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## Transition in Occupations of Refugees During Resettlement

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# **Transition in Occupations of Refugees During Resettlement**

By

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A culminating Capstone project report submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Occupational Therapy.

Dominican University of California

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## Abstract

**Title:** Transition in Occupations of Refugees During Resettlement

**Purpose:** In 2016, there were 22.5 million refugees worldwide (UNHCR, 2017). California resettled just over 5,000 of those 85,000 (Igielnik & Krogstad, 2017). Limited research has been conducted in the United States (U.S.) focusing on the refugee experience; furthermore, there is a significant gap in research regarding the impact of the refugee experience on the occupations of refugees as they transition to living in the U.S. Smith (2012) explored the adaptation of cultural weaving among Karen refugees to maintain their previous occupations and the impact of daily weaving on their lives within Western culture; however, the study focused only on work occupations. This study sought to capture the experience of refugees and the impact of their transition on a broad array of occupations. Adding to occupational science literature regarding the occupational impact of the refugee experience, as well as aiding in addressing issues of occupational justice (Townsend, & Wilcock, 2004).

**Methods:** This research was a qualitative-descriptive, phenomenological study. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Questions were guided by Person-Environment-Occupation model (Law, et al., 1996) and Transitions Theory (Blair, 2000), to address personal and cultural values, environments where occupations are performed, and occupational patterns to identify changes in meaningful occupations due to the refugee process. Participants have legal status as refugees, have been in the U.S. between one and five years, resettled in Northern California, are at least 18 years old and were not required to speak English. As this study aimed to capture a broad experience of transition and limit confounding factors influencing how the participant responded to changes in occupations, participants could be of any ethnicity, country of origin, or gender. Two participants were recruited through snowball sampling. Interviews

were audio taped and transcribed. Interviews were coded using Thematic Analysis to generate common themes across cases (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Rigor was strengthened through member checks and peer review.

**Findings:** Through analysis of the interviews, the researchers found five major themes: contextual barriers, internal factors, adaptation, belonging, and transition. The first four themes form a loop and influence each other both positively and negatively and, ultimately, affect engagement in occupations. Transition is the theme that envelops and influences the whole. Using these five themes, the researchers developed the Transition-related Effects on Refugee Occupations (TERO) Model. Key findings include that refugees may experience more meaning and role change/loss in their occupations, rather than adoption of new occupations. Additionally, the researchers found social network to be important for positive occupational engagement throughout country transition.

**Implications:** As occupational therapists, the tendency towards working with refugee populations may be to focus on their transitions to new occupations. However, data from this study indicates that it may be more pertinent to address role and meaning change/loss in current occupations.

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Kimberley: *“With deepest gratitude, I would like to acknowledge my family and friends for their emotional and moral support, as well as their unwavering believe in my abilities. Thank you to my husband, Tim, children, Emily, Maddie & Nick and my friends, Liz and Sophia”.*

Jacqueline: *“To those of you who may use this research in your work with refugees, thank you! Additionally, I would like to thank our participants for giving us their time and sharing their stories, and my family, friends, and capstone team for their love and support”.*

Adam: *“I would like to thank my wife and family for their love and support”.*

Jennifer: *“This research would not have been possible without the time and generosity of our two participants. Additionally, I would like to thank my husband, Anson, and my family and friends for their love and support throughout this 18-month project”.*

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## Introduction

In the last century, the United States (U.S.) has experienced periodic influxes of refugees and displaced persons from a variety of countries. It is estimated that during the 1930s over 196,000 refugees escaping Nazi Germany entered the United States. Over subsequent years, refugees came to the U.S. from Hungary in 1956, from Cuba in the late 1950s, and from Vietnam in the 1970s during the Vietnam War (Stein, 1979). Since then, refugees have entered the U.S. from all over the globe, including from Kenya, Kosovo, Somalia, Sudan, and Iraq, with the greatest influx currently from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Syria, and Myanmar (a.k.a. Burma) (Igielnik & Krogstad, 2017).

Persons fleeing from persecution—refugees—have had legal status with the United Nations since 1951 (UNHCR, 2017). Since then, groups from across the globe have been granted the legal status of refugees. Whether they are internally displaced in camps, or externally displaced and granted entrance to a host country, these groups face many challenges, including the challenges of maintaining current cultural and meaningful occupations, adapting their occupations, and transitioning to new occupations. Refugees often have difficulty leaving old occupations and replacing them with new ones, as will be discussed in the literature review. Additionally, refugees often have difficulty accessing meaningful occupations at various stages in their transition, as will be discussed in later sections, leading to issues of occupational justice. Despite the constant flow of refugees over the last 90 years, and the unique occupational challenges they represent, little research has been done to better understand the occupational needs of these groups. Previous studies that focused broadly on the occupations of refugees have been limited by context, while other studies have jumped into a very narrow focus—discussing

employment or productive occupations (Mirza et al., 2012; Smith, Stephenson, & Gibson-Satterthwaite, 2013b; Stein, 1979), for example—without a broader context.

Limited research has been conducted in the U.S. focusing on the refugee experience; furthermore, there is a significant gap in research regarding the impact of the refugee experience on the occupations of refugees as they transition to living in the United States.

## Background and Literature Review

### Operational Definitions

In order to continue discussion about this complex subject, it is necessary to have some definitions available. In the research for this literature review, it became necessary to include refugee OR internally displaced OR asylum seeker OR forced migrant due to the lack of available information on refugees. However, to get a better understanding of the experiences of refugees, the authors decided to limit the scope of their research to only refugees. The term refugee is a legal status and is defined as: “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence” and is likely unable to return home due to safety concerns (UNHCR, 2017).

As defined by Townsend and Wilcock the word occupation simply means “various aspects of daily life” (2004). In occupational therapy (OT), the focus is on identifying those occupations—all the things people want, need, or have to do—that are important to the client and helping the client to fully participate in those occupations or activities of daily living (AOTA, 2014). Occupational injustice occurs when a person(s) cannot participate in their occupations. As described by Townsend and Wilcock (2004), there are five classifications of occupational injustice; deprivation where occupation is not available, imbalance where the person is experiencing too much or not enough of their occupations, marginalization where their occupations are considered unimportant, apartheid where participation in occupations is decided by very discriminant lines, and alienation where a person is unable to participate in occupation for some reason (2004). While all of the aforementioned forms of occupational injustice are important, occupational deprivation is a type of injustice that comes up most often in the literature. Occupational deprivation is defined as prolonged restriction from participation in

meaningful occupations due to circumstances outside an individual's control, such as geographical isolation or social exclusion (Whiteford, 2003).

According to Blair, “throughout the life span[*sic*], many transitions are experienced which require adjustment and adaptation in terms of role changes, balance of valued occupation and occupational performance. Transitional changes also have significant effects upon self-esteem and self-concept” (2000, p. 231). Resettlement refers to the process of admitting refugees from an asylum country to a country that has granted them permanent settlement (UNHCR, 2017). Roles are the identity within a social, familial, or employment context that people assume which are reinforced by certain activities or skills (McElroy, Muyinda, Atim, Spittal, & Backman, 2002).

## **Background**

Between 2012 and 2016 the number of refugees resettled to the U.S. increased from 58,238 to 85,000 (HHS, 2016). In 2016, the largest groups of refugees came from the Democratic Republic of Congo, followed by Syria and Burma (Igielnik & Krogstad, 2017). Large groups resettled from 2012-2016 have also included refugees from Iraq and Bhutan (HHS, 2016). Because of the upward trend of refugees admitted each year in the last five years, it becomes more important to create programs and services that focus on the needs and wants of refugees through occupations and purposeful activity. Health care providers, and specifically occupational therapists (OTs) may want to consider being culturally sensitive to the specific cultural groups that enter the U.S. each year when conducting assessments, providing treatment and developing intervention plans.

