

IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY FORMATION AMONGST SPECIAL IMMIGRANT VISA (SIV) REFUGEES

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ABSTRACT: *This work investigates agency exercised by resettled Afghan and Iraqi SIV (Special Immigrant Visa) refugees in Columbia, SC, specifically focusing on how this distinct population creates and restructures their identities and communities within a resettlement context. Without presuming the existence of an a priori, cohesive Afghan or Iraqi identity or ‘culture,’ I seek to examine the different circumstances and constraints that drive identity formation and performance within a unique subset of the refugee population. The intent is to illustrate the variability and complexity of a seemingly homogenous population, the ‘generic’ refugee; to deconstruct a pre-established conception of an ‘ethnic’ or ‘culture’ group; and to examine the continuous, fluid process of identity formation.*

Keywords: *Identity formation, SIV, refugee resettlement, South Carolina*

“We are all human, we all eager to have this feeling to belonging to something bigger than us. Some people choose religion, some people choose sport, some people choose nationality, some people choose army.”

Amer, personal interview

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Resettlement fundamentally disrupts refugee identity both by rupturing existing communities and repositioning the refugee within a new, externally imposed political, social and economic hierarchies (Flores-Borquez, 1995; Brown, 2011, Guler and Berman, 2019). The spatiality of resettlement directly impacts the social networks and economic opportunities refugees are able to access (Flache and Macy, 2011). Refugee status brings with it explicit expectations of submission, dependence, and helplessness, along with implicit expectations of assimilation (Flores-Borquez, 1995). Refugees are forced to negotiate new identities and communities in this unfamiliar, often disadvantaged resettlement context (Brown, 2011; Besteman, 2012). Established identities take on new meanings and established communities must likewise be redefined and understood, for example family takes on a whole new meaning during resettlement (Nelson, Hess, Isakson and Goodkind, 2016). The construction of identity and community thus become active processes during resettlement, as refugees struggle to make sense of themselves and their place within their new setting.

Identity formation is fundamental to understanding refugee resettlement. It highlights the (perceived) existence of social and ethnic/racial hierarchies in the host society and how refugees are intentionally placed within these hierarchies by existing political and social structures (Brown, 2011; Yeh and Lama, 2006; Besteman, 2012). Focusing on identities illuminates the ways in which refugees contest (or accept) their ascribed roles, and how they attempt to position themselves within, or to re-work or subvert these social hierarchies. Identity thus highlights the agency exercised by refugees in forming new identities and communities, while showing how interactions with existing social structures and actors help shape refugee experiences during resettlement (Trudeau, 2012).

In this article, I demonstrate how study participants draw on family, religion, gender, culture, ethnicity/race, and military experience to make sense of themselves and how they fit within an American society that views them with both sympathy and a great degree of suspicion. While these themes appear frequently in the refugee literature (Yeh and Lama, 2006; Besteman, 2012; Nagel and Staeheli, 2008; Langellier, 2010; Sorenson, 1990, Brown, 2011, Nelson et al, 2016), the results of identity and community construction vary between individuals, groups and locations. While examining these coalescing themes, I want to emphasize the indeterminacy of these social categories. Religion, for example means different things to different people. For my participants, the same religion, Islam, results in drastically different identity performances and community claims. The salience of a specific identity, the way this identity is conveyed and used to negotiate membership in communities and society thus varies across individuals and groups. This indeterminacy of common, consistent coalescents provides an intriguing, insightful understanding of how refugees actively construct their resettlement.

These six themes are woven into the narratives presented throughout the entire interview process. Single responses tended to combine references to family, religion and national origin, for example, such that these social identifiers appeared to be intrinsically connected. And while the identity themes were relatively uniform, respondents imbued identities with different meanings and described their performances of these identities in different ways. This variety of resulting identities, reliant upon the same core coalescent, illustrates the complexity of identity negotiation and performance within the SIV community while underscoring the dangers of approaching any group or individual with preconceptions pertaining to ‘race’ or ‘ethnicity’ (Nagel, 2009).

METHODOLOGY

This research took place in Columbia, SC between October 2015 and December 2016. During this time I volunteered with Lutheran Family Services (LFS), a refugee resettlement agency and with the Scholastic Soccer Program (SSP), a sport-focused outreach program aimed at reaching refugee children through soccer. For both LFS and the SSP I served as a mentor, coach and instructor, teaching job, language, and driving skills, as well as providing transportation and other assistance. I gained access to my participants via my involvement with LFS and SSP, as well as valuable background information on the refugee resettlement program and experience. I specifically targeted individuals for participation in my study using Patton’s (2002) homogeneous and snowball sampling strategies. This allowed me to focus solely on Afghan and Iraqi SIV refugees. As I gained access to one individual, I used that contact to establish contact with others within the community.

My sample population was quite small; nine individuals (seven male and two female) participated in the study. This small population, however, constitutes the majority of SIVs that have settled in Columbia. All participants were either previously employed as interpreters by US or NATO forces, or directly related (spouse, parent or sibling) to an interpreter. Some participants selected their own pseudonyms based upon nicknames they used while working with American soldiers (Scarface, Alex, and Zorro) while others allowed me to choose their aliases. All personal information is kept intentionally vague to limit any possible loss of anonymity, and some locations (Logar or Mazar-i-Sharif, for instance) have been changed. Participants all lived within one of two apartment communities on the outskirts of Columbia, with limited access to public transportation. Five participants had selectively relocated, the remaining four resided in their initial placements. Seven interviews occurred in the individual’s home, one occurred at the LFS offices, and another via phone, text and email (that participant was out of the country for an extended period visiting family). Interviews were conducted in English and recorded using a mobile voice recording app. I began each interview with scripted questions, and then allowed the conversation to organically proceed. I transcribed each interview, and then combined the transcriptions with personal notes taken during the interview. I then examined this collected data to identify prominent themes concerning identity and community formation.

IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY FORMING THEMES

Family

Family served as both an identity and a community-based claim for SIVs. Individual definitions and conceptualizations of family were incredibly diverse. Family was referred to abstractly and specifically; it was used to reference a single individual or an entire tribe. Family was also used to explain community membership, access to opportunities, conflict, and responsibility. Thus, a blanket approach to family as a coalescing factor—as the foundation of identity, community, and belonging— would prove just as problematic as a blanket approach to ‘ethnicity/race’ or ‘culture’ (Nagel, 2009; Ramsden and Ridge, 2012, Nelson et al, 2016). As the resettlement process involves profound changes to family structure and composition, these changes fundamentally alter the ways that SIVs understand themselves, their community, and their place in society. Here, family serves as a source of community, security and status, though in varying ways and to varying degrees.

Some of the men I interviewed derived a strong sense of self from their role as fathers and heads of household. Perhaps Alex said it best, “here, I’m feeling a lot like a father. I mean, like because I’m supporting my sons, and my wife, and my daughter... I have a lot of responsibility down here” (personal interview). In Afghanistan Alex’s father was the patriarch, with Alex and his numerous brothers contributing to, but not being ultimately responsible for, the provision of food, shelter, and clothing to their families. In Afghanistan, the nuclear family was placed within a larger hierarchy that encompassed complex extended family relationships. These families were an important form of community; familial relationships dictated social ties and access to resources. Alex’s identity was primarily influenced

by his age, relationship with his father, and order of birth compared to his siblings, not by his role as a husband and father. In the US, by contrast, Alex is removed from his extended family and has become the sole provider for his family. His patriarchal role is shifting with the expansion of his responsibilities (and the shrinkage of the household unit). Removal from his extended family hierarchy requires the formation of a new community for social and financial security, achieved through a redefining of family.

Scarface echoes this sentiment, identifying himself as “the father of two kids and husband and trying to be a good provider for them” (personal interview). His statement, in conjunction with Alex’s narrative, illustrate how Afghani and Iraqi SIVs, specifically the male participants, define themselves in relation to their role as providers for their nuclear family. This perception is compared against their previous roles within a community formed around extended family relationships. “Back in there [Afghanistan], no responsibility, no... I was just a father and husband... down here I have too much responsibility, for my two sons, and for my daughter, and for my wife” (Alex, personal interview). The dissolution of a community premised upon blood and marriage thus requires a new understanding of paternal identity and its accompanying social and economic responsibilities. Divorced from their extended families, and the support that community provided, both Alex and Scarface are forced to both redefine their roles as fathers, and their definitions of family and community.

Family, both extended and nuclear, provides a valuable source of social networks and ties. The majority of my participants selected resettlement in Columbia, SC in part because of these extended family networks. Sami (personal interview) explained how he selected a sponsor and location, “so, like we have two choices. I choose my brother [here] or my aunt in Chicago.” These social networks, based on blood or marriage, in turn provide resources to build senses of community and belonging in the resettlement context, and to assist in the negotiation of new identities (Yeh and Lama, 2006; Allan, 2010). Sponsorship by relatives helps ease the isolation of resettlement, as discussed by Scarface (personal interview) “...yeah, but she came from big family. Like I have 12 brothers, 5 sister, two moms... we all live together [in Afghanistan]. Now, there’s just two of us, we go outside and it’s just her and these two kids. It’s not easy...” He later on refers to resettlement as “jail, it’s a kind of jail” (Scarface, personal interview). By choosing relatives as sponsors, SIVs attempt to leverage familial relationships, and create new communities, around a familiar core.

In resettlement contexts, however, communities formed around traditional family ties proved largely ineffective. Khabir provides an excellent example. He chose his aunt as the sponsor for him and his wife. Soon after arrival, however, he discovered a surprise. “My aunt, I respect her... [but] she lived here for 30 years, so they adapted the culture of here” (Khabir, personal interview). Rather than provide a free place to reside, as Khabir anticipated due to social norms, she charged them rent. Khabir explains this abrogation of Afghan norms, “In our culture, they don’t take rent, but my aunt in there they charge it. Back in my culture... if you come to my house, free, how long you live is free. And not only me, food and everything, even if they bring a family” (personal interview). For an Afghani, family membership allows claims to be made that provide access to significant advantages, particularly during resettlement. Violation of this expected norm requires a renegotiation and conceptualization of family as a community and an identity. This creates a division between those whom have been ‘Americanized’ and those who still hold true to ‘cultural’ norms. Despite having lived in the US for over three years, Khabir asserts he would never charge a relative rent, because “that’s our culture” (personal interview).

