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Exploring the Experiences of Resilience in Muslim Afghan Refugee Children

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The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of Muslim Afghan refugee children living in Canada. War has an impact on a child's life, including education and protection by the family and community. The actual course of events of war can never be told completely due to the occurrence of simultaneous adversities. Hermeneutic photography was used to understand the experiences of Afghan children. Data were collected through photo conversations. Building and sustaining resilience was a theme that emerged from the data analysis. The findings of the study provide a useful guide for education, practice, and policy development to benefit Afghan refugee children and their families to overcome adversities in a new country.

Keywords *Muslim Afghans, photo conversations, refugee children, resilience*

INTRODUCTION

Children and their family members affected by war or natural disasters experience substantial hardships in their future lives and livelihoods. War impacts every aspect of a child's life, including education, nurturance, and protection by the family and community, due to loss of control over their lives. Therefore, the actual course of war events can never be completely told

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because of simultaneous adversities. Although many children succumb to serious psychological and physical problems, a substantial number manage to survive and thrive, despite facing adversities (Levine & Ion, 2002). These children are able to withstand the negative pressures around them and grow up to be competent, well-adjusted, and caring adults who contribute to future generations and society at large (Garmezy, 1991; Werner, 1989, 1997). Pioneer researchers (Garmezy & Masten, 1986; Rutter, 1987; Werner, 1993) have posed questions as to why some children thrive despite facing adversity.

The first priority in a crisis is survival. Before taking on this research study, the first author learned a lot about the Afghan refugees by accompanying nursing students to a refugee camp in Karachi, Pakistan, and also while working in Afghanistan in the post-Taliban period. The Afghan families had to sell all their belongings in order to flee from their homeland. Cash in hand enabled them to buy safety as refugees in neighboring countries such as Iran and Pakistan. The children had to leave the war-torn country of Afghanistan with their families. Yet, in spite of these adversities, the first author observed children playing with each other and having fun.

Dwelling in adversity could be gleaned from the perspective of an individual, family, or community facing hardships and the supports available to them (Garmezy, 1991; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; McCubbin, McCubbin, Thompson, Han, & Allen, 1997; Werner, 1989, 1993). Other researchers (Apfel & Simon, 1966; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1996; Masten & Powell, 2003; McCubbin et al., 1997; Walsh, 2002) have developed frameworks to determine resilience and used them to enhance the processes of adaptation in children, families, and communities.

Children are rarely asked about their experiences. Each child, if given an opportunity, has a unique story to share. It is most likely that embedded within their experiential stories are essences of resilience. The purpose of this study was to understand the phenomenon of resilience in an exploratory way with regard to how Afghan refugee children adapt despite facing adversities in the aftermath of war. The core research question was: What are the experiences of Afghan refugee children currently living in Canada in the aftermath of war? The related question was: How do they describe their experiences of day-to-day life? In this article, we will discuss only one theme–building and sustaining resilience—in both the transitional country of Pakistan and the host country of Canada.

METHODS

Participants

The participants ranged between the ages of 13 and 17; five children were female (Gulshan, age 17; Izzat, age 17; Tayreez, age 15; Sonu, age 14; and Meera, age 13), and two were male (Azim, age 15; and Farooq, age 13).

These names are pseudonyms. All the participants were born in Afghanistan and had two-parent families. They were all Muslims belonging to the Shia sect; specifically, the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims, also known as the Ismailis.

The inclusion of participants was purposefully determined. Each research participant was chosen because he or she (a) was born in Afghanistan, (b) was either male or female, (c) entered Canada through Pakistan, (d) resided in Canada for at least 2 years, (e) had some command of the English language, (f) was between the ages of 13 and 17 at the time of recruitment, and (g) permitted to audiotape the interview. In addition, children who were receiving psychiatric counseling or therapy at the time of interview were excluded from the study.

Procedures

Three agencies were approached for recruiting the participants, but only one agency was able to facilitate. The study was approved by the Health Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. Two to three *photo conversations* were done with seven children residing in an urban city in Canada. Each participant brought with them 10–15 pictures, resulting in a large data set.

Recruitment of the children was accomplished through both Farsi- and English-speaking connectors. They contacted the Afghan families to describe this study and to ask for their participation. Once the parents agreed to be contacted, the first author contacted the family to arrange to meet. The first author then obtained consent from the parents for the research and assent from the children to participate.