In 2015, California resettled 5,718 refugees, down from 6,108 the previous year (HHS, 2017). The largest groups of people resettled in the last few years have included refugees from



Iran, Iraq, Ukraine, Burma, Somalia, Afghanistan, and the DRC (HHS, 2017). Refugee arrivals in California have declined in recent years, but the number of Iranian and Iraqi refugees continues to remain high. Therefore, California resettlement agencies, as well as care providers such as OTs, must adjust to the specific needs of refugees.

### **Refugee Experience of Employment**

Employment is necessary to refugees for integration into society. The benefits of employment are acquiring contacts such as coworkers, learning language and group norms, and earning income for social and cultural activities (Stein, 1979). Employment addresses refugee needs for self-esteem, language acquisition, and socialization (Trimboli & Taylor, 2016). Researchers from Stein, 1970 state that getting a job within three-to-four years of immigration prevented refugees from giving up on integrating into society.

Refugees face barriers to employment, and occupational change when they resettle. Some refugees' previous jobs earned steady income in their home country, but earned low wages in the United States. A harvester discovered that manual labor did not earn a living in the U.S. (Huot, Kelly, & Park, 2016). Other refugees transitioned from white-collar jobs to blue-collar jobs when their skills or credentials are not transferable (Huot et al, 2016). Some women cared for the family within the home in their old country but entered the workforce in their new country, which changes gender roles (Huot et al, 2016). In addition to studies regarding occupational barriers to employment, study authors have explored how integrating specific cultural activities can ease a transition in occupation.

One such study examined weaving among Karen refugees. The Karen people, who originated from Burma, have been subjected to an ethnic cleansing campaign. They may flee from violence into Thailand, or internal displacement camps within Burma (Smith, Stephenson,

& Gibson-Satterthwaite, 2013b). Recently, Karen refugees are being resettled into Western countries. A study found that encouraging Karen women to continue a familiar activity, weaving, helped facilitate the drastic transition to western culture. Occupational therapists facilitated the Karen women's weaving in the U.S. by teaching business skills, money management, and connecting them with opportunities to sell their products (Smith et al., 2013b). Reviving traditional activities is very important for refugees whose cultures have been nearly eradicated by ethnic cleansing, such as the Karen women (Smith et al., 2013b). The Karen women benefited from continuity of activities between their old and new country, similarly other refugees found success in resettling by continuing previous activities in a new context (Werge-Olsen & Vik, 2012). According to Smith et al., occupational therapists are "well-suited" to facilitating employment for refugees by incorporating prior occupations as an essential element of interventions (2013b).

Werge-Olsen and Vik explain that continuing activities are connected to a smoother transition and to creating a sense of "community" (2012). One example was a woman named Shah who lived with her husband and six children in Afghanistan. Her daily activities were childcare, tailoring, and cooking, and she was relegated to working in her home due to the Shia Muslim government. After Shah and her family resettled in Norway, she went to school, worked in the school cafeteria, cared for her disabled husband and children, and performed domestic duties. Shah transferred her domestic skills from the cultural context of Afghanistan to Norway. In terms of employment, she shifted her previous dishwashing skills to work in the cafeteria as a dishwasher. The activity of dishwashing became much more meaningful to Shah as it allowed her to experience a sense of community with people at the school and to be employed outside the home. Occupational therapists can help refugees transition to a new environment by focusing

therapy on their daily activities that have transferable value in their resettlement location (Werge-Olsen & Vik, 2012).

### **Social Occupations Throughout Transition**

While some research focuses on the personal experiences of refugees, this research by Smith (2013a) studied the impact of the resettlement transition on the social network of a group, the Somali Bantu. In recognition of the existence of a strong social network and value placed upon social capital by the Somali Bantu in their native environment, researchers focused their investigation on whether the Somali Bantu were able to preserve their social capital as they transitioned across settings, eventually arriving in the United States. Using constructivist grounded theory methods and a qualitative study format, the researchers found that some social supports were maintained but others were impacted negatively by the transition to a new culture. Specifically, a small number of refugees were able to navigate the new environment and became conduits for their less adept counterparts. The geographical separation of the refugees put many of them at a disadvantage and significantly disrupted the continuity of their social support systems. Because not much research has encompassed the group experiences in addition to personal experiences, it is necessary for future research to collect broad, multifaceted information to truly understand refugee experience.

### **Occupational Justice Challenges for Refugees**

Throughout the research, themes relating to occupational justice have come up consistently. These issues are important because occupational justice and balance both relate strongly to a person's sense of self, identity, purpose, how self-efficacious they can be, and more. All of these things are important for a person who is a refugee to thrive in a new country, thus research, ideally, should capture justice themes through their experiences.

McElroy et al. (2012) is an example of research targeted at occupational justice concerns. The researchers conducted a qualitative study involving 249 agriculturists in a refugee camp in Northern Uganda. The authors discussed occupational adaptation, change, and deprivation in addition to other health themes. The findings suggest different experiences based on gender and age. For example, they found that women experienced more adaptation than deprivation because they maintained their role of caretaker to the family regardless of external situations; whereas men, as traditional providers for the family, experienced more deprivation due to being unable to grow and hunt food and other resources for their families. McElroy et al. (2012) highlight the contextual factors affecting engagement in occupation.

Huot et al. (2016) conducted a critical appraisal of literature published between 2003 and 2014 focused on the experiences of refugees through the lens of occupation. This review highlights the occupational deprivation that refugees encounter both during encampment while awaiting resettlement and afterwards due to limitations within the host country. Deprivation then leads into occupational imbalance, most commonly, not being able to work which makes the refugees continuously reliant on social aid and further limits occupational engagement. The review also discusses transition, identity, adaptation, and future as themes. Suggestions for future research include broadening the research aim, better integration of previous data with new data, and including more people with more specific methods of grouping and understanding data.

In contrast to the previous study, Morville, Erlandsson, Danneskiold-Samsøe, Amris, and Eklund (2015) explored specifically how asylum seekers in Denmark experience occupational deprivation. The study was mixed methods; using qualitative and quantitative data and the design was longitudinal and correlational. There were 17 participants. The study focused on occupation using a satisfaction with daily occupations questionnaire, and found low satisfaction with daily

occupations due to restriction, as well as unfamiliarity with new occupations throughout ten-month stays in an asylum center. The authors highlight a need for research specific to asylum seekers and their experiences because they have different problems and longer periods of unknown than other refugee groups.

A different approach to researching refugees and occupations was taken by Trimboli and Taylor (2016) who focus on OT services. This includes the current intervention approaches in OT, such as art, education, and health promotion. The aim is to encourage more evidence regarding occupation and refugees to better understand needs and improve existing services. Additionally, this article proposes further research to establish evidence based need for OTs to address this population and advocates for growth of the profession.

An alternative tactic to understanding refugees and their experiences while also helping them adjust was taken in the following study. The Akinsulure-Smith (2012) study more closely resembles a clinical project in which observations throughout the project were the main sources of information. This project focused on the psychological well-being of the group participants, but is strongly tied to occupation. The groups included displaced African men and focused on helping them rebuild community ties and enrich their sense of identity. This study used an occupation based approach (social group of peers) to address experiences and needs, and was very successful based on measures used.

Occupational justice, while not extensively studied contextually, is one of the most serious problems for refugees during and after resettlement. More research is necessary to understand which issues cause problems with occupations, and the best methods to address those issues.