In other instances, the size of the family proves ineffective for forming an effective community identity during resettlement. Both Alex and Scarface noted the size of their families back in Afghanistan. Similarly, Amer states he has “cousins, aunts, uncles, nephews...you know for the Iraqi usually they have a big family” (personal interview). These families provide a community of scale that allow individuals to access employment, economic support, and social status. In resettlement, SIVs can only bring their direct dependents, essentially a spouse and their children. This small, nuclear family is incapable of providing extensive social or financial benefits, and therefore, SIVs seek to redefine family, to renegotiate a community based upon family. Alex explains, “yeah, we’re friends...we’re a family relationship. I mean, we’re not like families from the same family...from same tribe. We’re different tribes. But you know, because we’re Afghans, we come to each other’s houses” (personal interview). Here Alex shows how family ties are redefined to exceed blood and tribe relationships, and instead be based upon a common, national identity. This identity drives the creation of an ‘ethnic’ community, a family based upon Afghan origins, which SIVs can turn to for social and economic support, access to employment, and even simply friendship.

Even when SIVs have large numbers of relatives present in the United States, they are dispersed and not centrally located, and thus unable to provide the same economic and social benefits of family-based communities in Afghanistan and Iraq. “I have a lot of family members compared to other Afghans here...but I have my aunts, one in New York, I have two uncles in Atlanta, Georgia, I have one uncle and aunt in Pennsylvania, [and another] in Virginia” (Khabir, personal interview). When one of his uncles advocated for Khabir to move to Atlanta, Khabir refused due to his employment in Columbia. “My uncle was telling me, come to Atlanta. I say no, I work for CarMax, that’s a good

place... I'm making \$22.50, so I'm happy" (Khabir, personal interview). Here Khabir notes that while his uncle wanted him to relocate to Atlanta to be closer to relatives, that this proximity did not provide the same economic security as his job in Columbia. Thus, the original function of family community is disrupted in resettlement, and new communities for securing economic and social security are formed.

The definition and role of family, and family-based communities, changes drastically during resettlement. Traditional family structures and relationships are ruptured and renegotiated, ties that prove effective and beneficial in Afghanistan and Iraq are ineffective and weak in the United States. Thus, SIVs are inclined to redefine family roles and community definitions, in order to access social and economic benefits. As traditional blood ties weaken through acculturation and spatial dilution, different concepts of family and community arise, uniting SIVs in new, yet equally powerful ways.

Religion

A second powerful, yet decidedly indeterminate, theme for coalescing identity is religion (Allen, 2010; Nagel and Staeheli, 2008; Langellier, 2010; Sorenson, 1990). Like family, religious identity and membership claims take on new roles during resettlement, serving to both unite and divide individuals and groups. For Afghani SIVs in Columbia, SC, religion proves to be a strong centrifugal force for self-identity, one that allows claims to membership in a larger Islamic community. In the absence of a traditional, family-based community, Afghani SIVs are able to identify with, and claim membership in, the Pakistani and Indian Muslim community in Columbia. This Islamic community provides both a safe place of worship and valuable social support, and Afghani SIVs are able to leverage their common religious background (style of prayer, 'cultural' practices, and language) in order to tap into economic and social support networks. Their ability to use religious identity to claim membership in an expanded community highlights the agency exerted by SIVs during resettlement.

When asked about the role of religion in the Afghan SIV community, Khabir proved to be particularly insightful. He succinctly stated, "everyone is religious... we practice our religion frequently" (Khabir, personal interview). Adherence to a common religious identity provides a powerful cohesive force amongst the Afghani SIVs. It allows them to form and maintain a cohesive, group identity as practicing Muslims, similar to other refugee groups in resettlement contexts (Smith, 2013; Langellier, 2010). This adds additional commonality to strengthen a community based upon re-conceptualized family definitions. Additionally, it provides them access to other Muslim communities within Columbia. When asked about ties to local mosques and other Muslim groups, Khabir notes "our religion is the same, but our culture is different, but still, we can have a great bond with Pakistani people" (personal interview). When a local Afghan youth died tragically last year, this common religious identity allowed his mother to access social and financial support from Masjid Noor-Ul-Huda, a predominantly Pakistani mosque (Khabir, personal interview). Another local mosque, identified as mostly Arab, in contrast attempted to charge the grieving family for funeral services and a burial plot. A compatible religious identity thus enables Afghani SIVs to access Pakistani and Indian Muslims, creating a "community thing we do with Noor-Ul-Huda" (Khabir, personal interview). This religious identity fails, however, to overcome linguistic and ethnic/racial differences present in the other mosque. Thus, Afghani SIVs are restricted from claiming membership in all Muslim communities, but are still able to exercise agency by negotiating membership in Noor-Ul-Huda.

For Iraqi SIVs in Columbia, religion, or rather the rejection of religion, serves to both solidify a new identity, and fracture old connections. During resettlement, contestations over religion, and its prescribed social roles and practices, serves to erode old identities and form new ones. Amir, discussing fellow Iraqi students, highlights this discord. He states "some people here are religious... men hang out together, separate than women. It will not work for us" (personal interview). His wife, Sana, explains further, "I tried when we first moved. I tried to get along with his, you know, like two of the Iraqis from back home... But it just didn't work out. Because we are just different" (personal interview). Here, the difference is religious identity. Amir and Sana cannot find commonality with his religious friends in the US. This fracture overshadows the fact that they used to be friends back in Iraq. For these two participants, rejection of religious practice defines a new community identity that excludes former acquaintances. In Columbia, this family directs their religious identity towards an American one that accepts and celebrates religious plurality. By doing so, they reject the strict, traditional adherence to religion that fuels Iraq's social problems, and instead claim membership in an American community.