Hermeneutic photography, which is based on the methodology of hermeneutic (interpretive) inquiry (Hagedorn, 1994), was used as a research method in this study to explore the experiences of Afghan refugee children currently living in Canada. Photographs facilitate research participants' composition of an interpretive text that discloses the phenomenon of interest meaningfully (Berman, Ford-Gilboe, Moutrey, & Cekic, 2001; Hagedorn, 1994; Wang & Burris, 1994). The children were asked to take pictures of individuals, things, or celebrations that they considered important to them (Berman et al., 2001), or to collect any pictures of their choice that they already had at home that they might want to use during the photo conversation. The Afghan children referred to the photographs as tools to empower them to reflect beyond the picture on their experiences of living in the transitional country of Pakistan as well as in the settlement country of Canada. The research participants were given notebooks to allow them to record their reflections on each picture (Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004).

Using hermeneutic photography allowed the Afghan children to communicate critical and rich information about their families and their life in Pakistan and Canada. The above approach is well suited to give voice to

every Afghan refugee child in this research study and they took us with them through their experiences. The main question asked was: "Tell me why this picture or photograph is important to you?" The probes depended on the course of the conversation and the children led the flow of the conversation.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data was done manually. The *hermeneutic analysis cycle* identified by Fleming, Gaidys, and Robb (2003) was followed. The photo conversations with Afghan children were read as a whole to gain an understanding of the parts. Then, every sentence was reexamined to identify how each child fostered an understanding of a particular experience. These sentences were revealed back to the meaning of the whole text to gain a deeper understanding. Passages that represented the shared and individual meaning of experiences were documented. The whole cycle was repeated until authors were satisfied they had captured an essential aspect of the Afghan children's experience.

RESULTS

Four themes that described the day-to-day life experiences of the Afghan children in the transitional country of Pakistan and the settlement country of Canada emerged. These included cherishing the family, treasuring the Afghan culture, creating opportune spaces to dwell, and building and sustaining resilience. In this article, we restrict the findings to those that relate to the experiences of building and sustaining resilience in Muslim Afghan refugee children currently living in Canada.

Consequences of Dwelling in Adversity

The Afghan children in this study reflected on the adversities of war in Afghanistan. Farooq explained that, "because there was a lot of war there [in Afghanistan], my whole family had to leave the country." Izzat shared that "girls could not go to school during the Taliban regime." Azim said that "they had to leave everything behind in Afghanistan as they could not bring anything with them." Gulshan related her story of why her family was forced to leave Afghanistan when she was only 6 or 7 years old:

> Taliban came. . . . They were just taking people's houses. . . . They were just killing the people and [or] taking them away. . . . and [so] we moved to Pakistan.

The adversities of war for these Afghan children were forced migration, homelessness, loss of opportunity for education, and loss of human and material resources. These findings are similar to the findings by other

researchers on Afghans (de Berry et al., 2003; Halimi, 2002) and refugee children (Machel, 2001; Schleicher, 2003).

The children were uprooted from their birth country of Afghanistan, and their lives were disrupted because they had no choice but to flee their homeland to a foreign place to save their lives. There was no guarantee that what awaited them was a safe haven. Any human being in these circumstances would be devastated. The empirical data of this study relates to the consequences of war. However, these children were able to face their adversities positively due to consistent supports.

A Journey of Supports: In Pakistan

FOCUS Pakistan, the humanitarian institution of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), in collaboration with the funding from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and assistance from the Ismaili community of Pakistan provided support to the Afghan families (M. Manji, personal communication, November 10, 2008). Although there were transit centers or refugee camps set up in Pakistan, the children in this study did not have to stay in refugee camps.

On arrival in Pakistan, two participants' families joined their relatives in the city of Karachi. The other five children and their families settled in the city of Rawalpindi where there were no transit centers, and were provided with food, clothing, and rental units by the Ismaili community. Adults in the family were provided with employment opportunities, which enabled them to face adversity. Azim, one of the research participants, eloquently shared the impact of support during photo conversation that "it was very good, people built up their life very quickly." In addition, a transitional school building space was rented and operated by the Pakistani community for the children in order to continue with their formal education. Research participant Izzat described this school space as a place where they "had to start from grade 1 [to catch up with studies]."