## **Experiences of Trauma**

The classification of refugee requires that the individual be forced to flee their home to escape persecution, or various types of violence or conflict. Therefore, refugees are likely to have experienced physical, mental, or emotional trauma. Many may have experienced multiple types of trauma. Through a series of focus groups, Shannon, Wieling, Simmelink McCleary, and Becher (2015) explored the mental health of several refugee groups newly arrived to the United States. They found that, while the cultural expressions of trauma were different, all of the groups that participated expressed symptoms poor mental health, including for conditions such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Depression. They also noted that the expression of psychological distress was different across the cultural groups. Additionally, research by Shin and Lee (2015) found signs of PTSD and other psychological distress in female refugees from North Korea, and noted that the process of escape and resettlement may contribute to psychological stress amongst refugees.

It is not enough for refugees to simply survive the trauma they have escaped from, it is necessary to understand how problems with occupation occur, why, and how to enable them so that refugees can move past being a refugee, and into a more meaningful existence.

## **Limitations of Previous Research**

Several literature reviews have been conducted on recent studies regarding the occupations of refugees. The limited number and context of studies and articles from an occupational perspective was noted as a limitation by Bennett, Scornaiencki, Brzozowski, Denis and Magalhaes (2012). Huot et al, 2016, also noted that few articles were available for review in order to extract themes and present gaps in research. Or, rather, gaps in research were too numerous to discuss in a meaningful way given how few articles were available.

## Statement of Purpose

In order to provide a foundation for further research from an occupational perspective, the researchers aim is to conduct a qualitative research study. The study will seek to facilitate understanding of the occupations of refugees before, during, and after their transition and resettlement in the U.S., and how their transitional period affects them as occupational beings. The researchers hope to capture the broad experience of refugees, add to occupational science literature regarding the occupational impact of the refugee experience, as well as aid in addressing issues of occupational justice (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004).

Based on what the researchers have learned in reviewing the literature, there have been multiple ideas formed about expected findings. The research suggests that forced transitions negatively impact refugee occupations. The transition refugees experience may necessitate the adoption of unfamiliar occupations. Some previous cultural occupations may positively impact transition throughout resettlement. Refugees may keep some of the same occupations, but will change the manner in which they participate throughout resettlement. How a refugee navigates their occupations during transition is related to their social network throughout resettlement. Lastly, the researchers believe prior occupational engagement and performance does not necessarily positively correlate with engagement and performance once resettled. This is a problem of public policy, resettlement programs, and occupational justice. Research which seeks to understand the experiences of refugees and their occupational demands can potentially lead to an overhaul in how we, as a society, approach refugees and will add to the collective understanding of this population as occupational beings.

## Theoretical Framework

The experiences of refugees are complex and serious, requiring the use of a model which is dynamic and multifaceted. The Person-Environment-Occupation-Model (PEO) (Law, Cooper, Strong, Stewart, Rigby, & Letts, 1996) is an OT model which identifies the areas of person, environment, and occupation as separate entities. This model also identifies those concepts as a system resulting in occupational performance, which is defined by Law et al., as “the dynamic experience of a person engaged in purposeful activities and tasks within an environment” (1996, p. 16). This approach also enables us to pull out themes of context where they may be lost or overemphasized in other models. For example, much of the literature regarding refugees has focused on employment. This aspect, while important, is only one piece of a person’s occupational profile, and it affects and is affected by many other contextual factors. Experiences are so unique and belong to everyone in different ways; because of this, research must not attempt to fit their experiences into a box of preset categories.

The PEO model (Law, Cooper, Strong, Stewart, Rigby, & Letts, 1996) assumes that occupational performance is like a transaction between the person, environment and occupation. This means they continue to affect each other, bringing the relationship either closer or farther away over time. Due to the separation of factors, it enables the examination of experience as it occurs in different areas. For example, how one’s experiences affect their roles, work, or social occupations may be vastly different. Examination of those areas individually, as well as together, can improve the quality of information obtained and improve intervention planning for various professional domains, including OT. The information gleaned from this research may help improve the experiences of refugees once they have resettled in the U.S., as well as leaving OTs with a better understanding of how to work with refugees.



To further guide and shape our research, this study will be utilizing transition theory viewed through the lens of occupations. Transition theory will allow the researchers to focus on occupations and occupational behavior during a transition period, such as refugee resettlement, and help the researchers to better understand transitions in occupations (Blair, 2000). Refugees may be prevented from fully engaging in their transition to a new life as they are deprived of the time and tools needed to adapt to the occupational disruption that becoming a refugee can cause. Blair hypothesized that an incomplete or absent occupational adaptation causes stress that impacts virtually every aspect of occupation. According to Blair, “A discontinuity requires alteration to routine, habit and the taken-for-granted configuration of occupations. It requires personal awareness and recognition of the event and new responses to deal with the results of the discontinuity.” (2000, p.232). Because refugees may not have the opportunity to go through the process of grief, it is unlikely that they experience protracted denial. This is of interest because it could impact how they react and adapt to transition. While there is not currently a transition theory from an occupational perspective, literature reviews have shown that there is a strong body of research and knowledge supporting transition theory applied to occupations (Crider, Calder, Bunting, & Forwell, 2015).

## **Methodology**

### **Research Methods**

In order to effectively understand the occupations of refugees and the effect of the transition on their occupations, it is important to gain insight into their lived experiences. This research study is qualitative, descriptive, and phenomenological. It is meant to gather in-depth information about the experience of being a refugee, and how the phenomenon of being a refugee impacts their occupational engagement. The researchers used the PEO model (Law et al., 1996) to guide the development of questions for a semi-structured interview (see Appendix B). Interviews were about one hour in length, and took place in a location of the participant's choice.

### **Participants and Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria**

Participants were required to be age 18 or older, and have the United Nations protected status of refugee (not asylee, forced migrant, or other title). The inclusion criteria of official refugee status was determined by the confounding factors associated with the legal processes, type and length of relocation and transition, as well as status in country of transition (U.S.) of each title—refugee, asylee, forced migrant, and/or internally displaced person. Participants were willing to be interviewed and recorded for transcription and coding purposes. The participants had resettled to Northern California within the past five years, but had not lived in the U.S. for less than a year. Participants were not required to speak English. A confidential translation service was available to the researchers if needed.

Table 1 Participant Demographics

	Pseudonym*	Age	Sex	Country of Origin	Ethnicity	Years in U.S.
Interview 1	Jawid	25-30	M	Afghanistan	Afghan	2
Interview 2	Javad	20-25	M	Iran	Afghan	1

\*Participants chose their own pseudonym

## Recruitment

This research study was reviewed and approved by Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the use of human subjects and is IRB #10648. The researchers used snowball sampling technique through word of mouth to recruit participants. Snowball sampling was chosen to enable the team to gather more participants through specific gatekeepers in the community. Gatekeepers are people who are known to the larger community of refugees and have an intimate understanding of the refugee experience. This type of approach was necessary because large organizations in the U.S. that aid refugees—International Rescue Committee, Catholic Charities, etc.—do not generally partner with researchers due to privacy concerns for this vulnerable group. Additionally, refugees are not frequently tracked post-resettlement by these organizations. Participant recruitment and interviews progressed until August of 2018. Unfortunately, researchers were only able to recruit two participants. Participants were both recruited as a result of researcher attendance at a nonprofit fundraising event for 1951 Coffee Company in the San Francisco Bay Area. The company trains and employs recently arrived refugees.

## Data Collection

Data was collected by the use of audio recorder, with written field notes as necessary. Data was transcribed verbatim.