This refusal to adhere to religious practice and participate in the religious community serves to alienate Iraqi SIVs, separating them from former Iraqi (non-SIV) acquaintances. Iraqi participants used the rejection of religion, specifically religious practices requiring gender separation, to distinguish themselves from the larger Iraqi population in Columbia. Here participants rejected being identified with a Muslim community, they intentionally distanced themselves from the larger Iraqi community, and instead laid claim to implicit membership in American society. Sami draws direct ties between religious tolerance and American society, saying Americans are "really nice people, because

we [refugees] are different. Different religion, different countries, but still they smile and help you...if we have these nice people, in Iraq if we have 50% of the community, like you all are, then Iraq would be great” (personal interview). Religious plurality, coupled with a rejection of gender discrimination, allows Sami and his family to claim membership in a larger, American community.

Religious adherence and degrees of religiosity thus vary greatly between individual SIVs, illustrating the indeterminist nature of Islamic identity. Yet regardless of its acceptance, adherence, or rejection, Islam influenced identity negotiations and community formation for all participants. When asked to define their identity, all SIVs specifically referenced Islam. Afghani SIVs referred to themselves as devout Muslims, claiming membership to both a local Islamic community and a global Muslim brotherhood. Conversely, Iraqi SIVs referenced Islam in a decidedly negative light, emphasizing their rejection of religious practices and linking the Iraqi conflict with traditional adherence to Islam. For Afghani participants, religion was the first identity mentioned, and it was tied into a larger ‘human’ identity. The placement of religion as the first mentioned identifier underscores its importance as a coalescing theme for both self- and community identity; their religious identity was their foundational identity. As Alex states, “First of all, we’re all Muslims... the Muslim, like we’re brothers” (personal interview). Scarface links religion to his very existence, “being a Muslim and person is a, you know you have, a feeling every day, every time” (personal interview). This emphasis on religious identity supports previous research that finds religion to be a particularly strong facet of identity formation (Allen, 2010; Nagel and Staeheli, 2008; Langellier, 2010; Sorenson, 1990).

The role of religion highlights the complexity of SIV resettlement and the indeterminacy of this coalescing theme. Yeah and Lama (2006) note Nepalese refugees use religion to claim preferential treatment over other refugees; Afghani and Iraqi SIVs fail to make this claim. When asked about the differences between other refugees and SIVs, and whether SIVs should get preferential treatment, Zorro stated “the only difference is that the people have different religions and, yeah, different perspectives” (personal interview). Amer echoed this sentiment, stating “we are all human. Of course. Helping the less fortunate should be the higher priority” (personal interview). Instead of claiming a relationally higher social standing or a more ‘deserving’ status, both Afghani and Iraqi participants use religion to make and solidify community membership claims. Afghani SIVs used religion to strengthen inter-community ties and access membership in a larger Muslim community. Iraqi SIVs rejected membership in an Iraqi religious community and position themselves as members within American society. The variety of ways in which the common theme of religion is understood and used underscores the dynamic and complex ways in which refugees negotiate, contest and position themselves in a resettlement context.

Gender

Gender roles and identity, like family and religion, are redefined during resettlement. For refugees, resettlement brings significant personal and social change. Traditional communities are dissolved, and refugees are forced to negotiate and form new communities based upon altered identities in foreign societies. Untethered from familiar support structures, and positioned within specific (and restricted) hierarchies, refugees rely on their available resources to redefine and negotiate a sense of self, community and belonging (Allen, 2010; Besteman, 2012; Hopkins, 2010; Nagel, 2009). Gender proves to be a powerful, if implicit, tool for creating a sense of normalcy in an uncertain resettlement context. While not explicitly discussed or explored by my participants, gender proved to exert a significant implicit influence on identity, community and belonging. Similar to religion, gender can be either reinforced along traditional lines, with a strict separation and domination of male gender, or rejected as undesirable in a modern, American society (Hopkins, 2010; Langellier, 2010; Sorenson, 1990). In some respects, due to overwhelming gendered participation, where seven of the nine participants were male (and in the focus group with the two females, unless directly prompted neither spoke out), gender roles and their utility is inferred based upon observation and participant actions. For example, in three out of four interviews with Afghan SIVs, I was not introduced to the participant’s spouse. This gendered separation prevented me from observing the division of gender identity, however it allows me to make key assumptions about gender practices within the Afghan SIV community, particularly in conjunction with literature that discusses the role of gender amongst female refugee populations (Hopkins, 2010; Sorenson, 1990).

The division between reinforcement of traditional gendered identities and the rejection of these identities again cleaved generally along Afghan and Iraqi SIV lines. Afghani participants were far more likely to ascribe gendered roles to themselves and their families, while my Iraqi participants were relatively vocal about dismissing traditional separation and stratification. Scarface positioned his gendered identity in line with his role as a provider, staying “first thing is I am a human, Muslim, Afghan...the father of two kids and husband trying to be a good provider.” Here he links religious, national origin and his humanity to a natural role as a male provider. This identity is carried forward into the resettlement context, as Khabir notes “you know, our wives, they cannot live alone... so I explain to my manager, I cannot leave my wife here.” As the provider for his family, Khabir, much like Scarface,

assumes the role of caretaker. His wife, he claims, cannot survive without him. Thus he positions his gendered identity as being essential to the very survival of his family, without a strong male presence, his wife would be unable to live.

