feel accepted in their host community. For example, Ralph remarked, “the culture of where I am is the culture I focus on. I don’t forget my other culture but I focus on where I am.” Several respondents mentioned not having strong ties to the immigrant community in the Boston area, despite being new immigrants themselves. Though one respondent stated, “I still eat Haitian food and go to a Haitian church,” he reported a lack of deeper cultural ties to the Haitian community.

Acculturation literature points to difficulties for refugees and immigrants balancing cultures. Individuals may privilege one culture over another, accelerating or hindering acculturation. Participants in the current study noted a strong desire to learn about American culture in an effort to make new friends.

Naturally-occurring refugee networks may have social benefits for recently resettled communities, including finding common ground across cultures. For example, Tony referred to the ABC Project as a place where people came together from different backgrounds yet were able to forge new friendships.

> For me, the program has opened my mind to know that there are some places I can go to enjoy with my friends. Another thing is that the program helped me meet with different people from different countries. I didn’t know them before and now we are still friends. (Tony, age 28)

Almost all participants reported difficulties adapting to their host culture. When building new relationships in the US, shared experiences with US resettlement may accelerate opportunities for migrants to find common ground, whereas pressure to assimilate in order to build networks among host communities may prohibit relationship-building.

Close Relationships

Most participants reported establishing very few, if any, close relationships since resettlement. Participants reported being placed with roommates to afford housing. Most did not report roommates as a source of friendship. All respondents lived in

self-described “culturally diverse” neighborhoods. Participants did not mention their neighbors as members of their community. Isolation from roommates and neighbors was amplified for respondents living in smaller communities surrounding the city of Boston.

> I live in …a very quiet place, you can’t see anyone your age, you just go to work and come back and go to sleep. (Arif, age 32)

Participants mentioned meeting people they considered friends primarily through work, the refugee resettlement agency, and occasionally through contacts made online and on public transit. One respondent described introducing himself to people regularly on the train, “Some friends I met on the train. I say, ‘Hi, how are you? My name is…’ Just like this…” Others utilized online platforms (e.g., Meetup, Craigslist, or Facebook) to locate social events. Amir, a Boston resident for two years, described not having made any close friends despite seeking out events related to the local Arabic-speaking/Egyptian community.

> So I have lived in Boston for two years now. There were only two events where the Egyptian community gathered together. There is not a very active Egyptian community here. I haven’t met any friends. Sometimes there are events on Facebook for the Arab community, but they are only once or twice a year so it’s very limited. (Amir, age 26)

Two respondents reported not having any friends at all. The ability to cultivate new, close relationships through the program was noted as the most meaningful and useful feature of the ABC Project.

Impact of the ABC Project

The ABC Project was designed to determine whether frequent social gatherings could facilitate relationships among recently resettled refugees. In exit interviews, when asked their thoughts about the ABC Project, most participants reported that the program was “important”, “useful”, and helped respondents form friendships with one another. Participants stated that “…it was very good. I like going to visit places and meeting the people in the program…” and “I think I have more friends now from the program.”

However, these responses were reported almost exclusively by participants in groups meeting four or six times. The participants who attended two meetings did not report benefiting from the program. One respondent who attended twice noted that, “it was not useful to go such few times.” According to another participant who attended two meetings:

> I see people from the program at the office, but I hang out with people who are not from the program. (Marcus, age 24)

Most participants appreciated the opportunity to learn about one another’s cultures and reconnect with people they met through the refugee resettlement agency. As compared to the start of the program, the number of participants who endorsed

the statement that they would be “happy to move away from the United States” decreased. This indicates that participants may feel more comfortable staying in the country following the program. Whether these reports can be attributed to their involvement in the ABC Project is unclear.

On the exit survey, when asked, the majority of participants (eight) indicated that they would be “somewhat happy” or “very happy” to move away from the Boston area. When probed further in interviews, respondents reported wanting to stay in the US, but not feeling a particular attachment to Boston.

> I would be somewhat sorry to move away. Because here at least I have some people to talk to now. If I am going to move somewhere, I am going to start everything over again which is not easy. But the city has no special meaning for me. (Micah, age 21)

Opportunity for upward mobility was also a factor in participants’ decisions to remain in the greater Boston area. When asked “In five years, what do you see yourself doing?”, one respondent replied:

> I will be in a new job. This job now is just like when you first come to the country. My problem is my language, I need to study and get a better job. I will stay in Boston. (Eze, age 30)

Nine of the participants had lived in the US for one to two years, and three for two years or more. However, due to the limited sample size, determining significant patterns between the time lived in the US and likelihood of staying in the country or city of Boston is not possible.