## **Analysis of data**

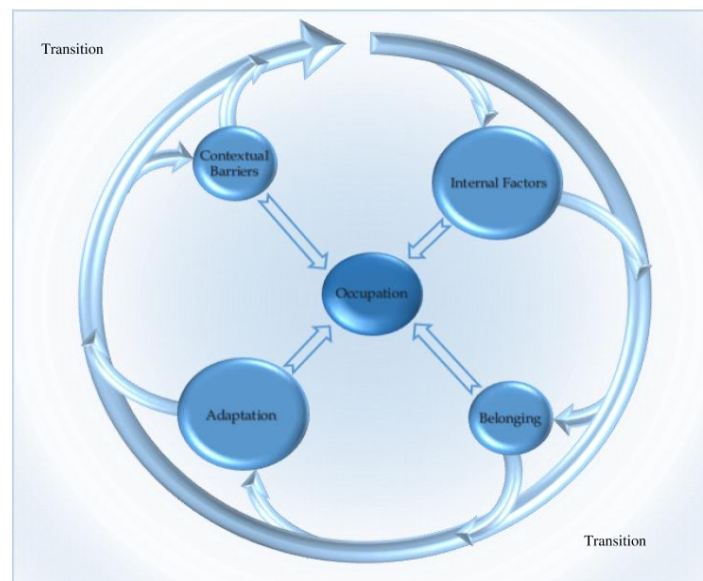
The researchers utilized Dedoose software to organize and code the interview transcripts. The process of initial coding and final coding was based on a consensus of the team of researchers. Operational definitions of codes were used to ensure accurate coding. The researchers used Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyze the data and apply themes and codes to the transcripts. Thematic Analysis is an inductive method of developing codes and themes. Inductive reasoning is more appropriate than deductive reasoning in this instance because the interviews seek to understand human experience, and the participants were not part of the hypothesis process. The authors will have better information from the interviews with the participants than by proving or disproving hypotheses. This method facilitated the organization of the results of the study and minimized bias. An additional strategy to minimize bias included team meetings with the faculty advisor to discuss the themes and codes for clarity. Similarly, chosen themes were critically examined. After initial coding, member checks were used for additional rigor.

## Findings

During the review of the current literature, the researchers developed several thoughts on expected findings from the interviews: 1) Forced transitions negatively impact refugee occupations 2) The transition refugees experience may necessitate the adoption of unfamiliar occupations 3) Some previous cultural occupations may positively impact transition throughout resettlement 4) Refugees may keep some of the same occupations, but will change the manner in which they participate throughout resettlement 5) How a refugee navigates their occupations during transition is related to their social network throughout resettlement 6) Lastly, prior occupational engagement and performance does not necessarily positively correlate with engagement and performance once resettled.

Through analysis of the interviews, the researchers found five major themes: Internal Factors, Contextual Barriers, Belonging, Adaptation, and Transition. A model of these findings was developed in order to illustrate key themes as well as their relationship within the research. This is the Model of Transition-related Effects on Refugee Occupations (TERO Model).

Figure 1. Model of Transition-related Effects on Refugee Occupations - (TERO Model)



## **Internal Factors**

The theme of internal factors was found to be prevalent in the participant interviews. The researchers define internal factors as internal thoughts, feelings, or insights; such as perspective, identity, perseverance, and other specific interpretations of experience. These internal factors may allow for adaptation, or be the result of achieving occupational adaptation. A sense of community belonging may be found through internal factors, or may influence internal factors, such as perspective. Similarly, contextual barriers may influence internal factors, such as perspective. Internal factors may affect the individual's ability to adapt to contextual barriers.

### **Perspective**

Perspective was found to be a subtheme within internal factors. Both participants demonstrated through their interviews that their specific perspective about events was important to their transition, and continues to play a role in how they interact with and experience their new environment. For example, Javad described personal changes during his country transition:

I can say I understand life more than before because I left my family when I was 18. It is super different now. I learned a lot of things that changed myself. I changed a lot. I understand I have responsibility for life. I need to have plans for the future. Because in Iran, I remember immigrant people have difficult life. They are living for the future because it is so difficult. (Javad, personal communication, May 25, 2018)

Jawid demonstrated an interesting perspective while describing the experience of losing his wallet—which contained his green card—in a robbery:

So uh yes, uh about the robbing [laughs] when I went uh, he said, “let's go out”, it was 7 in the evening, so we went out and a few blocks away from the house, a guy came from in front of us and he had a gun and he took all of our money. And uh second time it

happened, it was two months ago, I think-yes. I wanted to go to the job that I have in the San Francisco, it starts at from eight in the evening until the morning at the weekends so around seven I got out of the house, I had my bag and so I got a few blocks away near the BART a guy just ran from behind me, and when I turn around I saw he had a gun and he took my bag and my wallet. And my wallet also had all of my credit cards, my my green card, social security card, everything. So he took everything and he went uh in a car and after that, but uh fortunately maybe he throw away my wallet somewhere uh after 1 week I receive my wallet in a parcel UPS parcel so that was fortunate uh otherwise I didn't have anything. No green card. I called IRC to see if I can have, I lost my green card, they say it would take a least one year to get a new green card. (Jawid, personal communication, March 31, 2018)

Specifically, the laugh during the beginning of the story demonstrates his perspective on the event. The wallet was later returned, and Jawid demonstrated a positive perspective and subsequent outlook on the experience:

Fortunately someone has found my wallet, or the person who take it-took it from me maybe he saw that I am an immigrant and there was not a lot of money in my wallet too so maybe he sent it back. Or something.

Additionally, when asked about personal changes since relocating to the U.S., Jawid shared a specific outlook and perspective regarding employment that was beneath his skill level:

The most important difference is the job. When I was in Afghanistan I work as a medical doctor, here I work, I . . . my first job was working in, on an assembly line in Tesla factory after that I, uh I found a job as a barista [laughs] in a coffee shop. Then I got another job as a security [guard], I, I used to work as a security and right now I also work

as a security but it's better than the other job, it was a construction site and um I used to watch it. (Jawid, personal communication, March 31, 2018)

### **Identity**

The way in which a person views themselves in relation to their roles, spirituality and values, and environment and context forms their sense of personal identity. A person's sense of identity may influence other internal factors, such as perseverance. Additionally, identity may positively influence a person's ability to overcome barriers and adapt. Identity and sense of belonging in a community or environment—which will be discussed further later—are also related.

In both interviews, participants expressed their sense of identity and/or changed identity in relation to various occupations. This is particularly evident through the use of statements such as “I am”, “my job”, or other I statements. For example, Javad discussed his role of supporting his family who remain in Iran:

My job is to help the family. . . . In our culture we are like if you are 18 years, you are suppose to take care of them. My father passed away 3 years ago so I have more responsibility then.” (Javad, personal communication, May 25, 2018)

Additionally, he discussed his experience of religious practice in the U.S., and how that relates to his identity as a Shia Muslim, “. . . Islam has like different branch, have you heard about that? Like Shia, the Sunnis. We are Shia so we are always like against with Sunni, they say we are not right. . . .” He goes onto say that the mosques in the local areas tend to be Sunni. When asked about praying at home, Javad said:

Yeah, here praying at home yeah. Also there are some places, big events, big festivals for Shia people. We are going to the mosque, we are just Shia people gathering together and



celebrate those days.... So for example now it is Ramadan month, So the last day of Ramadan is a big day. So we celebrate the last day of Ramadan. We are opening our fasting so we can go back to our regular day.

### **Perseverance**

Evidence of perseverance, or the drive to attain a goal in spite of barriers, was present in both interviews. Perseverance allows a person to successfully adapt to a new environment, overcome barriers, and achieve self-actualization. In the first interview, Jawid briefly discussed his journey to obtaining a driver's license in the U.S., "Yeah, in Afghanistan I used to drive. Here I used the bus. BART" (Jawid, personal communication, March 31, 2018). When asked about driving in the future, he said, "Yeah, actually I have a driving license. It was very difficult. I failed a lot". Jawid failed multiple times in his journey to obtaining a driver's license, but still persevered through in order to reach his goal. While obtaining a driver's license in a new country may not seem like a significant accomplishment, the ability to drive legally allows for improved community access and marketability for future employment.

