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“We came to this country for the future of our children. We have no future”: Acculturative stress among Iraqi refugees in the United States[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Individuals from Iraq form one of the largest groups of refugees and asylum seekers in the United States in the recent years following the decade long war in the region. Yet, the experiences of these refugee families in a new country offering sanctuary to them are largely unknown, and often ignored. Utilizing a mixed methods approach, this study explored experiences of refugees from Iraq and evaluated experiences related to acculturation in the United States among a purposive sample of 154 Iraqi refugees in two separate communities. Findings suggest existing social isolation, language barriers, religious and ethnic persecution among Iraqi refugees. These barriers contributed to sustained hopelessness and distress where participants fail to visualize a future of their own. Implications include suggestions for policy and practice guidelines designed for federal and non-governmental organizations engaged in assistance of immigrants/refugees in their transition.

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1. Introduction

Refugees from Iraq are one of the largest groups of individuals arriving in the United States in the recent years (US Department of State, 2010). The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) was launched in 2007 in an effort to resettle individuals fleeing Iraq in quest for safety. As of 2012, more than 166,000 Iraqi nationals have been referred to the USRAP program, but less than a third of them have been admitted in the past four years in what seems like an extremely slow response (US Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2011). About four million Iraqi residents, making up almost one-sixth of the pre-war population, had to flee their country, and have created the fastest-growing refugee crisis in the world (Bettis, 2010). Host countries estimated 4.5 million Iraqis were displaced inside both Iraq and its neighboring countries with two million Iraqi nationals in Syria, one-half million in Jordan, and others in Iran, Lebanon, Egypt, and Turkey at various stages of resettlement (Alpert, 2010). Yet, little is known about the processes and outcome of this displacement of refugees from Iraq, especially those that have lived through the invasion, bombings, terror of ethnic conflict, and the resulting trauma from the wars, and have come to the United States seeking refuge (Miremadi, Ganesan, & McKenna, 2011; Nickerson, Bryant, Steel, Silove, & Brooks, 2010).

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1.1. The United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) and Iraqi nationals

Iraqi nationals seeking refuge outside began with the Iran war in 1980. Some people left for political reasons; others fled to avoid military service. Migration increased with the Gulf War in the 1990s. The mass exodus of Iraqi citizens started after the bombing of the Al-Askari Mosque in Samarra in February 2006 (The List Project to Restle Iraqi Allies, 2010). This event marked the beginning of sectarian and ethnic conflict throughout Iraq in the form of a civil war. The ethnic conflicts following this event also prompted international human rights organizations and refugee advocate groups to ask the United States to provide assistance and resettlement to Iraqi nationals caught in the conflict (US Department of State, 2010).

Refugees are resettled throughout the United States with the largest Iraqi populations found in Detroit, Southern California, and Washington, DC (US Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2011). While the early Iraqi refugees were mainly seeking economic stability, a majority of the Christian refugees settled in the Detroit area were seeking safety and were followed by their relatives. While other findings suggest migration from one country to another requires time for acceptance, adjustment, and assimilation into a new culture (Rousa & Lloyd, 2012), this group of refugees did not have that time in the face of an already burgeoning crisis (Mowafi, 2008).

1.2. Theoretical and empirical exploration of acculturative stress among people in transition

Acculturative stress is the psychological distress one feels often accompanied by feelings of low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression, and other difficulties resulting from adjustment to a new culture (Tartakovsky, 2007). Acculturation is the experience whereby people move from one or more cultures into another which differs substantially from their original culture. This process can be challenging and worrisome (Jamil, Nassar McMillan, & Lambert, 2007). Another study found that acculturative distress was associated with physical and psychological changes from adapting to new diet, housing, dress, and other norms of the new culture (Nwadiora & McAdoo, 1996). While immigrants usually leave their own country in order to better their economic or social well-being, Williams and Berry (1991) differentiated refugees as asylum seekers who leave their homelands seeking security because they fear persecution for their religious, ideological, or political beliefs or for their ethnicity. Many challenges await Iraqi refugees to the United States, and these can be overwhelming. These include learning a new system of education new laws, new language, and a whole new way of life (Jamil et al., 2007).