Overall, participants cited making new friends and visiting new places in the metropolitan area as the most meaningful features of the program. While it remains unknown if the ABC Project, employment opportunities, or time living in the US are determining factors in participants’ desire to remain in the country, social support systems were cited as significant forces in their choice to stay.

The ABC Project Pilot Feedback

Nine respondents suggested that the ABC Project could be improved by adding more meetings and extending the length of the program. Participants who met twice reported fewer benefits such as finding fewer friends as compared to those who attended four and six meetings (Figs. 1, 2). Those who attended two meetings did not report feelings of inclusion in a community. However, those who attended four or more meetings reported finding a community through the program.

To increase opportunity for outdoor activities, participants suggested meeting in the spring and summer rather than fall and winter. When asked, the majority of the participants shared that they prefer an all-male group, as compared to one that would include all gender identities. One participant responded that they would not change anything about the program.

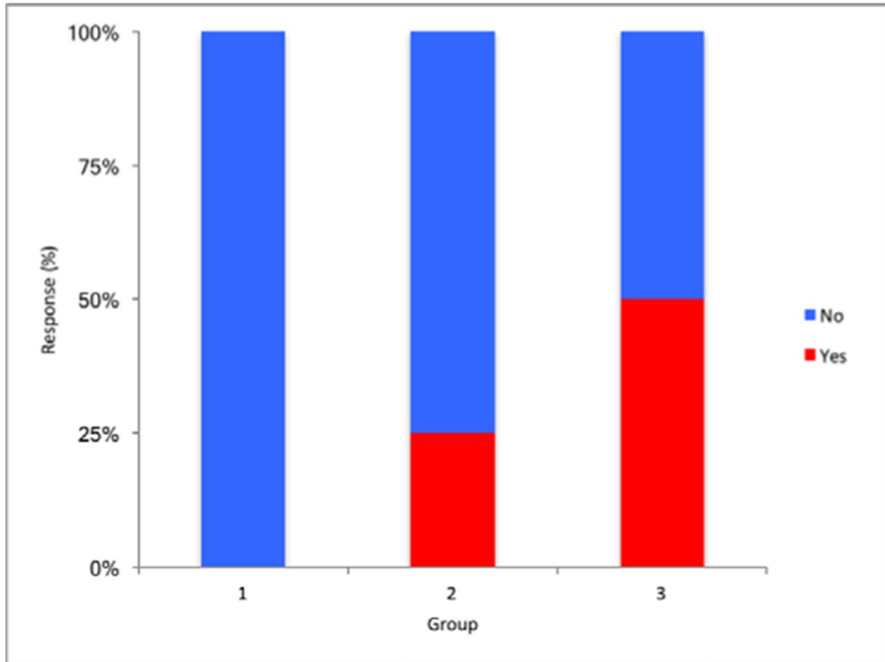

Fig. 1 Responses to whether, as compared to the start of the program, individuals feel a part of a community by meeting frequency. (N = 12)

In particular, participants who met most frequently enjoyed meeting new friends, connecting with old acquaintances, and seeing new places:

> The meaningful thing about the program was that it was all about knowing different places, knowing different people, and communication. (Tony, age 28)

> I learned a lot of things. I went a lot of places which I didn't know. I could meet different people. (Nabil, age 28)

Summary of Findings

These findings indicate that, if expanded, a similar social participation program has the potential to cultivate meaningful social relationships among recently resettled individuals. The results highlight a range of challenges refugees face when building social networks, as well as a lack of existing infrastructure to facilitate social connectedness. The impact of the ABC Project was rated favorably by participants, highlighting the significance of connecting recently resettled individuals with one another through small group meetings, community excursions, and sports/leisure activities. Caution should be exercised when drawing definitive conclusions based on this study as it is limited to one sample of new Americans in one resettlement area.