Supports in Canada

Unlike Pakistan, the greatest support for the Afghan children and their families was that they were legal refugee immigrants and could dwell in Canada without the fear of being expelled from the country. In addition, the children could attend schools. However, the facilities and funding provided by the Canadian government for refugee resettlement was not fully sufficient for the children in this study to flourish. These children were fortunate to have the added support of the Ismaili community in Canada in order to face the adversities of day-to-day living. According to Garbarino and Kostelny (1996), in addition to children having individual strength, "successful adaptation and 'resilience' lies in the balance of social supports from and for

parents and other adults" (p. 41) such as members of extended family. The Afghan children in this study always had their parents with them to comfort them.

Drawing Strength from Divine Support

Tayreez described speaking with a close family member and having faith in her spiritual leader as her way of dealing with feelings of sadness or loneliness:

> I go to my sister and we talk about it. . . . Also whenever I am sad I remember him [my spiritual leader]. I know when I am sad, he is sad too and that nothing will happen to me and all my troubles will be taken care [of] by him.

Meera explained that she recited the name of Ali (the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad and the first spiritual leader of Ismailis) as her way of trying to overcome fear:

> My uncle when he tells us a story, he is so good at telling stories and his daughter and me were so scared and we were hugging each other and we would say "Ya Ali Ya Ali."

The children in this study also drew strength from their faith practices such as attending the prayer place to pray with their family members. In addition, the support system of extended family members, friends, the Ismaili community, the unwavering faith in the divine power, and finding meaning in adversity as identified above contributed to building and sustaining the strong foundation for the children. Practicing faith is also a way of promoting and sustaining resilience within a person in the face of adversity (Joseph, 1994; Ratrin Hestyanti, 2006; Walsh, 2003).

Besides having a religious or divine support system, an individual's personality traits also play a role in cultivating resilience. According to Kobasa (1979), Omeri, Lennings, and Raymond (2004), and Rutter (1987), a person with resilience has a personality trait of hardiness. Furthermore, they contend that hardiness entails three characteristics: a belief in the capacity to influence events in one's experience (control), an ability to be profoundly involved in activities of their lives (commitment), and an inclination to view change as an opportunity for growth (challenge). For example, the Afghan refugee children in this study were in full control of their play environment and committed to each other. They could structure their environment in any way they wished. For example, Azim said that finding a space to play in Pakistan is different than finding a space in Canada because there

> we used to go and there was no space [to play]. We would say "OK! Where is the space?" then just start playing, [on the street or on open ground] until someone kicks us out. . . . There [in Pakistan] was not any playground, like we have in Canada, so it was like this [in Pakistan], people used to throw their garbage and we used to clear the spot for ourselves to play games.

The children organized play spaces wherever they could: in garbage dumps, busy streets, Jamatkhana (prayer place), and small rooms. Play itself is a strengthening process, by learning how to live or adapt to new conditions. In addition, attending school, giving voluntary service, practicing their faith, and caring for siblings enabled them to strive forward in life to take on all challenges as opportunities for growth. The children also spoke of building their confidence to accomplish something through being involved in community activities.

Drawing Strength from Family and Community Support

The Afghan refugee children presented photographs of family members who lived close and distant, and confidently conveyed that their strength came from them. Family togetherness not only instilled courage, but also gave support and protection at all times. Researchers (Garmezy, 1991; Luthar et al., 2000; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998) have also identified the presence of caring adults either during or after major stresses as the most important protective factor for children.

In this study, it was clearly demonstrated that the extended family and the faith community played major roles in supporting the children to deal with their daily hassles in life. For example, during the data collection phase, there was a crisis in the family of one of the participants. The uncle, aunt, and community members took over the role of caring for all of the children in the family until the situation stabilized. These children continued to go to school and perform all their routine activities with this support. According to Joseph (1994), "the predictability that comes from a routine helps stabilize the chaos that so often follows a loss or crisis" (p. 279). It offers security as well as building and sustaining resilience. Meera identified the confidence of lifetime support and strength derived from the interdependent relationship between the Afghan children, their parents, and the extended family. In addition, there is a cultural expectation from parents to support their children for their entire lifetime and, in return, the children are obliged to look after their parents when they grow old (Dupree, 2002). Meera summarized:

> We get a lot of support from parents and it is not like we leave our parents and live on our own when we are 18. We support them and we

> also get support from the parents and family [members] for our whole life.