Berry posited four possible outcomes of the acculturation process that can be applied to Iraqi refugees (Berry, 2006). These refer to (1) assimilation: the movement from Iraq (minor culture) to the United States (dominant culture), (2) integration: the merging or blending of the Iraqi culture and American culture, (3) rejection: proclamation of the Iraqi culture and the rejection of the American culture and (4) marginalization: separation from both Iraqi and United States cultures. In this latter outcome the marginalized individual is perceived by others to be in isolation (Berry, 2006, 2008).

While research finds high levels of acculturative stress to be associated with depression, being part of a social group of family, friends, and coreligionists was also found to be helpful in combating acculturative stress (Thomas & Baek Choi, 2006). Additionally, ability to pursue religion and religious rituals were found to be protective factors by providing a sense of community (Bhugra, 2004). Tartakovsky furnished empirical evidence that acculturative stress and homesickness led to psychological distress during the transition from one culture to another (Tartakovsky, 2007). Berry et al. reiterated that psychological distress adds up as individuals move from one group and mix in a dominant group (Berry, 1986; Berry & Kim, 1988).

Multiculturalism, a merging of attitudes, beliefs, and cultures, and the adaptation to another culture shows how stressors can be related with experiences of integration, assimilation, migration and marginalization (Campbell & Blain, 1982; Kymlicka, 2003). A study on Central American refugees found that the respondents overwhelmingly favored an integration mode over the other three styles of acculturation (Donà & Berry, 1994).

Acculturative stress affects all aspects of the bio-psychological and social spheres of a refugee irrespective of gender, socioeconomic status or religion. Clear associations between different experiences and acculturative stressors can be established across social and demographic factors (Rudmin & Ahmadzadeh, 2001).

Findings suggest that an inability to speak the language, unemployment, and family separation are factors contributing to acculturative stress (Knipscheer & Kleber, 2006; Tartakovsky, 2007). Employment is one of the biggest challenge facing immigrant and refugees from the Middle East, especially after September 11, 2001. Lack of employment increases stress which places the refugee at greater risk of poor health (Lie, 2002; Nawyn, 2012; Ramos et al., 2010). Gender, religious affiliation and language capability are factors associated with finding a job among refugee persons (Ben-Sira, 1997; De Vroome & Van Tubergen, 2010; Vasey & Manderson, 2012). The ability to speak English was identified as the most important factor to help a refugee find jobs (Codell, Hill, Woltz, & Gore, 2011). Lack of language fluency puts the refugee in a position where they may say yes to a job, without complete comprehension. In the current economic situation, misunderstandings such as this could lead to loss of job, thus exasperating an already stressful situation (Christoff, 2010; Jamil et al., 2010). While much is known about the sources of stress as a result of coming to a different country, relatively less is known about the impact of these stressors on the refugee persons.

1.3. Study aims

To address this gap, we conducted a mixed methods study at two resettlement areas of Iraqi refugees in Midwestern United States. The study assessed stress factors related to the resettlement process and triangulated the findings with follow up in-depth interview to investigate context specific factors related to such stressors. The first resettlement area was Detroit, MI, a metropolitan area with a large concentration of Iraqi refugees. The second area, Saint Louis, MO, had a smaller population of recently arrived Iraqi refugees. The aim of this current study is twofold. We seek to increase knowledge on acculturative stress among Iraqi residents who came in as refugees in the United States following the decade long war in Iraq, and to explore context specific factors contributing to acculturative stress among this sample. Specifically, the quantitative portion of this study addresses two research questions: (1) Do Iraqi refugees with higher acculturative stress differ significantly from those with lower acculturative stress with regards to key psychosocial characteristics? and (2) What factors are associated with acculturative stress among Iraqi refugees in this sample? Answers to these questions will add knowledge in understanding about acculturative stress, specifically in identifying factors that contribute to acculturative stress and could potentially enhance early intervention development among the growing number of Iraqi nationals who are seeking refuge in the United States. The qualitative portion of the study triangulates the quantitative findings to explore contextual factors related to resettlement experiences of Iraqi nationals, with particular emphasis on exploring possibilities of how to create less stressful resettlement experiences in the limited context of governmental and non-profit agencies.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedures

This cross sectional mixed methods study utilized survey questionnaires followed by selected in-depth interview guide to elicit responses from Iraqi residents currently living in Detroit, MI and St. Louis, MO. These two geographical areas in the Midwest were chosen due to their higher concentration of refugee population, as well as existing relationship with the primary author in these communities. The primary author, an immigrant from Iraq, is also a member of the clergy at a religious denomination that serves the refugee community in Detroit, MI. Initial contact with this religious group in Detroit was made by the primary author, who was in turn invited to attend worship services with the Iraqi refugee community members. Contacts were made with a refugee resettlement agency in St. Louis that experienced a surge of Iraqi refugees and permission to contact the research study was sought.

Following protocol approved by the Institutional Review Board at St. Louis University, the primary author introduced the purpose of the study and invited members of the refugee community to fill out the survey questionnaires at both locations. Inclusion criteria included Iraqi refugee status, and ability to read and write. All questions were translated from English to Aramaic, the native language of the respondents ($n = 154$), and back translated to English to ensure accuracy prior to administering the surveys. In Detroit 73 survey questionnaires were carried out at a geographical community after a religious service. In St. Louis, 81 surveys were given to Iraqi refugee clients served by the refugee resettlement agency. Data collection lasted from March to May 2009.

2.2. Qualitative study procedure

The qualitative inquiries were deemed necessary after the preliminary analysis of the quantitative data pertaining to acculturative stress. The survey data was not enough to understand context specific information that would enhance understanding the processes involved in refugee resettlement efforts made by the Iraqi nationals. At the time of presenting the survey to request information of the Iraqi refugees who came to the St. Louis area after 2003, the researcher found that these individuals had never had been given an opportunity to express their feeling about their initial and current experiences of life as an Iraqi refugee in the United States. The persons interviewed indicated willingness to contribute additional information that could potentially help alleviate stress among future refugees bound for the United States. After explaining the purposes of the study and obtaining informed consent, individual in-depth interviews were carried out with a purposive sampling of five respondents seeking resettlement services at a community based agency in St. Louis. All the respondents were married, two of them were men. Questions were framed to capture the respondents' experiences in Iraq that prompted them to seek refugee status in the United States and their subsequent experiences in the US. The participants were also asked about their experience with the process of resettlement efforts. Another issue that was discussed referred to their lived experiences in Iraq during the war compared to their lived experiences in the US following resettlement. All in-depth interviews were carried out in Arabic by the first author, herself a person of Iraqi origin with experiences of living through the war in Iraq. Each interview was recorded, transcribed and translated into English to aid analyses. Data analysis included preliminary coding of emergent issues identified by those researched, triangulating the same with quantitative findings and generating themes.

Table 1Characteristics of the study participants ($n = 154$).

Variable	Frequency (percentage)/mean (SD)
Mean age in years	40.00 (13.0)
Gender: male (%)	80 (51.9)
Visa issued from: Jordan (%)	52 (34.9)
Religious affiliation: Christian (%)	90 (58.4)
Education: high school and above (%)	112 (73.2)
Marital status: married (%)	124 (80.5)
Current residence type: apartment (%)	63 (42.3)
Current job status: unemployed (%)	98 (64.5)
Acculturative stress: high (%)	94 (61.0)

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Socio-demographic characteristics

This analysis included age in years, gender, marital status, education, and religious affiliation. Immigration specific information related to visa and residency status was also obtained. Housing information included residence type.