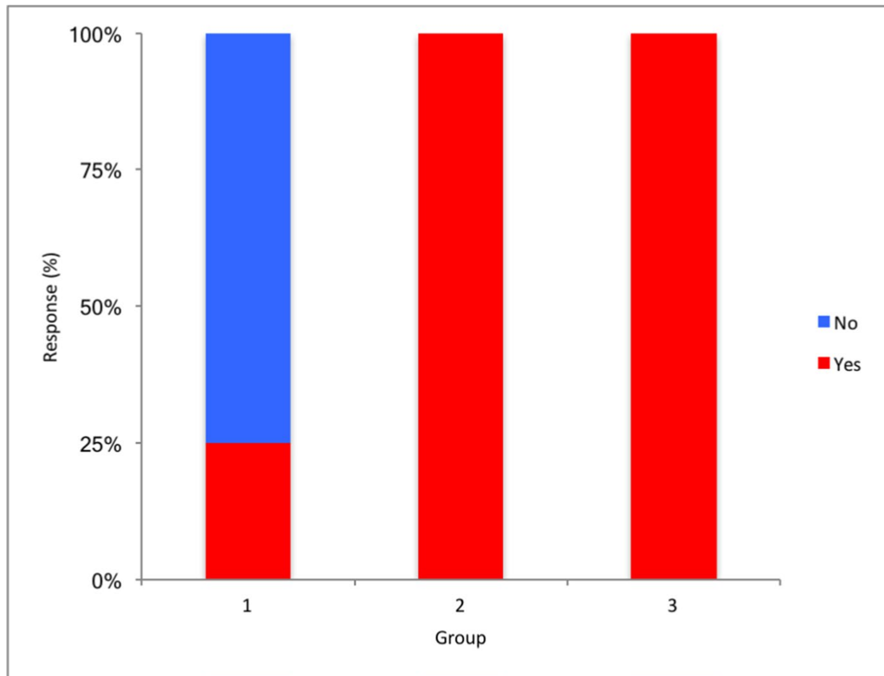

Fig. 2 Responses to whether individuals made connections with anyone that they would now consider a "friend." (N=12)

Discussion

Research shows that immigrants' main source of support is their informal social network (Hernández-Plaza et al., 2006), yet few studies have examined how these networks may be sustained through social interventions. This paper examined one format for a program, which used common types of social interventions (e.g., befriending and community based support) in participant-led small group meetings to help facilitate naturally-occurring networks. All participants received services through the same resettlement agency. Many did not know their fellow participants prior to the program, and those who did, had not remained in contact.

Although all participants had been in the US for at least one year, in the initial surveys and interviews, participants frequently reported social isolation, loneliness, and small social networks, highlighting a need to increase opportunities for socialization for new refugees. Most participants reported benefitting from the program, having an increased number of friends, and an expanded community. This benefit of the ABC Project was observed after only four meetings. We recommend exploring a more sustained model—meeting more frequently and for a longer period of time—which may yield more significant results. Given increased reports of happiness, sense of community, and social connectivity following

participation in at least four weeks of the program, further research might consider how expanded social interventions can offer additional support.

Naturally-occurring networks can provide material aid, including basic goods (e.g., food, clothes, loans), short-term housing, social support, companionship, understanding, and trust. Additionally, social networks are an essential source of information about the host culture, employment opportunities, and available social, education, and health services (Elliott & Yusuf, 2014).

The majority of previously held friendships reported by participants were formed in the workplace. However, they did not frequently see or meet with those friends outside of the workplace. In addition, participants may have experienced some hesitancy initiating or deepening workplace relationships due to language barriers and/or feelings of unfamiliarity with American culture. Participants without a job (and without family in the US) experienced little social support. This finding is reinforced by research showing that underemployment and unemployment can have negative social effects (Marlowe et al., 2014). Beyond the scope of the current study, investigating the quality of workplace relationships and whether workplaces could function as a site for future social interventions targeted towards new immigrants is an area for further consideration.

During exit interviews, which came after two to six weeks of meetings, participants reported an increased number of friends. This may indicate the potential for an increased sense of inclusion and belonging among the group. For example, one respondent expressed not wanting to leave Boston due to making new friends through this program. This supports existing evidence that social relationships are a strong predictor of positive acculturation experiences.

As the "Indicators of Integration" framework expands to include complementary theoretical models and toolkits of practical interventions, social participation programs should be considered a central part of those efforts (Tyson, 2017). Specifically, the US refugee resettlement program and nonprofit agencies should consider adopting best practices that promote better social and psychological outcomes, as opposed to the current emphasis on self-sufficiency. This study, while preliminary and exploratory, recruited refugees who were willing to share about their experiences post-resettlement. The majority of respondents reported very limited social engagement. Thus, new policies, practices, and programs that consider an individual's needs holistically should be developed to address the gap between the social struggles articulated by participants and the aid that is currently provided.