Sonu shared a picture of her uncle at her birthday party. She verbalized the presence of extended family as part of the family unit that was always there for her and acted as a buffer when things were rough with her parents. Sonu viewed her extended family in the context of her parents as well as her uncle who, when required, would step in and take over the responsibility of nurturing:

> He's my favorite uncle because my dad would try to teach me something and I would not get it, he would get mad, but my uncle would take me away. He spent a lot of money on me and my brother. . . . He [the uncle] was a security guard at some place and he didn't have much time as he worked night shifts, but he [still] made time for my birthday.

Werner and Smith (1982) affirmed that resilient children have the capacity to attract support from diverse individuals. Therefore, dwelling and experiencing the adversities contributes as an opportunity to form strong family bonds.

Burgo (2006) affirmed that the sense of belonging to the family, and being loved, increases the self-esteem of children. In addition, children develop an "I can do it" attitude (p. 3); a capable attitude that helps them learn, grow, and cope with life's inevitable problems in order to become resilient. This positive way of thinking also facilitates children to develop problem-solving skills, to do well in school, and to avoid getting into trouble. The above concept was mirrored by all the children because they are working hard to achieve good grades. According to Luthar, Sawyer, and Brown (2006), their literature review of over 50 years on childhood resilience showed that good positive parent-child relationships can generate "feelings of confidence, security, and self-efficacy" (p. 111) in children.

Gathering Support by Maintaining the Afghan Culture

Treasuring one's own identity and integrating with the other cultures facilitates viewing life in a diverse way (Doane & Varcoe, 2005; Ellis, 1999; Falicov, 2007) and transforming oneself by making meaning of the experiences. For example, when Meera learned that her non-Afghan friend was longing to move out from home when she turned 18, it forced Meera to reflect on the values embedded in the Afghan culture. Meera preferred the Afghan culture of lifetime support from parents and the expectation of interdependency of family members that facilitates coping with daily struggles of life rather than the Western culture of individualization.

The children treasured their Afghan identity by communicating in Farsi with their family members and learned English to survive and progress in school. These children also learned Urdu to survive in the transitional country of Pakistan. Learning multiple languages served as a strong protective factor for the children and their families. The children were able to translate and help themselves and their parents to ease their experiences of everyday living. Furthermore, proficiency in more than one language is generally considered an asset, especially in Canada. Understanding different languages also creates an opportunity of connecting, understanding, and valuing diverse cultures within Canada. In addition, it increases the children's self-esteem and facilitates building social networks as well as strengthening the foundation of their dwelling.

Another component of most cultures is volunteerism. The children in this study made reference to volunteering and the positive feeling they derived from the service. Serving others without recognition is an Islamic tradition that has been practiced by Muslims for over 1,400 years (Aga Khan, 2008). It enhances confidence, leadership qualities, and opens avenues to build human resources within and beyond the community. Some examples of volunteering for these children included cleaning the prayer place, escorting older people inside the prayer hall, and serving water if someone was thirsty. According to Izzat, volunteerism facilitated networking through "meeting new people [during volunteering], and then getting [forming] new relationship[s] . . . like knowing new people in JK [prayer place]." These relationships could become a whole network of support system for building and sustaining resilience in the future. Azim described his volunteering experience as making him "feeling happy inside doing it. . .. I don't know how, but it just makes me happy."

Garnering Support from Varying Spaces

Human beings have the innate ability to create opportune spaces to dwell and thrive in diverse spaces during their entire life (Derr, 2006; Siebert, 2005). Children's curious minds actively explore their environment and learn from discovering new things or by getting in trouble. The spaces of opportunity discovered by the Afghan refugee children were in the home, the school, the Jamatkhana, and around individuals such as extended family members, friends, and members of the Ismaili community. Some of these spaces also facilitated opportunities for building and sustaining a support system for adapting to the new environments.