2.3.2. Acculturative stress

Acculturation information was collected based on a thorough review of the literature on refugee experiences in host countries. Life experiences of Iraqi nationals before and after arrival in the United States were taken into account while constructing the scale. A ten-item scale to measure acculturative stress was developed and validated based on both review of pertinent literature on Iraqi refugees, the process of acculturation (Berry, 2008; Christoff, 2010; Mowafi, 2008; Ramos et al., 2010), and personal judgment of the first author, a survivor of the Iraq war. The following items were measured: adaptation to US culture, western food, different housing, bringing up children in the US and teaching them values of the native culture, efforts made to learn English language and teach the same to children, attempts at wearing both native and western clothes, and adaptation to stress caused by a new culture. Each item reflected level of ease or difficulty in respondents ability to manage each of the ten factors measured on a Likert type scale ranging from very easy to easy = 1, average = 2 and difficult to very difficult = 3. Respondents were asked to select the best response indicative of their agreement with each item. Responses from all ten items were added to arrive at a total score ranging from 10 to 30. The acculturative stress scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.74$) in this sample. Results were further dichotomized to lower acculturative stress (ranging from 10 to 20) and higher acculturative stress (above 20).

2.4. Quantitative data analysis plan

This study determines acculturative stress among Iraqi nationals living in the United States by evaluating differences between high and low levels of acculturative stress and exploring the contributive factors. In exploring how individuals with high acculturative stress differ from those with low stress levels in demographic, behavioral and psychosocial characteristics, we utilized bivariate analyses using chi-square and t -tests to determine proportional and mean differences, respectively. Next, effect size was calculated for these comparisons to provide meaningful interpretations beyond what tests of significance can provide. Finally, binary logistic regression was employed to determine predictors of likelihood of higher acculturative stress in this sample. Data analyses were executed using SPSS version 19.0. Following the quantitative analyses, individual in-depth interviews were carried out with five Iraqi refugees seeking services at a refugee resettlement agency. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated by the primary author, and content analyses lead to salient themes pertaining to refugee and resettlement experiences in the United States.

3. Results

3.1. Characteristics of study sample

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the study sample. The mean age of the study population is 40 years. About half of the respondents (52%) were males, 80% of the respondents were married, and almost three quarters of the sample were educated high school and beyond, with 33% with a university degree. About 66% of the sample belonged to a Christian faith. The respondents in this sample had to wait an average 2.8 years from the time they left Iraq till their US visa was granted ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 4.4$). About 20% of the respondents had to come to the US leaving their families behind, while almost 80% of the respondents were able to travel with at least one family member. A majority of the respondents (65%) were unemployed, and lived in one or two bedroom apartments or homes. Acculturative stress, the dependent variable of interest in this analysis ranged from 10 to 30, with a median of 20 ($M = 20.09$, $SD = 4.08$). When further dichotomized, 61% of the respondents ($n = 94$) were identified with high acculturative stress in this sample.

Table 2
Characteristics of participants with high and low acculturative stress.

Variable	Higher stress 94 (61%)	Lower stress 60 (39%)	t/χ^2	p-Value	Effect size
Gender			6.71		
Male	41 (43.6)	39 (65.0)		.012	.21
Female	53 (56.4)	21 (28.4)			
Marital status			3.85	.058	.14
Married	71 (75.5)	53 (88.3)			
Single	19 (76)	6 (10)			
Religion			3.4	.047	.16
Christian	49 (52)	41 (68.3)			
Muslim	45 (70.3)	19 (32)			
Poor family support	22 (23.7)	4 (15.4)	12.00	.03	.28
Ability to pursue one's religion	29 (31)	35 (60.3)	16.50	.01	.33

3.2. Do respondents with higher acculturative stress differ significantly from those with lower acculturative stress with respect to their key psychosocial characteristics?

Acculturative stress was found to be significantly associated with gender [$\chi^2(1)=6.71$; $p < .01$; $\Phi = 0.21$] although with a small effect size where more female respondents (56.4%) reported higher stress levels when compared to males (43.6%) as noted in Table 2. There was a significant association between religion and acculturative stress again with a small effect size where more Muslim participants reported higher acculturative stress and more Christian participants reported lower stress levels [$\chi^2(1)=3.40$; $p < .05$; $\Phi = 0.16$]. While support from family and/or friends in Iraq was not associated with acculturative stress, family support in the US was significantly associated with acculturative stress [Pearson's $\chi^2(5)=12.00$, Cramer's $V=0.32$, $p < .01$]. Increased opportunities to exercise religious practices was also significantly associated with low acculturative stress with a medium effect size [Pearson's $\chi^2(5)=16.5$, Cramer's $V=0.28$, $p < .05$]. No significant relationship was noted between individuals with low and high acculturative stress based on marital status, age, employment status or length of time before arriving in the US.