To this end, the fundamentals of social capital (i.e., bonding, bridging, and linking) could be integrated with resettlement models through social participation programs like the ABC Project. The ABC Project is an action-oriented strategy aimed at increasing meaningful social connections for immigrants, with a specific focus on refugees. The model is participant-led and relies on naturally-occurring networks made up of individuals who likely share experiences and may provide a needed source of support and camaraderie.

The ABC Project and other programs that facilitate socialization may be invaluable to newly arrived refugees. Some strategies for informal social support systems have been developed and applied among diverse populations, showing the strength of leveraging informal networks (Hernández-Plaza et al., 2006). Our findings

suggest that the ABC Project is a program that has the potential to be effective and sustained by participants themselves. This would be achieved by converting weak ties (i.e., convergence of people from different backgrounds) into strong ties (i.e., friends or family with frequent interactions) over time through increased frequency, involvement, and participant leadership.

Limitations

Although the findings are promising, this is a pilot project and is largely exploratory. Detailed mental health assessments were not collected from participants, and we are unable to discuss the implications of the program on mental health diagnostic indicators. However, mean levels of life satisfaction and quality of life did improve for the two groups meeting more than twice, indicating some potential benefits for psychological well-being. Overall, the ease of feasibility combined with the potential mental health impact of the ABC Project warrants further investigation.

All participants were young adult males, resettled by the same agency in the same city, who were proficient in English. The outcomes may not be similar if applied to other groups, particularly if participants are in different stages of the resettlement process. For example, given the limited number of participants, we were unable to probe differences by factors such as age, socioeconomic class, or formal education.

Another limitation was having all male participants. Women should be recruited in subsequent studies as they may not have employment to secure access to outside social networks, positioning them as a particularly vulnerable group (Behnia, 2003). The ABC Project may also be particularly important for men, given that men experience greater difficulty forming social groups, compared to women (Zetter, 2007). Prior interventions of befriending show significant declines in depression among men with chronic health conditions; however, its application to refugee support has not yet been widely explored (Behnia, 2007; Mead et al., 2010). Replications of the ABC Project should consider incorporating several groups to determine subgroup effects.

A third limitation was that, due to concerns about religious sensitivity, we did not include questions about specific religious practices, which may have yielded additional information about existing religious support systems. Few participants mentioned religious organizations, which may be a function of the sample or reflective of the religious demographics of the refugee populations in the Boston area.

Prior research notes that connections to religious institutions can provide support that is important for acculturation (Nawyn, 2006). At the same time, a higher level of religious interaction is not necessarily associated with lower levels of acculturative stress (Benson et al., 2011). Participants in the current study mentioned distancing themselves from their culture of origin, which may include their religion. Whether this is a common strategy among refugees remains unclear. Therefore, future research should consider the potential benefit of religious gatherings and intercultural outreach programs for providing additional social support.

Finally, a limitation was that funding allowed us to host a maximum of six meetings. Therefore, similar results cannot be expected for shorter study periods. Our

results emphasize the benefit of duration—the longer participants were engaged in the program, the better they perceived the program and its utility as a tool for initiating relationships.

The program was also restricted to recently resettled refugees who had lived in the US at least a year, a narrowly defined group. Future studies might pay careful attention to the recruiting process, ensuring adequate engagement and outreach using a variety of sampling procedures (e.g., snowball sampling vs. volunteers) to gain a more diverse group of participants and program benefits.

Conclusions

Ultimately, while social support is essential for refugees, interpersonal relationships alone are not sufficient for addressing the complex problems encountered by refugees during resettlement. Therefore, enthusiasm for this program and similar social interventions should be balanced with continuing policy efforts to increase funding and support for refugees at a national level. This intervention represents a small yet promising advancement that has the potential to improve refugee mental health and social support.

While previous systematic reviews have focused on resettlement procedures and processes, less attention has been paid to social care, a key aspect of health and well-being. Social relationships, both weak and strong, create spaces for emotional expression and facilitate social bonds among people from diverse backgrounds. Therefore, cities and towns hosting large groups of immigrants may consider adopting the ABC Project and/or similar social interventions to create space for essential social connections. In addition, research that tracks long-term outcomes associated with social participation would be useful to clarify benefits and sustainability over time. The ABC Project suggests a need to consider more well-established programs to provide the opportunity for recently resettled refugees to connect and build long-lasting relationships through community events.

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