Home

Tayreez articulated the feeling of gaining control over her life by recalling her experience of stability and the significance of permanency in her life:

"I remember our first house, it was very special I guess because it was my first Canadian home and I really like cherished it." This assistance of renting a home by the Ismaili community of Pakistan and Canada contributed to coping with the new environment. The *tarbia* (upbringing) of the children and planning for their future becomes easier when the family is able to live in one place, under one roof. A dwelling place gives stability and safety, and provides an address from which to apply for a job, benefits, training, and a school in the neighborhood (Carter & Polevychok, 2004; Perry, 2005).

School

Researchers have found that, when refugee children attend school, it gives them stability and increases their confidence, self-esteem, problem-solving abilities, and career opportunities (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1996; Hek, 2005; Machel, 2001). The children identified the advantages of going to school such as making friends, creating strong bonds of friendship, learning to fulfill aspirations of becoming something, and being useful in contributing toward the society with a general direction for the hope of a better future. They also mentioned the human and material resources provided by the school system in Canada as contributing to the positive experiences of living. For example, the principals and teachers motivated them to be great achievers. In addition, the well-equipped library with books and computers facilitated learning.

Hek (2005) interviewed 15 refugee students between the ages of 13 and 17 years in two schools in the United Kingdom. Similar to the findings in this study, the students identified that the positive attitude of teachers, friends, and peer support played an important role in adjusting to the new country. Other researchers (Garmezy, 1991; Luthar et al., 2000; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Masten & Powell, 2003; McCubbin et al., 1997) have also identified the school environment as contributing to resilience in children who have experienced adversity.

Jamatkhana

In addition to the school space, the Jamatkhana had also become a vital place for diverse activities that facilitated not only practicing the faith, but promoted expansion of social networks and learning for the Afghan children to further build and sustain resilience. The children had an opportunity to attend tutorial classes organized by the Ismaili community in Jamatkhana twice a week as afterschool support.

All the above-mentioned supports helped the Afghan children face the challenges of daily living. It is interesting to note that the children verbalized the challenges of daily living faced in Canada as causing tensions while those

faced in Pakistan as an adventurous journey. This is probably because the children were younger when they entered Pakistan. Furthermore, it could be that these children had already overcome the challenges they faced in Pakistan and their focus was now of dwelling in the present in Canada.

Challenges and Tensions of Daily Living in Canada

Despite the ease with which the children accessed resources for support in Canada, they faced several challenges such as keeping up with schoolwork, learning English, making friends, and adjusting to geographic distance from relatives and friends. All of these challenges created tensions that needed to be addressed and overcome. The Afghan children talked in great length about the challenges of adapting to the Canadian school system.

Keeping Up With Schoolwork

As soon as the children arrived in Canada, they had to take English as a second language (ESL). The children went through an assessment process for a full year before they were placed in an appropriate grade. Therefore, they had to take subjects offered in two different grades in the same year simultaneously. The children had taken English classes in the transitional country of Pakistan so they had acquired the basic language skills to enable them to communicate in English. However, they had to build on those skills in order to learn various subjects taught in English and adapt to unfamiliar accent and teaching strategies.

Azim voiced that the language barrier strongly influenced his ability to incorporate the task at hand rather than the subject itself. This is how he explained his challenge:

> I cannot multitask, I am slow in English. I am getting better at it, but not that much. The teacher gives you something on the overhead, and as he is giving the notes on the overhead, he [also] explains it [to] you. Like OK! So what do you do? Take the notes first or you listen to the teacher first? . . . [It is] kind of hard for me. It is difficult for me to do that. It is kind of easy for the students who are born in Canada and they know to speak in English. I cannot do that. Like if I read "university," I have to put that in my mind [first] so that I know how to spell it U-NI-VER-SI-TY and like you know . . . people here when they [read] university, they just forget about it and they can spell it and can listen [at the same time] and just write down the stuff, but I can't.

Azim continued to invest a lot of time in understanding the content of the subject by seeking assistance from his teachers in school and in the community. Despite the above challenges, coupled with the fact that English

was not Azim's first language, he worked hard to adapt and overcome these challenges. Azim demonstrated strong inner strength by approaching the teachers at the school as well as in the community and was able to pass Grade 10.