3.3. What factors are associated with the likelihood of higher acculturative stress among Iraqi refugees living in the United States?

To answer this question, we employed binary logistic regression analyses to assess the impact of a number of predictors on the likelihood of respondents' reporting higher acculturative stress. The overall model included nine independent variables including gender, age and marital status, which were used as control variables. The covariates included religious affiliation, extent of family support in the United States, freedom to practice religion, satisfaction with social life in Iraq, perceptions of being welcome in the United States and in Iraq (Table 3).

The final model containing all predictors was statistically significant, [$\chi^2(9)=43.20$, $p < .001$], and supported the model's ability in distinguishing between respondents with higher likelihood of reporting acculturative stress from those with lower stress levels. The generalized (Cox and Snell) R^2 was 26.7% while the rescaled (Nagelkerke) R^2 was 36.6%.

While controlling for gender, age and marital status, significant variables in this model were religious affiliation, family support in the United States, satisfaction with prior social life in Iraq, and ability to pursue one's religion in the United States.

Table 3
Results from binary logistic regression analyses: predictors of acculturative stress among Iraqi refugees living in the United States.

Predictors	b	SE	Wald χ^2	p-Value	Odds ratio	(95% CI)
Dependent variable: acculturative stress high or low						
Gender	-1.241	.439	7.994	.005	.289	0.123–0.686
Age	0.005	.017	.085	.771	1.005	0.972–1.040
Marital status	-1.428	.659	4.689	.030	.240	0.066–0.087
Religious affiliation	-1.280	.473	7.321	.007	3.60	1.423–9.097
Family support in US	-0.379	.134	7.972	.005	.684	0.526–0.889
Pursue religion in US	-0.404	.180	5.031	.025	.668	0.469–0.950
Social life satisfaction in Iraq	0.338	.145	7.207	.007	1.474	1.110–1.957
Feeling welcome in Iraq	-0.220	.164	1.808	ns	0.803	0.582–1.106
Feeling welcome in US	-0.137	.195	0.493	ns	0.872	0.595–1.278
Constant	4.956	1.560	10.094	.001	142.07	
Model χ^2 (df)		43.20 (9)				
Cox and Snell R^2		.267				
Nagelkerke R^2		.366				
-2 -Log likelihood		138.40				
N		142				

Respondents who were Christians were 3.6 times less likely to experience acculturative stress compared to their Muslim counterparts. Respondents with family support were 31.6% less likely to report high acculturative stress while the ability to pursue one's religion contributed to 33.2% less likelihood of reporting high acculturative stress. While perceptions of being welcome while in Iraq or in the United States did not contribute to likelihood of reporting high acculturative stress, respondents who reported higher satisfaction with their past social life in Iraq reported almost 47% increased likelihood of reporting high acculturative stress.

4. Content analysis of individual in-depth interviews of Iraqi refugees

4.1. Context of leaving Iraq

Four of the respondents came to the United States after a four-year wait in Syria, perceived to be the easiest country to enter from Iraq. One came through Turkey after a single year of waiting. All five respondents narrated the conditions under which they decided to leave Iraq. They came because of death threats if they remained in Iraq. One respondent narrated that as an Iraqi baker he provided bread to American and British soldiers. He was threatened and his nine year old daughter was shot and killed in his car. Other respondents shared similar experiences of fear and violence and said they fled their homeland with only their passport, marriage licenses, the clothes they were wearing, and the money they had.