Similarly, Javad explored his experience encountering and learning new languages throughout his transition, first in Indonesia and then in the U.S.:

...Oh yeah, when I first got to Indonesia I was like, I was listening to this, like what is this language, super different, I've never heard this language. So it was really difficult for me over there, yeah. And then, I had [inaudible] travel and I couldn't speak English well over there also and then yeah I had a lot of difficulties with language too. To talk to the people, to be doing my process papers, I was by myself so it was pretty much difficult, yeah. . . . And then yeah when I got here also for English it was really difficult for me also. When I was doing my process like my papers and all that kind of stuff so I needed

to go by myself and that was very difficult but now I pretty much get used to the process and whatever I can do is what I do. (Javad, personal communication, May 25, 2018)

Perseverance is required in order to learn a new language, and he learned two new languages (Indonesian and English) during his transition to the United States.

### **Contextual Barriers**

Barriers, or cultural, personal, and social situations that have a negative influence on successful participation in occupations, were identified as a common theme among the participants. These barriers are created by refugees' transition from their home country to their resettled country. Contextual barriers have influence on and are influenced by a refugee's internal factors, sense of belonging and occupational adaptation to his or her new environment. In turn, each of these barriers has a direct influence on the engagement of meaningful occupations.

### **Education**

The personal context of an insufficient education for the country of resettlement created barriers for both participants. For Jawid, the personal contextual barrier of lacking the educational and training requirements to become a doctor in the U.S.—despite his education to be a doctor in Afghanistan—was challenging. As he stated, “the most important difference [since coming to the U.S.] is the job. When I was in Afghanistan, I work as a medical doctor; here my first job was working on an assembly line in the Tesla factory. . . .” (Jawid, personal communication, March 31, 2018). This contextual barrier impeded his ability to resume the occupations of a medical doctor and necessitated the participation of blue-collar work occupations and educational occupations. Analogous to that, Javad stated: “I am planning to go [to school] but I am not really sure because I am supporting my family. [Computers are] my

favorite but I've never been through to the end" (Javad, personal communication, May 25, 2018). His lack of formal computer education and training prevented him from participating in his ideal work occupations.

### **Language**

Both participants identified the cultural barrier of language that limited their participation in personal and social occupations. Javad shared that, "when I got [to the U.S.] it was also difficult for me in English, so like [to] process my papers and those kind of stuff. . . ." (Javad, personal communication, May 25, 2018).

The language barrier impeded his refugee resettlement process and provided challenges to adapting to his environment. For Jawid, language created a cultural barrier that limited his interactions with acquaintances and his participation in social occupations. "I needed to speak in another language and it's very difficult to connect with people in another language, you can't make jokes because the culture is so different" (Jawid, personal communication, March 31, 2018). Overall, both participants recognized these barriers as impediments to occupational participation.

### **Belonging**

Hammell (2014) defines belonging as a sense of connectedness and the participation in occupations with others, both strong aspects of overall wellbeing. For the purpose of this paper, belonging is a feeling, a sense of being a part of something, usually a community. Belonging is not objectively measurable, it is subjectively experienced, which is important in the context of this qualitative study. Belonging, or its absence, affects the other major themes of internal factors, contextual barriers, and adaptation.

Jawid talked about being placed in an apartment with another refugee from the same home country:

Yeah when I was here what, I think like two months, I went out... um when I came here they rented a place with another person he was from Afghanistan too so we lived in the same room, it was one-room studio apartment, we lived two person-same room, uh he was uh from another place of Afghanistan, so there were a lot of difference between me and him and I had a lot of difficulty with him, I didn't know him. (Jawid, personal communication, March 31, 2018)

While it might be intuitive to try to place people with similar cultural factors together to increase a sense of belonging for refugees, culture is only one aspect of belonging and may not be enough to foster belonging on its own. This example was itself a contextual barrier to daily occupations and it impacted the interviewees living context. While assigned as roommates, they did not know each other and had difficulties living together. It eventually pushed the interviewee to adapt his living situation to living with a friend somewhere else. The other refugee returned to their home country. As Jawid said:

Yeah he's a [name omitted]. I live with him, he's my friend, we used to hang out in Afghanistan a lot. He also works with the US Army and when I come here after one year he came here so now I- I live with him and I'm happy. Yeah the guy that they used to live with when my friend came here, he went to Afghanistan and so my friend was able to come. It was a very good change [laughs]. (Jawid, personal communication, March 31, 2018)

A sense of belonging may influence experiences and perceptions of barriers, and might motivate or require adaptation in order to participate in occupations in a way that is most

meaningful. A sense of belonging can also affect internal factors. Self-image can contribute to building or damaging resiliency, which plays a role in occupational engagement.

Javad discussed the change in environment as a contextual barrier to social occupations.

This change had a strong influence on his feeling of belonging:

Yeah so in Iran there's a lot of things comfortable for that all. So I've grown up over there. Everywhere, I like would be used to it, it was like a lot of memories over there. Here, I came here and it's a little bit different . . . it's a lot different for me here, when you compare-for example over there was like, it was like walking with friends, knowing people, saying hi to people you are living with, in the area that you were living. Here it's kind of uhm little bit for me, uhhh strange I can say yeah. . . . (Javad, personal communication, May 25, 2018)

While some occupations have had changes in meaning or role, there are other situations where roles and responsibilities remained. For example, when Javad was asked about work, he also mentioned his responsibility to help his family:

Yes, I am a manager here. So, this is my only job. I don't have any other jobs. . . . My job is to help the family. . . . In our culture we are like if you are 18 years, you are suppose to take care of them. My father passed away 3 years ago so I have more responsibility then". (Javad, personal communication, May 25, 2018)

Cultural roles caused him to retain familial roles, while engaging in a new and different occupation than previously. This responsibility to the family is an aspect of belonging and promotes the connection between the resettled individual and family in spite of relocation to the United States.

## Adaptation

The idea that successful adaptation to barriers prevents dysfunction, an aspect of Occupational Adaptation (OA) (Schkade & Schultz, 1992)—which will be addressed in the discussion—can be seen from Javad’s point of view. Here he discusses other refugees in transition in Indonesia:

I’m just really regret of those times. When you are there, you can for example do some online courses or things, but when you are there in that situation . . . you just cannot focus on anything. . . . I have some friends who suicide themselves because of the stress.

(Javad, personal communication, May 25, 2018)

An example of contextual barriers that require adaptation from Jawid:

Uh, yeah um. Some things that are, for example, drinking here. It’s legal. It wasn’t legal in Afghanistan. We used to drink beer, but it was all away from the police and stuff. Yes, um. Going to bars. There’s no bar in Afghanistan. . . . (Jawid, personal communication, March 31, 2018)

This is also an example of occupational adaptation to fit a new country’s contextual factors, rather than an occupation discarded due to changed barriers.

Additionally, Javad was required to learn new skills due to contextual barriers after resettlement. In this case, he was required to learn to drive, an occupation he did not have to do to get around in his home or transition country. When asked about using the bus system in the U.S., “Ahhh no. Fortunately, I got a car two weeks ago. Yeah . . . I was[sic] living in Oakland so it took me like two hours [by bus] to come to and two hours to go home. So yeah I need a car. I need a car now” (Javad, personal communication, May 25, 2018).

When asked about using the bus system before Javad said:

Indonesia they have like, the city that I was living they didn't have buses. In Jakarta, they did have. The cities are different. I lived in Jakarta and Bali, so mostly I was living in Meta, so the transportation was small cars with lots of people inside. It was a lot, also It was cheap it was ok. But here is better than Indonesia. In Iran, the facility for bus or lifting is pretty good. I can say its better than over here. A lot of like availability for buses and yeah. Here you have to wait a lot. Over there the cars keep coming.