These gender roles are then reinforced through social support networks established by Afghan SIVs and their dependents in the resettlement context. Here they provide a degree of comfort and certainty, by aligning with old, familiar social relations preset back in Afghanistan, and strengthen a sense of community, a community coalescing around an expanded definition of family. For Afghan SIVs in Columbia, the males associate with the males while the females likewise socialize along gender lines. “We [men] drive, we carpool every day. And also our wives, you know, that like when I go to work, my wife comes to their house, their wives come to our house...” (Khabir, personal interview). These networks extend beyond work, they include sharing information about hostile places and even leisure activities like playing cards and drinking chi. Thus, traditional gender norms are reinforced in the resettlement context for Afghani SIVs and their families. They facilitate the consolidation of information, reification of personal identity, and fuel the formation of a community based upon a common ‘culture.’ This aligns closely with the findings of Hopkins (2010) and Sorenson (1990), that gender amongst refugee populations provides a strong cohesive for establishing identity.

Yet rejection, or contestation of traditional gender identity also features in refugee identity (Sorenson, 1990; Hopkins, 2010). For Iraqi SIVs, this proves especially true. Amir ties traditional gender identity back to religion when discussing differences between other Iraqi students and himself. He rejects a “traditional way of living” that segregates men from women, and thus performs a new identity based upon the degradation of a gendered social division. He positions himself and his family as modern and progressive, above the old gender identities that are foundational to the “reason why the Iraq situation is so bad. Because there’s a lot of problems. Social problems” (Amer, personal interview). These problems, to include gender divisions, follow SIVs and other refugees, “even if you move outside of Iraq, still a lot of these problems exist” (Amer, personal interview). The acknowledgement of the detrimental role traditional gender identity plays on social problems necessitates the abandonment of his oldest, closest friends in Columbia who are unwilling to adapt to their new setting. “The two Iraqis who are here they are my friend since college. Since 2004. We’ve been friends for more like 12 years. But their wives different. Different interests. They more like into kids and traditional role of women” (Amer, personal interview). For these Iraqi SIVs, gender serves to develop new identities, ones that expand beyond traditional, religious, and national origins. Social ties are built upon common interests, such as academic studies and work, as Sana states, “I bring friends to our place... but not Iraqis” (personal interview). Here, gender identity allows Amer and his wife to make a specific status claim for acceptance into American society. By rejecting a traditional, rigid Iraqi identity of gender separation, they instead embrace a modern approach to gender equality, allowing them to claim membership in a broader community of likeminded individuals.

Gender proves to be a strong foundation for identity formation. For all my participants, gender served to create and/or strengthen unique identities in the resettlement context. As Hopkins (2010) states “migration, resettlement and transnational connections produce, reproduce, and alter gender... identities” (524). This is certainly the case with SIVs in Columbia, SC. While the specific ways in which the resettlement process affects gender identities differs between participants, and thus the resulting identities are varied, gender nonetheless proves to be a potent indeterminate entity for creating new senses of self and community.

Culture

My treatment of ‘culture’ differs from (and contests) a conventional understanding of culture as a pre-existing, homogeneous entity. As an a priori category, culture does not exist (Nagel, 2009; Ramsden and Ridge, 2012). Rather than constitute an established, uniform, and discrete attribute, to which an individual or group belongs, ‘culture’ in this sense is an understanding of similarity/difference. Here I will use language and country of origin as two ways to examine ‘culture. While other aspects of ‘culture’ are undeniably salient in affecting SIV identity, language and country of origin were the two strongest, most consistent relational tools leveraged by SIVs in my study to make claims of sameness or difference, to coalesce identity or reject membership claims. Thus, ‘culture’ is used as a reference point for positioning identity claims that center on common practices or shared origins.

Language drives some surprising identity formations for SIVs. Scarface draws a distinction between SIVs, who speak both their native tongue and English, and other refugees: “Most of the other refugees, when they were in my class, they were... we were different. First thing, they don’t know the language” (personal interview). Khabir concurs, saying “he didn’t know how to speak English. That’s why we’re not, too much connected with each other” (personal interview). Here, the shared ability to speak English allows SIVs to identify as separate from the general pool of refugees, “because whomever comes through SIV is certain that they speak English” (Khabir, personal interview). The ability to speak English allows Iraqi and Afghani SIVs to create a distinctive identity, independent of other refugees, an identity that posits the SIV as more capable of functioning and thriving in American society.

Language serves a centrifugal function; it allows identity to coalesce around a common native tongue and reinforces a sense of community. Many SIV dependents are unable to understand English, and thus, as Scarface notes for his family, “it’s kind of a jail for my wife. She does not know English, she got here and she doesn’t know, she didn’t know anyone” (personal interview). In order to socialize, Scarface’s wife, and the wives of the other SIVs, seek out others who speak their language. This allows a community to form along common linguistic lines, and was a primary factor when choosing to relocate from their initial resettlement location (Nagel and Staeheli, 2008). The resulting identity is not limited only to fellow Afghans or Iraqis, but rather to those with whom the SIVs and their families are able to communicate. Thus, Khadijah befriended a Syrian family, while the Afghani SIV community interacts and worships with Pakistani Muslims. Khabir explains, “the Masjid al-Muslimiin are Arabs. We don’t speak Arab. Arabic. But Masjid Noor Ul Huda is all from Pakistan...we can have a great[er] bond with Pakistani people than with the Arabs” (personal interview). Here language allows for the development of identities that expand beyond ethnicity or national origin. A common language allows the development of a social relationship between an Iraqi and Syrian family, while it also facilitates a common religious identity within Masjid Noor-Ul-Huda. Thus SIVs leverage linguistic skills during resettlement to both justify relocating and to create, strengthen, and expand community claims.