4.2. "This is not we expected to find"

The respondents said they believed that in the United States they would find a "heaven", an idea gained from Iraqi television, videos and agencies in Syria. Instead they found drug dealers, doors with no locks, bedbugs in rooms, no jobs, discrimination, and bills to be paid. Most, if not all of their resources were spent for necessities during the waiting period to come to the United States. The long waiting period meant by the time they got to the United States they had already depleted their savings. Financial resources brought along in person had to be used up while waiting in the neighboring countries waiting to be resettled. So many of the respondents found themselves to be in debt by the time they arrived in the United States.

Through the in-depth interview, participants spoke of the condition of the housing and neighborhood in which the agency placed them. One respondent said that in Iraq he lived in a sprawling house with good furniture, a garden, and a three-car garage. As a refugee in the United States, he along with his wife and their seven children were told they would be living in a one-bedroom apartment, with no usable furniture. This respondent also reported spending his unemployed days perusing neighborhood alleys looking for discarded furniture waiting for trash pickup that he could repair and use.

4.3. Experiences of culture shock

Narrating their experience with refugee resettlement agencies, the first point of contact in the United States, a respondent said, "entrance into this country was cold and unfriendly; agencies made us feel like we were brought and dumped here". The participants narrated being met by agency representatives who painted a dismal picture of what awaited them, and some even insulted them for their ignorance of the refugee system. The agencies' inability to provide proper care, or their lack of care was especially hard because the respondents felt they were individuals who "came not from a desert, but a country that has everything". Due to the resettlement agencies' standardized approaches to service delivery, respondents found agencies were not able to understand the Iraqi cultural nuances and even perceived their culture was being rejected. One participant said, "The agencies have forgotten that the Iraqis are coming from a country that at one time was the height of civilization (the Tigris–Euphrates Valley known as Babylonia)". Another participant felt her intelligence was insulted when she was provided with a handbook by the agency on how to do things such as opening windows and turn on stoves. "Education is free in Iraq, almost all adults have college degrees", shared one respondent as she reminisced the instructions on how to live in the United States handbook given to her. The majority of the individuals in this study had some job skills but that did not help them in the United States. One respondent knew of a fellow refugee who was trained as a physician in Iraq and had to take up menial jobs in the United States. Yet another respondent, an aeronautical engineer, was working as a grocery store clerk. "Most of us need jobs to pay our bills and support our families, so we take any job that is offered", stated one respondent, who went on to narrate the example of a dentist in Iraq who was offered a job as a house keeper in the United States.

4.4. Continued persecution

The respondents fled Iraq to avoid the daily violence and threats to their lives. Yet, coming to a country that promised them refuge, they felt they were back to living in fear – amidst violent crimes in unsafe neighborhoods. As he was shown a crammed apartment complex in a rough neighborhood, one respondent asked his caseworker if she would live in this place. She answered, "not really", so he asked her why she bought them there. "Because it is the cheapest place", she told him. During the seven months that he lived there, their family witnessed three homicides in front of their apartment building. His children were traumatized and refused to leave the building. Luckily for this individual, he was able to get a job and moved

to a safer neighborhood. Another participant shared, “we talk, but no one listens to us. In Iraq the situation was bad; now it is very bad. We had one Saddam (Hussein); now we have thousands. Iraq’s problem is complete lack of safety. America has safety, and we came here expecting that”. The respondents coming in the United States as refugees from Iraq were faced with the hopelessness that was pervasive in areas of lives that were meant to be meaningful – safety, security, occupation. As one respondent narrated, he came to the United States with the dream of transferring his engineering and technical skills to build airplanes. Instead, he was told his skills were not welcome here, and was given a job as a bagger in a grocery store.

4.5. *Suggested alternatives*

All participants of the in depth interviews identified the same three areas as the greatest needs that they felt needed to be met in order to improve the condition of new refugees: adequate housing in safe environments, financial aid for at least a year or two, so refugees need not have their minds occupied full time of the bills to be paid, and an English speaking program for at least one whole year since English is too difficult to learn in less.

4.5.1. *Safe and adequate housing*

The respondents identified provision of adequate housing in safe environments for the refugees as a mark of respect demonstrated by the United States for these educated people who until recently had all the things that middle class American enjoy. “That (safe and adequate housing) will help the incoming refugees to become good, future citizens of our nation. To provide any less conveys a negative impression that Americans only do what they absolutely have to do. Iraqis give the best to (their) guests (the US and NATO allies), including our lives and the safety and security of our children, yet here we are insulted by substandard living conditions”.