All of the research participants voiced accomplishment of a milestone of school adjustment and were looking forward to their future career goals. These children were also aware that there would be more challenges to face as they succeeded into higher grades. According to researchers (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2001), these Afghan children could be called resilient because their perseverance and the available external supports led them to adapt positively and face the adversity encountered in school.

Making New Friends

As established in the literature, children going through adolescence face a number of challenges in their transition to adulthood. This period tends to involve experimentation, risk-taking behaviors, and reflection on a sense of personal identity. It can also be a time when parental boundaries are pushed and family conflict can occur (Merali, 2004). For example, Azim identified that parental restriction of not meeting his best friend was hard to follow. This becomes further complicated when children are uprooted from their familiar surroundings and are forced to make new friends in a strange environment. In Azim's words, "you might not [have difficulty] when you are a kid. I mean it is tough [to make friends] like in Grade 7, 8, or 9."

Adjusting to Geographic Distance From Relatives and Friends

One of the advantages for the refugee families to living in Canada was the opportunity to live in a peaceful country. However, given how accommodations work in Canadian society, it was impossible for all the refugee families to dwell within the same neighborhood as was the case in Pakistan. Why did this change create tension for the Afghan refugee children? In Azim's words:

> My friends went to the same school, yeah! And we lived in the same place [neighborhood] too [in Pakistan], but in Canada one person lives on the north side and another person lives on the south side, but us we were like close neighbors [in Pakistan] so we were together like all the time, from the day til the night.

Making friends in Canada was not a problem. What mattered was the quality of the friendship that often seemed lacking due to different situations. Azim loved to talk of his friends and memories through photo conversations that gave him strong and lovely memories most of the time:

> I met many friends here [in Canada], but they [he points to the picture of friends in Pakistan] were very sincere. I tried really hard, but I did not have that kind of relationship here [in Canada as in Pakistan]. You cannot get it back. First of all, I have friends and I am living here and the other friend lives on the other side of the mall and I only meet him in school that's all like, those kinds of stuff, many problems like that.

Although Azim has managed to make friends both in the school and at the prayer place he still misses his friends from Pakistan. He has found comfort in his memories of the happy and joyful times experienced during the 10 years he spent in Pakistan. For example, living at a walking distance from his friends facilitated studying and socializing with them. The nostalgic memories of flying kites, watching television, and helping each other to progress academically carried him through periods of yearning for them.

Meera, another participant, related that, when she was sick, she could not stay at home because there was no one to care for her. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, she always had someone to look after her at home. She also missed playing with her cousins and friends in Pakistan every day.

DISCUSSION

Findings from Selected Studies with Refugees or Immigrant Children

The question that must be asked now is why the findings of this study differ so much from other studies on refugee children. Other studies have reported a higher level of traumatic experiences in refugee children (Halimi, 2002; Joshi & O'Donnell, 2003). One of the reasons may be the availability of support from the Ismaili community within Pakistan and Canada. It could also be said that the connector recruited the families that were doing well and was biased. The connector reported that some of the Afghan families he invited to the study did not want their children to participate because of fear of repercussions in the future and this also limited involvement. They all came from a traumatized background. Also, it could be pondered that, because the first author is a member of the Ismaili community, the children spoke only positively about their experiences.

Challenges faced by children were mainly the language and the schooling, but both of these were supplemented by the Ismaili community. Going to the prayer place also gave them the opportunity to speak to other Afghan children, to be warned sometimes by other children not to spend time with certain students in the school, and to receive tutoring. These results imply that religion and support from the religious community serves as a source of building resilience for refugee children.

The participants were happy that the first author had been to the places they came from, that she could speak the Urdu and some Farsi language

as well as other dialects, and it is from this view they spoke to her. These children were busy dwelling in their new home in Canada, trying to cope with their day-to-day struggles of living, and facing challenges in school.

All of the children in this study were between the ages of 2 and 5 when they left Afghanistan with their families because of war in their country. Consistent with the findings of the study of refugee children of war who settled in Canada (Berman, 1999; Berman et al., 2001; Devjee, 2008), most children used innovative strategies to survive and show strength in spite of facing adversities. The challenges that the refugee children faced were adjusting to school, culture, and language in a new country. In addition, they did not remember the actual events and the intensity of the danger they faced in Afghanistan, but heard it from their parents and relatives. But, it was not so much the subject of their conversation. They were very clear that the most consistent support was from their families.