An example of an unexpected adaptation to cultural differences is exemplified by Jawid where he discussed talking to girls in public at home versus in the U.S., “. . . In Afghanistan uh you if you go to [laughs] for example a girl, and you want to talk with her. She won't talk with you or if you do that and people see, you will be arrested by police” (Jawid, personal communication, March 31, 2018). This point was particularly powerful to the authors because both interviewers were female, and the interview took place in a public park, a situation he never would have participated in while living in Afghanistan.

In the next example, Jawid discussed previous patterns of engaging in leisure occupations:

Yeah, usually we would go to, away from the city and we will cook something. Other than that, there is not a lot of places for entertainment or stuff in Afghanistan. So the only thing we used to do, there was a snooker club. We used to go there and play snooker. Other than that, we would go to one of the houses of one of our friends and drink. No other things. No exciting things. (Jawid, personal communication, March 31, 2018)

This example shows that types of leisure occupations change based on accessibility and availability. However, participation in leisure occupations still occurs.

Jawid also had to adapt to the new requirements of becoming a doctor in the U.S., and took on a new occupation in order to facilitate this change:

If I find a job as a medical assistant I will work in a hospital and I will learn more about how, the way that medical, the way that its practiced in the United States and because uh one of the steps is um medical skills, so uh it is different here than in Afghanistan so I'll need to learn how the medical field is practiced and how in the United States so I will be more prepared for that step of the exam. (Jawid, personal communication, March 31, 2018)

The adaptation of adopting a new language was significant for participant Javad, who spoke about the need to adopt two new languages over the course of his transition to the U.S.:

Yeah! And then yeah when I got here also for English it was really difficult for me also. When I was doing my process like my papers and all that kind of stuff so I needed to go by myself and that was very difficult but now I pretty much get used to the process and whatever I can do is what I do. (Javad, personal communication, May 25, 2018)

## **Transition**

Transition and transition theory is a cornerstone of this research study design, hypotheses, as well as the findings. Transition was found to be the major theme that encompasses and influences all of the themes discussed thus far. There are several sub-themes that were appropriate to include under the umbrella of transition: experience of change, refugee and resettlement processes; and an exploration of experiences before, during, and after transition. The transition of countries itself affects the four other major themes.

### **Before Transition**



Before their transition to the U.S., both participants had two elements in common with regards to their experiences during transition versus after transition: greater engagement in social occupations and a more defined role within their respective families in their home countries.

In their home countries, both participants had a larger social network, which had an effect on their occupational engagement. As Jawid explained, “In Afghanistan, I used to hang out with my friends and because my friends are not [in the U.S.], I don’t do that anymore” (Jawid, personal communication, March 31, 2018). Javad recounted his daily routine living in Iran as he was “always with friends doing things, like playing soccer. Here [in the U.S] you barely find [people] playing soccer. . . .” (Javad, personal communication, May 25, 2018).

The second change cited by both participants was a more defined role within each of their respective families before they transitioned to the United States. For Javad, his culture clearly defined the role of a son or daughter in Iran as he described, “if you are 18 years [old], you are suppose to take care of your family” (Javad, personal communication, May 25, 2018). His role influenced his routine in the U.S., and the profile of occupations he chose to engage in once he arrived to the United States. Jawid shared about how his family role affected the environment in which he lived, “In Afghanistan, people live with their parents. So I would see them every day” (Jawid, personal communication, March 31, 2018). After he transitioned to California, he was required to share a studio apartment with a roommate he had never met from Afghanistan. He had difficulty with his new roommate, which made assuming his new roles more challenging.

### **During Transition**

There was a theme that the participant who stayed for a longer period in his transition country had a more complex experience than the first participant. For Javad, he was subject to a loss of work and educational occupations during his time in Indonesia. As he stated, “You can’t

work, you can't go to university, so it is just stressful over there" (Javad, personal communication, May 25, 2018). Another experience he had was difficulty accessing public transportation, as he described the situation in the Indonesian city that he lived in, "they didn't have buses . . . here [the U.S.] is better than Indonesia". In contrast, Jawid did not share about any of his occupational challenges during his time of transition. The authors surmise that his lack of commentary is due to the short duration of transition: an overnight stay in a Dubai airport.

### **After Transition**

Cultural differences come up frequently after a transition to a new country and society; an example of the effect on everyday occupations, such as shopping, was captured by Javad:

People walking in the street, selling food in the street. Here there is nothing. When I got here, I was with my friend and I said, there is no people in the street. It's like zombie city.... He said, why are you saying that. In Indonesia people are everywhere, there is always people walking. Yeah, a lot of people around. . . . (Javad, personal communication, May 25, 2018)

Cultural difference lead to changes in participation of spiritual occupations for Javad as well:

. . . spending time with friends and family, over there. Here there is nothing like, not many friends to spend time with. Yeah, and then, and for example . . . praying places. Praying place yeah, over there, there are a lot of mosques you can go, but here barely you can find it. Yeah, there is some but it is really far from here, yeah."

Even the process of seeking employment changed for Javad:

Over there if you know someone, for example, they can just offer you job or they have friend, they can say, here is a guy that wants to work and yeah because were immigrants, it was bit difficult. Here, when we came, there was an organization called IRC that helped

people who came to U.S., refugee people, they help them finding job, finding house.

Then, yeah, I find my job here through them. I found 1951 training class. I took training class and then yeah I found a job. [In Indonesia] we were not able to work, we did not have any permit to work over there, so we had to stay.

Some occupations were found to remain the same despite transition, such as with Jawid:

In Afghanistan I used to hang out with my friends and because my friends are not here I don't do that anymore. Other than that uh, I didn't do much things in Afghanistan that I don't do here. I uh I like computers and computer programming so I had a computer there and I have one here too so nothing I didn't do there that I do here. (Jawid, personal communication, March 31, 2018)

In the case of housing, from Jawid's perspective housing was more similar than different from his home in Afghanistan:

Um, actually, it's not much uh different from Afghanistan. It's a one room apartment and um there's a restaurant beneath our house so they have, there's a lot of um, trash [laughs] so it's the same I guess as it used to be in Afghanistan.

**Experience of Change.** For Jawid, his experience of attempting to inject humor into everyday conversation was impacted by his fluency in English. He reported that he was not as able to respond to jokes made by people in the U.S. due to lack of familiarity with the popular culture references. Although Jawid may be unable to fully participate in humor and jokes as he did before, the performance skill of humor remains. He had to adapt to the language in order to fully participate in social communication:

I needed to-to speak in another language and it's very difficult to connect with people in another language for example uh you can't make jokes [laughs] because the culture is

different so if I make a joke you will, wouldn't understand or sometimes when uh people here, for example make a joke, we don't understand why people are laughing because the culture is different the cultural references and jokes are different and also you can't easily express your feelings in another language [laughs] you need a lot of vocabulary for that uh so that's another difference. (Jawid, personal communication, March 31, 2018)

Included in the quote above is a significant problem that arose due to his country transition; it is difficult to connect to others and express emotion without linguistic fluency. By adapting to the language, that powerful contextual barrier to social interaction and belonging was mitigated.