4.5.2. *Continued financial aid*

Financial aid was identified as a necessity by the respondents especially for incoming refugees. “These people arrive here penniless, having depleted their savings for the necessities of life during the long waiting period spent in another foreign country”, one respondent said. This is in the context that currently refugees are in debt almost as soon as they arrive. “While they are trying to learn a new language, new sets of laws and culture, the minds of these people need to be free of worries about how to pay bills, including utilities and medical needs”, shared one participant. Health related expenses was seen as an important concern because while waiting for permission to come the United States, refugees often live in conditions that lead to many health problems that do not always take precedence in the midst of more pressing matters and lack of language proficiency. “Health benefits need to be extended beyond eight months, and refugees need help in knowing how to make appointments and find good doctors”, suggested one participant, referring to the current policy where financial and medical aid expires within eight months, a time frame within a refugee is expected to learn English, find a job, and be fit – financially and medically. Another respondent suggested “financial aid to be continued for a longer time until they (refugees) can attain citizenship, unless they are assisted with finding a suitable job. They should not be penalized for finding part-time or low-paying jobs by cutting off aid”. This respondent offers the context that in Iraq, one parent is able to support a large family with the many supports that the government provides along with the lack of taxes.

4.5.3. *English as a second language program*

The need for an efficient and effective English program taught by a teacher trained in English as a Second Language has to be the main focus for the refugees for at least their first year in the United States, so that they can take care of themselves as newly inducted American citizens. “They (the refugees) need to understand their rights, the laws in the United States that governs them, and the programs that are available to them, and where to turn if they need help”, offered one respondent. Another suggestion was that of helping those learning English for the first time with simple teaching aids such as tape recorders so that “English lessons can continue the classroom”. This is especially true “when bus passes run out, they cannot afford transportation to English classes, so they have to quit”, said one respondent in underlining the fact that the “English language is the key to happiness in the United States.”

4.6. *Role of resettlement agencies*

A major concern that the respondents shared referred to the need for developing reciprocal trust between the agencies and the incoming refugees. As one respondent suggested, “a good beginning would be to welcome the refugees into this country, maybe with a welcome wagon”. “Like offering a plate of cookies from a neighbor extending a hand of friendship saying welcome to the neighborhood, rather than what we experienced at the agencies”, stated another. One participant reiterated the experience with “resettlement agencies make us feel like we were brought here and dumped here.” Another respondent mused about the role of resettlement agencies in helping make the initial transition smoother for individuals coming in as refugees from Iraq. He surmised “these newcomers (refugees from Iraq) came from an environment where education was free, medical health care was free, and one person’s work would be able to support the whole family, and they have large families and socialize with their extended families as well. What the personnel of the agencies must keep in minds is that whatever we feed these refugees’ minds will affect the future of the United States and its policies when these

individuals become citizens and are able to vote and make laws. If we treat them with dignity, we are treating the future of this country with dignity”.

5. Discussion

Our main study goal was to assess acculturative stress among Iraqi refugees in this sample and explore factors contributing to the same using multiple methodologies. The quantitative findings were predominantly in the direction as hypothesized and identified high levels of acculturative stress within this sample of Iraqi refugees. This group consisted of many professionally qualified individuals who also represented a group experiencing high levels of acculturative stress. The study finding that respondents with Christian religious affiliation experienced less acculturative stress is implicit given the context that most of the Iraqi refugees left their homeland and came to the United States due to religious persecution in their own country. Beyond the Christian religious affiliation merging with that of the predominant religious atmosphere in the United States, results also indicated freedom to pursue one's religion contributed to lower acculturative stress.