Both Afghani and Iraqi participants leveraged ‘culture’ to identify themselves as separate from, or included in, a specific group. That is, ‘culture’ was used to define themselves, individually, as identifying with, and claiming membership in, a larger community. As Khalid illustrates, “in our culture, they don’t take rent, but my aunt in [NY] charge it” (personal interview). Here Khalid identifies himself as adhering to traditional Afghan (and arguably larger Muslim) hospitality norms. He draws a clear distinction between himself, retaining his ‘culture’ and his aunt, who no longer performs that identity. Alex also equates ‘culture’ with hospitality, saying “you should still show the respect and the hospitality, to show the guy you’re religious and to show the guy your culture” (personal interview). He ties ‘culture’ and religion together under the umbrella of Pashtu hospitality, where certain actions must be performed in order to provide verification of a ‘cultural’ identity. Amer takes a different approach to ‘culture,’ but like Alex and Khalid, he uses it to show affinity with a larger identity. “It will make sense to accept people like me who pass several security background check, prove their willingness to accept American culture, to participate in the community, be a productive citizen in the future” (Amer, personal interview). Thus, despite ‘culture’s’ problematic use to obfuscate complex, evolving processes, here it serves as an effective point of reference for making identity and community membership claims.

Iraqi SIVs, contrary to Afghani SIVs, were the only participants to reference their national origin as a discrete nation-state identity. While Afghan SIVs referenced Afghanistan as a source of their common ‘cultural’ identity, Iraqis referred to Iraq as a political entity. Interestingly, they treated being Iraqi as undesirable, and defined themselves by rejecting this identity. Sami explains he’s glad to have left Iraq, “because like I hope to take a new identity. Like, ‘Hi, I am Sami, I am an American.’ Because Iraqi didn’t give me anything. All they give me, the sadness, the tired...they treat you like shit. Like, why am I proud to be from Iraq?” (personal interview). He rejects an Iraqi identity and hopes to assume a new, American one. This rejection positions Sami as eligible for a new national identity. Rather than provide a rooted, immobile identity, Sami’s country of origin instead serves to define what he rejects and what he aspires towards. Amer elaborates on Sami’s statement, saying “once you lose this feeling of belonging to something bigger than yourself, like community or society, a country, a citizenship, you end up in Sami’s situation” (personal interview). National identity, for these two Iraqis, is used to both define who they are not and lay claim towards what they seek to become.

Race/Ethnicity

Closely tied to ‘culture,’ ethnicity/race is another problematic identity categorization (Nagel and Staeheli, 2008; Besteman, 2012). Ethnicity typically is described as voluntary and ‘cultural,’ while race is more phenotypical, and is often ascribed based upon physical characteristics (Mavroudi and Nagel, 2016). The distinction between race and ethnicity is blurred, and likewise the separation between racial and ethnic groups is far from distinct. As socially constructed processes, the definitions and meanings of race/ethnicity are continually changing, and thus they are subject to temporal and spatial influences (Nagel and Staeheli, 2008; Brun, 2001; Brown, 2011). Despite the relational nature of race/ethnicity, American society is bifurcated along a black/white division; the bifurcation exists independent of shifting definitions of ‘white’ vs. ‘black’ (Jacobson, 1998). In the resettlement context, this black/white distinction is both understood and leveraged by refugees (Jacobson, 1998, Besteman, 2012; Yeh and Lama, 2006). Afghani and Iraqi SIVs illustrate a strong grasp of ethnic/racial social hierarchies in Columbia, and consistently position their identities towards ‘whiteness’ in pursuit of a more desirable status.

To position themselves towards a favorable racial/ethnic identity, first the SIV must grasp the black/white bifurcation of American society (Yeh and Lama, 2006). Study participants, while not directly questioned on racial or ethnic identities, were acutely aware of the black/white divide. When asked about citizenship, and whether he would

consider himself an American once he gained U.S. citizenship, Alex delved into race/ethnicity, discussing how he fills out official government forms. While he considers himself Afghan-American, he notes the primary distinction in the US is color-based, not defined by national origin. “If you go somewhere, like the hospital, the form they give you, [it says] like Caucasian, or white or black” (personal interview). Regardless of how he self-identifies, American society (in this case the hospital) officially recognizes black or white race/ethnicity. Thus, Alex is faced with one of two unfamiliar choices, and he chooses to position himself favorably. “I haven’t heard like, oh he’s a German-American, you know. They just say African-American, so... I just write down ‘white’” (personal interview). Faced with the black/white choice, coupled with a basic perception of the racial hierarchy in the US, Alex chooses to identify as white, showing at least a rudimentary understanding of desirable ethnic/racial status.

Scarface, another Afghan SIV, encounters racial/ethnic categories in a more explicit and direct way. He works as a valet at the local Veterans Administration (VA) hospital, a job he secured through his continued connection with an American military officer. This job, coupled with his darker complexion and black hair, often leads to presumptive behaviors from clients. Speaking of these clients, he notes “if they didn’t talk to me, if I don’t introduce where I am from and my background, when they see me, I don’t know why, they are thinking I am Spanish” (personal interview). When these individuals start speaking Spanish to him, Scarface replies that he is from Afghanistan and does not understand Spanish. Most are chagrined, or as he explains it, “like if you put someone in the wrong, you know, set, if you don’t know I am Afghan and you say I am Spanish... you are kind of, I am sorry and something like that” (personal interview). While Scarface professes ignorance when it comes to American racial/ethnic categories, he nonetheless recognizes the necessity of defining his position within this hierarchy by explaining he is not Latino.