Work as a means of providing income remains an important occupation for Jawid. However, in the U.S. he experiences a high amount of turnover and change in the type of employment and the variety of jobs for which he was qualified. While his work in Afghanistan appeared to remain consistent, in the U.S. his work became a highly variable activity. He seemed to take it all in stride, laughing at the incongruous jobs, and expressed an understanding that his previous work may not be available to him now for a variety of reasons:

The most important difference is the job. When I was in Afghanistan I work as a medical doctor, here I work, I . . . my first job was working in, on an assembly line in Tesla factory after that I, uh I found a job as a barista [laughs] in a coffee shop. Then I got another job as a security [guard], I, I used to work as a security and right now I also work as a security but it's better than the other job, it was a construction site and um I used to watch it. (Jawid, personal communication, March 31, 2018)

In the U.S., many adults do not live with their parents, and they may not even live in close proximity to their family. The opposite is true in Afghanistan, and Jawid seemed to miss that closeness to family. He said, "It's different from here, here people live separate from their

parents, yeah? In Afghanistan people live with their parents. So I would see them every day” (Jawid, personal communication, March 31, 2018).

Reflecting on the physical differences in housing, Javad talked about the relative complexity of the home environment in the U.S., as compared to a simpler, less formal situation in Afghanistan.

. . . simple things, over there we don’t use really sofa or chairs. We just have carpet and sitting on the ground, when you are eating you are just sitting on the ground eating. Here you have bed, chairs, sofas. Here we are living in apartments, over there we live in the house—we have a yard, it was big where we can grow some vegetables—so those were some different things. (Javad, personal communication, May 25, 2018)

Javad, who spent several years in Indonesia before transitioning to the U.S., expressed the necessity of learning the language of the host country as a means to facilitate the resettlement process:

Yeah! And then yeah when I got here also for English it was really difficult for me also. When I was doing my process like my papers and all that kind of stuff so I needed to go by myself and that was very difficult but now I pretty much get used to the process and whatever I can do is what I do. (Javad, personal communication, May 25, 2018)

### **Refugee and Resettlement Process**

In the following quote, Jawid talked about the complex process of traveling to the U.S. and obtaining housing. He seemed to accept the choice of place even though it was not close to his friend:

Ah yes that was when I . . . contacted the IOM that is the international organization for migration. So they, I think there’s uh what do you call it, organization IRC, yeah

international rescue committee and I, they hm, the IM I think they contact local organizations here and they take uh rent apartments for refugees, select a place and then they call back to IM and tell them the place is ready, and then the IM informed us and they took us and they buy us tickets - air plane tickets. So uh the IRC is the organization that rented a house for us here an apartment and uh I selected to be relocated near my friend in Hayward but uh they . . . I think the rent was high in Hayward so they rented a place here in Oakland. (Jawid, personal communication, March 31, 2018)

Javad was able to access health insurance that made the process of obtaining needed immunizations to get a green card much less expensive and, therefore, more accessible as indicated by the following quote “. . . The health insurance helped me with those things. If you want to pay for yourself. They came by visa and they applied for green card those shots are really expensive. It really helped me.” (Javad, personal communication, May 25, 2018)

Javad reflected on the multi-step process he experienced in leaving his country of origin and being held in “limbo” for an extended time with an unknown resettlement date. During his stay in Indonesia as a refugee, he was not allowed to participate in everyday occupations like a typical resident. For example, he was not allowed to work or go to school for a degree, so he was simply waiting:

Okay, in Indonesia, other refugees were there also. But we were waiting in second country. Our country is first country. Indonesia is our second country. So the third country is here [U.S.]. Uh, is your place that you want to go for, like forever. In Indonesia we were over there and the government and through the U.N.H.C.R. they help us finding house and they help us some like facilities to live over there. (Javad, personal communication, May 25, 2018)

Finding employment was dramatically different in Javad's home country as compared to Indonesia—where he was not allowed to work—versus being placed in a job in the U.S.:

Over there if you know someone, for example, they can just offer you job or they have friend, they can say, here is a guy that wants to work and yeah because we're immigrants, it was bit difficult. Here, when we came, there was an organization called IRC that helped people who came to U.S., refugee people, they help them finding job, finding house.

Then, yeah, I find my job here through them. I found 1951 training class. I took training class and then yeah I found a job. (Javad, personal communication, May 25, 2018)

When asked about work in Indonesia, he said, "Oh no, we were not able to work, we did not have any permit to work over there, so we had to stay". When asked about the previous statement, Javad said, "Yeah, it is happening, because if they are going back to their country, they are in danger, then they cannot go anywhere and they have to wait to wait for their process to make it to another country. . . ." Javad reflected on his experience of being in transition in a holding country—Indonesia—having left his home country but not yet resettled to the U.S. His comment shows how stressful the situation was for everyone sharing that experience.

## **Discussion**

### **Forced transitions negatively impact refugee occupations**

The authors expected that forced transitions would have a negative effect on refugee occupations. This idea was not applicable to the participants as they did not experience forced transition. Both of the refugees interviewed had some choice in their status as refugees, planned for resettlement, and decided to leave their home country. As such, their experience is different that a person who was more forcibly removed from their home country. However, it was found that there were, what might be termed, forced adaptations.

The concept of forced adaptation for the purpose of this research is a contextually required adaptation. In contrast, a person could choose to adapt their occupations. An example of a forced adaptation the findings is regarding language. Both refugees were forced to learn the English language in order to participate in daily occupations. To give an example using the TERO Model, a contextual barrier (language) which is related to the overarching impact of transition (refugee was relocated to place where English is primary language) is a barrier to engagement in occupations (nearly all of them) which necessitated an adaptation (learning the language) which fed back into their identity (capability/resilience), and their ability to engage in occupations. Language and culture are two areas where occupational adaptation was required to continue occupational participation for the participants.

### **The transition refugees experience may necessitate the adoption of unfamiliar occupations**

In one case, a previous occupation was discarded (soccer) and a new one initiated (basketball) because the refugee could not find as many people interested in soccer in the U.S. as they did at home. Their previous skill in athletic activities such as sports helped them to adjust



this change in serious leisure occupation. Despite this finding, the majority of occupations were adapted, not abandoned or adopted like soccer and basketball.

While the analysis of the interviews indicates that the occupations which refugees engage in changed minimally between their home country and resettlement in Northern California, the meaning and the roles associated with their occupations changed significantly, as reported by the participants. For example, both Jawid and Javad left their families behind when they became refugees. For both men in their respective cultures, families usually live together and participate in many co-occupations. Becoming a refugee and moving to a new country inherently disrupts this cultural phenomenon, thereby changing the meaning of these occupations, but does not necessarily cause occupations to be discarded. Due to the transition to a new country, refugees are more likely to partake in occupations independently, where previously in their home country, they would have been accompanied by family. This change of co-occupations into individual occupations does affect the meaning and the participants' roles; however, it was found that the participants generally retained their previous occupations.

### **Some previous cultural occupations may positively impact transition throughout resettlement**

While this study did not find that *cultural* occupations positively impacted transition, there was some engagement in occupations that positively influenced the participants once resettled. For example, the motivation to become a doctor, a profession for which he was studying while living in Afghanistan, allowed Jawid to adopt new occupations once in California, in addition to providing him with a goal to work towards once resettled.

Based on the participant's experiences and occupations in their home country, they were able to adjust to circumstances and challenges throughout transition. For Jawid, the introduction

to English language during elementary school, and the viewing of American television shows and movies accelerated his acquisition of the English language. His proficiency in English was strong enough that he interpreted for the U.S. Army prior to moving to the U.S., which is actually how he received refugee status, as it was no longer safe for him to reside in Afghanistan. In turn, he was able to engage in work and classroom lectures more easily once he resettled in the United States. For Javad, playing video games in Iran improved his ability to pass the driving test in the United States. This access to a more efficient mode of transportation promoted greater adaptation to his work role after his resettlement.