The in-depth interviews show that while the refugees are working and supporting their families, the jobs they have are affecting their emotional well-being. The respondents express their deep concern for the need for justice in at least transferring their skills. An individualized resettlement process would be meaningful where Iraqi personnel coming in with technical skills can be certified and licensed in their field of expertise, so that they can work in the United States in similar areas. Failing to match the refugees' skills with satisfying employment is not only damage their self-image and result in an unhappy personality in an already traumatized refugee.

This study was novel in terms of its timing and importance given the declaration of the end of war which is projected to create a surge of refugees coming to the United States. To the best of our knowledge, no systematic assessment of acculturative stress has been undertaken elsewhere with Iraqi refugees in the United States. This survey was presented in Arabic, the native language of the refugees, and was conducted by a person (the first author) who is of Iraqi origin and a survivor of the war. This enriched this study tremendously by being culturally relevant, and sensitive to the kind of questions that were presented to the participants.

Limitations of the study include conducting the survey in one place in Detroit due to feasibility factors. Additionally, almost 70% of the respondents were Christians since the communities were identified through a Christian religious congregation. This limits variability in religious affiliation beyond two major groups and does not include other religious factions found in Iraq. The small number of participants who were willing to participate in the in-depth interviews is another limitation. All in-depth interviews were conducted in St. Louis at an agency that provides services such as housing, meeting at the airport, taking people shopping. This was different than Detroit where refugees were sponsored by families where the families provided much of the wrap around services akin to what the agency in St. Louis did. Given the strong effect of satisfaction with social life on acculturative stress, the agency supported refugee assistance may not be applicable to the experiences of this supported by family.

The implications for social work policy, practice and research include further explorations to develop interventions to address acculturative stress among Iraqi refugee population and to find context specific solutions to their refugee status. The United Nation's Refugee Agency (UNHCR) report more than two million displaced Iraqis since 2003 (Clarke, 2008). The Iraqi refugees are a growing population in the United States who, for reasons to be explored in the future, warrant this nation's best and brightest efforts toward their acculturative stress reduction. The current crisis in Syria affects Iraqi refugees directly as Jordan has been the intermediate refuge till Iraqi refugees can come to the United States (UNHCR, 2012). In contrast, the response of the United States Refugee Admission Program (USRAP) to expedite processing of refugee admissions has been less than efficient. In 2007, the U.S. admitted only 1608 Iraqi refugees, and in the following year 13,822. In the first eight months of 2009, the U.S. resettled 16,965 (US Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2011). This delay also raises questions pertaining to whether the USRAP really provide the refugees with the long-term self-sufficiency and integration that is one of its purposes and certainly the goal of the Iraqi refugees. Our interview data affirmed this one of these interviewed stated, “Language is the key to happiness in the United States” as the most annoying and frustrating issue for these individuals where the new environment and the behavioral and cultural differences experienced due to significant language barriers.

Many refugees from war zones have been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Depression and are at further risk for physical and mental health issues (Lie, 2002). It is not known if acculturative stress would be lessened if the refugees had less mental health issues when they arrived. Current health screenings do not include mental health assessments (Ramos et al., 2010). Strengthening families by accepting the refugee's entire family unit to the United States and allowing them to remain together throughout their travels would be beneficial in minimizing acculturative stress. Accepting the refugee person's definition of family that includes extended family members will go a long way in achieving cultural competence. Having a social network of family and community is important to the health and wellbeing of this strong, yet fragile, population.

Most importantly, further research is needed to give voice to Iraqi refugees' own declaration of what would be most helpful to them when they arrive in a new culture. Human service professionals can be a source of support for refugees through cultural competence, sufficient empirical research and sensitive and effective policy. The combination of these efforts can help ease some of the stresses of people who have been forced to leave their country and begin a new life in an unfamiliar place. As the world witnesses ethnic clashes, civil wars, coups and unrest especially in the Middle East, it is important to understand the impact of such unrest on the communities directly affected by them. For some of the displaced

residents, refugee resettlement programs are the only hope for survival in the time of unknown futures. In conclusion, in this paper we share our lessons learned from a small group of Iraqi refugees in Detroit, MI and St. Louis, MO. The practice, policy and research implications can go beyond to allow for broader evaluation of refugee resettlement services and help improve service delivery.

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