Scarface transgresses upon racial/ethnic norms by failing to fulfill a stereotypical job/ethnicity match. He notes this transgression, and the resulting embarrassment of his clients with humor and confusion, but later in our interview he shows an implicit understanding of American racial bifurcation by linking Latino and black ethnicities/races together. Recounting a difficult experience, Scarface draws a direct link between a racist client and his supervisor being African-American. “An old dude, I told him to move here, and he said ‘This is America’ or something, he thinks I am Spanish. I think he doesn’t like them... My supervisor came and he stopped him... cause this guy had problems with my supervisor before. My supervisor’s black” (personal interview). These recounts show an understanding of the racial/ethnic grouping of Latinos and African Americans as ‘black.’ Scarface unconsciously links the client’s negative perceptions of Latinos to his past issues with the African American supervisor. Coupled with Scarface’s humorous recounting of mild mortification and acceptance after he identifies as Afghan (and not Latino), where “people like that, and they welcome me. And they are happy and they are wishing me good future” (personal interview), an implicit understanding of racial/ethnic identity is evident. Scarface acknowledges his understanding of racial bifurcated hierarchies by linking negative opinions of Latinos and African Americans, and offsetting these against positive reactions experienced when he repositioned himself away from a Latino identity.

Race/ethnicity directly influences the ways SIVs situate their identities and communities within Columbia. Other participants, Iraqi and Afghani alike, described their fellow refugees as ‘black’ or ‘African’ when drawing distinctions between themselves and the greater refugee population. When asked if he socialized with any other refugees, outside SIVs, Khabir acknowledged interacting with them at LFS, but “those people from, I don’t know... the African countries... [they] don’t know how to speak English. That’s why we are not... too much, connected” (personal interview). Here he links race/ethnicity with an inability to understand English, and thereby rejects association with these refugees. Thus my participants demonstrated both an understanding of the ethnic and racial hierarchies within the United States, and an ability to position their identity towards the more desirable, ‘white’ race/ethnicity. This closely aligns with other literatures that explore refugee racial/ethnic understanding and positioning (Brown, 2011; Yeh and Lama, 2006; Nagel, 2009; Besteman, 2012).

Military Experience

Lastly, combat experience in Afghanistan and Iraq serves as a particularly strong coalescing theme for SIVs. This military identity, one that centers on shared risk, interdependence, and experience, levels differences between interpreters and soldiers overseas. Interpreters, contractors, and soldiers alike are formed into a cohesive community with common goals, focused on security, safety, and applied violence. In the resettlement context, military identity and the communities it provides access to changes. While the identity shifts, the impact of shared combat experience prevails, allowing SIVs to claim belonging and membership in a widespread community of combat veterans.

In order to access my desired participants, I found I had to rely upon a shared military identity. While this emphasis introduced increased risk of bias for both parties (myself and the interviewee), it underscores the shifting importance of military experience as an identity coalescent. In the same way that combat experience allows SIVs to claim membership in a widespread community during resettlement, it also allowed me to claim access to their community. Due to this shared identity, most participants drew direct comparisons between their experiences with

soldiers and my experiences in their countries of origin. Rather than fully explain themselves, participants frequently said things such as “you can feel it too, because you were there” (Khabir, personal interview) or “that’s why, you know, they give me all the protection... it’s war” (Alex, personal interview). To offset issues of objectivity, I frequently draw a distinction here between my experience and theirs, in order to elicit a full, rich response. I would emphasize a difference in location (I was in Logar, he was in Mazar-i-Sharif, for example) or a difference in time (I was only there a year, he was an interpreter for nearly a decade). The frequent reference to a common frame of understanding, a shared identity of combat, was prevalent throughout my interviews, and was most likely the only reason why I was able to gain access to this relatively insular group of refugees.

Before resettlement, SIVs developed military identities that allowed them to claim equal membership to the deployed military community. “The interpreter... we have a same kind of thing, like the soldier... We were going on a mission, the Captain didn’t think that he’s a terp [interpreter], or he’s a linguist. He didn’t think that. We were sent out there as a team” (Alex, personal interview). Shared missions, equal exposure to danger, and a team mentality served to forge a common bond between soldiers and their interpreters. From personal experience, the same proves true of all individuals who regularly went on patrol. I had a mutual respect for, and reliance on, local national truck drivers, interpreters, and Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers who chose to align themselves with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). In combat, no distinction is made between black/white, cook or mechanic, Afghan or American. Rather, a very clear, stark difference evolved. The overshadowing identity was simply those shooting with me, versus those shooting at me. As Alex succinctly explains, “we [interpreters] may get shot, we may save your life. That’s why I say, I was down there as a soldier... I didn’t think, I’m an interpreter. I was thinking I’m a soldier, and I’m serving for my country” (personal interview).

As American military units deploy and redeploy, Afghani and Iraqi SIVs maintained contact with individual soldiers and officers. These ties, maintained over time and across increasing, and ever changing, space influenced many resettlement decisions. Scarface chose to be resettled in Columbia due to a strong relationship with an old commander. Alex wanted to be resettled in Charleston, to be close to members of a unit he served with, but settled for Columbia as it was the closest place with a resettlement program. Zorro, Ahmed, and Zain all chose Columbia due to different connections with soldiers on Fort Jackson. Only two SIVs chose to resettle in Columbia without a direct link to military ties. An employment opportunity drew Khabir to Columbia, provided through a fellow SIV. This SIV, Muhammed, however resettled in Columbia because of a connection with a local National Guard unit.