According to Garbarino and Kostelny (1996), children are at a greater risk of developing mental illness if exposed to more than two adverse factors depending on the extent and type of exposure. Compounding the risks, Afghan refugee women face economical and occupational problems as well as accessibility to health care that could further affect their physical and psychological well-being (Lipson & Omidian, 1997) as well as the health of their children. If adults in the family do not get the appropriate support, they cannot protect the children (Garbarino & Kostelny).

Therefore, there are chances for these children to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Furthermore, children who live in refugee camps do not get consistent support due to the lack of material and financial resources (Halimi, 2002). According to Joshi and O'Donnell (2003), not all children exposed to traumatic events will develop PTSD. Several researchers (Garmezy, 1991; Luthar et al., 2000; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Werner, 1989, 1993) have identified that protective factors such as individual traits or attributes and family and community support act as buffers and promote resilience in children. In this study, the Ismaili Muslim community strongly supported the children's parents and this may have acted as an added buffer for the children and their families.

This process of buffering goes a long way to prevent an accumulation of stress that could lead to effective coping and development of resilience or positive adaptation (Garbarino, Kostelny, & Dubrow, 1991) and prevent mental illness (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1996). The children in this study showed strength due to the support outlined above, but also challenges mainly because of loss of family time due to economic challenges and parents having to work long hours at minimum wages. But, in addition, they also received consistent support from the Ismaili community in both Pakistan and Canada.

Frustrations and Supports Expressed by the Afghan Children

Some of the frustrations expressed by the Afghan children in this study were similar in comparison to the findings in Devjee's (2008) study on refugee children. For example, the Afghan refugee children in this study were also assigned to a specific grade or class in school based on their age regardless of their educational background, which caused stress. In contrast, the refugee children in Devjee's study did not have extra tutorial support from any community whereas the Afghan refugee children in this study had consistent tutorial support. The lack of consistent support in the community may have led to children to be unmotivated in the Devjee study. Also, having been placed in an inappropriate grade has led to lower scores or subject failures and a higher chance of dropping out of school, which affects choosing a career or entry to a university in the future.

Achieving high grades was important to the children and their families because they knew that high academic performance of students in school is vital in order to pursue a university degree or college education and to secure better-paying, stable employment. These children will then be able to build a new life for themselves and their families as well as contributing better to society. Educational support must maximize the potential of refugee children to participate successfully in their endeavors. Because the children in this study were received by an existing Muslim community within Canadian society, the children were able to adjust quicker and better than refugee children who do not have the same reception and support.

Recommendations and Further Thoughts: Education, Practice, and Policy Development

If we truly want to make a difference in the lives of refugee children we may consider the issues exemplified by the children themselves as implications for education, practice, and policy development. The following are our recommendations:

1. Provide a safe and nonthreatening environment by using photo conversations as a method to identify their needs.
2. Strengthen the skills of teachers, facilitators, and counselors to work with refugee children to adapt to the Canadian school system by: (a) learning the English language, (b) understanding the Canadian accent, (c) coping with being placed in two grades in 1 year, and (d) getting used to a variety of teaching strategies utilized by the instructors for learning.
3. Collaborate with the religious community and the civil society, which includes volunteers who act as support systems to attend to their needs.
4. Leverage importance on the interdependency of family to support the children.

5. Facilitate integration with other cultures in the new country of settlement.

A final recommendation emerging from this study is that the government of Canada should investigate best practices from existing community models to enhance their programs for resettling refugee children. This study has shown that governments alone cannot successfully resettle refugee children. Instead, there is a need for existing civil society and community institutions and support structures, including religious and ethnic networks and groups, to collaborate with the government (Aga Khan, 2008) for resettlement and support of refugee children.

CONCLUSIONS

The Afghan children in this study have shown that their burdens became easier from the numerous consistent supports they were given from the time they left Afghanistan. Life still held tensions and hardships, but they were able to take them in stride and work through them. The children experienced sound foundational support in the form of family, friends, and a Muslim community, and were motivated to volunteer their time to serve the community. These Afghan children treasured their cultural identity and expressed confidence in learning to understand other cultures of their new country. While experiencing challenges, they were resilient and confident that they could achieve their personal and career goals in Canada.

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