In a resettlement context, SIV military identity and the communities they access via this identity, change. Combat experience with American soldiers served to connect SIVs to other veteran populations and to validate their presence in Columbia. Scarface explains the expansion of the military community. “When I was working in the Army, the only thing we were dealing with is soldiers... [but] here we see old soldiers, new soldiers” (Scarface, personal interview). He uses his experience as an interpreter to explain why he is in the United States, “I never hide my identity, everybody asks me where I’m from and I say I am from Afghanistan... most people like it and they welcome me. They are happy and they are wishing me good future” (personal interview). Scarface uses his past experience serving as an interpreter with US forces to validate his presence at both the VA hospital, and in America. He draws on this identity to claim belonging in a larger veteran, and ultimately American, community. Thus, a military identity, initially tied directly to the individual soldiers he served alongside, expands during resettlement to incorporate veterans, and morphs into a general American identity, one based on service to the nation.

Alex also redefines the scope and purpose of military identity during resettlement. Rather than use his experience to claim membership in American society, he claims his service does not warrant access to US citizenship and refutes his ability to lay claim to belonging in the way Scarface does. “The thing is, back in the country [Afghanistan] I was working for Army, for Special Forces... But I wasn’t working for free. They were paying me. And also, I was helping my own country. I was helping my own people” (Alex, personal interview). While he acknowledges his experience as an interpreter allowed him to claim equal footing, to develop a shared identity with other soldiers in Afghanistan, he believes the only way to expand this identity and use it to validate any claims to American citizenship and belonging is to join the US Army. “My whole family wants to become as United States citizen... my plan, I may join the Army” (Alex, personal interview). While Alex states his service in Afghanistan does afford him the right to “come here [to the US] and live with my family in peace” (personal interview), he does not believe it allows him to identify with, and claim membership in, veteran communities or American society, because his motives in Afghanistan were self-serving and directed towards assisting Afghanistan, not America.

Amer draws a similar distinction to Alex, when asked if he believed his service warranted access to American society. He responded “I think it’s not an obligation. It’s still, I work for money. I was treated very well, I provided a service, [but] as the same time in exchange for money” (personal interview). When I pointed out that soldiers also are paid volunteers, he stated the difference between him and them was nationality. While he “appreciate[s] this current system, [that] this country will accept immigrant foreigner[s]” (personal interview), he does not believe his

employment with the US government in Iraq allows him to lay claim to a common military identity with American soldiers and veterans.

Thus, military identity is created, reshaped, and reinterpreted in different ways, by different individuals, within the resettlement context. Some SIVs use it to lay claims to belonging and for access to an American identity, while others dismiss this application. Some SIVs acknowledge the power of a military identity, and seek to secure it through enlistment in the Army, while others feel their past service allows them to resettle in the United States, but not to claim membership in American society. The ways in which military identity is developed and leveraged highlights the complexity of resettlement for SIVs, as well as the ability of refugees to leverage specific identities towards accessing specific communities and validating belonging.

CONCLUSION

Resettlement agencies and government policies work with a specific, narrowly defined perception of refugees and their place in society. Through this narrow framework, they impose upon refugees a limited identity, that of the 'generic' helpless victim, while simultaneously linking access to American society with self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency, in turn, is accessed along a standardized pathway. In order to become 'American' refugees must intently pursue and accept employment. Refugees are thus placed within definite places/spaces and jobs that restrict their spatial and economic access to (and exploration of) who they are, what 'America' is, how they fit within this new context and society. In Columbia, SC resettlement occurs on the outskirts of the city, isolated from public transportation. This limits interaction with diverse populations and access to all but a handful of low skill, low paying jobs. However, refugees are not completely bound to the identities imposed upon them, as evidenced by the mobility of the Afghani and Iraqi SIVs in relocating in closer proximity within more desirable communities. Instead, they negotiate their resettlement in a variety of ways, including reconstructing their identities and creating new communities.

SIVs actively construct identities during resettlement. While these identities coalesce around central themes, they are decidedly indeterminate. Common facets, such as religion, result in drastically different identity and community formations. These identities and communities are leveraged in a variety of ways, towards different aims. Other coalescing facets, such as language, serve to tie SIVs into larger, local communities, and provide access to employment and social networks not readily accessible to the general refugee population. SIVs make sense of their placement using these various identities and community claims, they position themselves as simultaneously inclusive in, and exclusive of, the general refugee population. Through an analysis of six coalescent themes, I illustrate how SIVs create, negotiate, and redefine identity and community towards specific goals.

The ability to exercise agency during resettlement aligns with arguments that contest the perception and treatment of refugees as 'generic' and homogenous entities (Malkki, 1992; Besteman, 2012; Yeh and Lama, 2006). The examples explored above highlight how a small, narrowly defined group of individuals understand and negotiate resettlement in Columbia, SC. Their experience differs greatly from one individual to the next, and their collective experience is vastly different from other refugees settled in the same context. A standardized treatment of refugees, even a uniform understanding of a single facet of the resettlement experience, proves misleading. While state and resettlement agencies operate with a fixed definition of refugee, this relatively inflexible treatment, is actively negotiated, contested, and undermined by the refugee. A shift in resettlement policies towards a more fluid, negotiated resettlement experience would greatly benefit both the individual and the greater American resettlement program. Further research can build on this understanding of refugee identity formation during resettlement in order to develop programs tailored towards assisting refugees' integration into new communities.

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