Sustaining participation in religious observance remained important as this established a link to the home country and family traditions. Javad responded to a question about expressing his religion this way, “Yeah, here praying at home yeah. Also, there are some places, big events, big festivals for Shia people. We are going to the mosque, we are just Shia people gathering together and celebrate those days” (Javad, personal communication, May 25, 2018). Although Javad experienced some discrimination here for his religious preference, he still felt expression of his faith was important, especially for recognition of specific holidays:

Yeah, yes we do. So for example now it is Ramadan month, so the last day of Ramadan is a big day. So we celebrate the last day of Ramadan. We are opening our fasting so we can go back to our regular day.

Hammell (2004) has described belonging as “contributions to life satisfaction and to occupational engagement: of social interaction and connections, mutual support and reciprocity, a sense of being valued and socially included, and the ability and opportunity to contribute to others” (p. 41).

**Refugees may keep some of the same occupations, but will change the manner in which they participate throughout resettlement**

Occupational adaptation was found to be a major theme throughout the interviews. The theory of Occupational Adaptation (OA) (Schkade & Schultz, 1992) is comprised of several key tenants: 1) Occupational barriers require adaptation for competency. 2) Environmental barriers are naturally occurring and can affect internal factors. 3) The successful adaptation to barriers prevents dysfunction, so when a refugee is unable to adapt for whatever reason, they are dysfunctional in their occupational performance. The participants demonstrate these tenets throughout the interview. This theory and PEO work in tandem to show how important each factor is, and how the interplay between them impacts occupation.

One example of occupations being adapted but changed is cooking and eating. These occupations continue to be necessary for their everyday lives and both refugees still participate in cooking and eating as it is required for survival, and it is a part of U.S. social culture. However, they are no longer participating in these as a family occupation; therefore, they kept the occupation, but the meaning is different.

The findings suggest that contextual barriers create a challenge to occupational engagement for refugees, but occupational adaptation facilitates overcoming these barriers and engagement in meaningful occupations. Participants were more likely to adapt their previous occupations in their new environment rather than discard them. For example, Jawid discussed that he used to participate in social drinking at his friend's house in his home country, as alcohol consumption is illegal in Afghanistan. Once he arrived in the U.S., he and his friends frequented bars to drink instead.

The concept of occupational adaptation facilitating engagement aligns with previous research on Karen refugees whom, given the support and resources from American occupational therapists, were able to adapt their previous leisure occupation of weaving into a profitable work occupation in the United States. Thus, the continuation of previous activities facilitates a smoother transition for refugees, which is supported by the findings of this study, and previous research.

### **How a refugee navigates their occupations during transition is related to their social network throughout resettlement**

Parts of the process of resettlement were more stressful than others. This was especially true for Javad, who spent four years waiting in Indonesia before arriving in Northern California. As a refugee there temporarily waiting for a transfer to a permanent location in a different country, he experienced occupational deprivation. The refugees were not allowed to work or go to school. They spent time socializing and taking music or language classes:

Some classes they have for us, music class, some English class. But when you are in Indonesia, the people who are still over there they are like in stress, because of their process. They cannot go back to their county and they don't know when they can make it to another country. Then you can't work, you can't go to university, so it is just stressful over there. Mostly people are staying for just 2-3 years. I know some friends who are still living there 7-8 years. They can't do anything they are just waiting, they have hope to make it to a new country. (Javad, personal communication, May 25, 2018)

For both men, the presence of friends in the community contributed to their decisions regarding housing. For Jawid, his friend was also resettled in California, but further along in the resettlement process. The friend had an apartment with room for Jawid, and was also connected

to the community and comfortable in his living situation. This gave rise the opportunity for Jawid to move and share some benefits of his friend’s assimilation into the community.

Javad also had a friend—a U.S. citizen he met while waiting in Indonesia for resettlement—who was well-established in the local community. This friend owned a home closer to Javad’s place of employment, and had financial means to charge discounted rent for a deserving tenant. This presented the opportunity for Javad to improve his situation and experience smoother occupational engagement.

To summarize, this expected finding that social network has an influence on how a refugee participates in their occupations as they resettle was supported by the interviews. This is also an example of how the TERO model works, transition brought about contextual barriers but the belonging to a social network and identity factors that lead to their friendships decreased the severity of the barriers and increased adaptation, allowing for participation in occupations anyways.

**Prior occupational engagement and performance does not necessarily positively correlate with engagement and performance once resettled**

An interesting point is that experiences of danger did not significantly affect the refugees engagement in occupations as it might to a typical person. The finding from the refugees’ experiences is that previous experiences with danger in their home country positively impacts how they respond to danger in the U.S. For example, when Jawid recounted two occurrences of robbery at gunpoint in Oakland, CA. his affect was relaxed, and he laughed, “So uh yes, uh about the robbing [laughs]” (Jawid, personal communication, March 31, 2018). He was not amused that someone had robbed him, rather, his experience of fearing beheading in the streets by the Taliban, overshadowed the frustration of a person taking something that does not belong to them

and threatening him. It is unknown if Jawid experienced any initial anger or sadness, but in his retelling of the experiences, some of them very recent, he was not worried, fearful, or concerned about his future safety. He even commented that potentially the person who stole from him realized that he needed his green card and mailed it back to him for that reason:

Fortunately, someone has found my wallet, or the person who take it-took it from me maybe he saw that I am an immigrant and there was not a lot of money in my wallet too so maybe he sent it back. Or something. (Jawid, personal communication, March 31, 2018)

Javad also had an example of more resilience in his interview compared with other refugees he met while in Indonesia:

When you are there, you can for example do some online courses or things, but when you are there in that situation . . . you just cannot focus on anything. . . . I have some friends who suicide themselves because of the stress. (Javad, personal communication, May 25, 2018)

### **Additional Discussion**

The resilience displayed by these two refugees is important as it likely impacted their success in engaging in occupations and their overall well-being. Based on the interviews, it was implied that people who successfully transitioned were more able to adapt due to stronger internal factors, such as perseverance, despite having experienced similar barriers to other people who are refugees. From the perspective of Jawid and Javad, some people did not transition as well.

As quoted previously, Javad spoke about people he knew in the refugee community in Indonesia “suiciding” themselves because of the extended period of occupational deprivation and

other difficulties associated with being in the middle of transition and resettlement. Potentially, those individuals were not as resilient—did not possess the same strong internal factors—as individuals who are successful in fully transitioning to a new country.

Additionally, Jawid explained that his first roommate in California moved back to Afghanistan despite completing the process of resettlement to the United States. This perhaps implies that his roommate was unsuccessful in fully transitioning and assimilating into a new country and culture. However, whether this was because this individual was not as resilient or if there were other factors is unclear and cannot be confirmed or rebutted because that person was not a participant of this study.

Another example, warranting further exploration, is the presence of resilience and its connection to perspective. As was mentioned earlier, Jawid was robbed at gunpoint twice since resettlement, and when he discussed this during the interview, he laughed. Later in the interview, he talked about the cause of him becoming a refugee and why he decided to leave Afghanistan. He said that at home, due to his work interpreting for the U.S. military, if the U.S. were to withdraw forces, he would likely be a target of retaliation by the Taliban. He said, “you know the Taliban? Yeah, if they get back in where I live.... they usually kill the people who work with the U.S. military. So it wasn’t safe for me to live there” (Jawid, personal communication, March 31, 2018). This implies that the previous experiences of danger or traumas have implications for how a person handles future experiences. For Jawid, he was able to cope well and his experience did not have a negative effect on his view of other people and of the world at large. This suggests two things; one, that if a person can be assisted through the process of before, during and after transition experiences, they may be better prepared for future incidents. The second, more somber suggestion is that persons who did not have the internal factors, or belonging, or had too

many barriers and could not go through the process of occupational adaptation are not as able to handle these intense situations and need help to be able to resettle and live meaningful lives.



## **Implications and Future Research**

As supported by this study's findings, one implication for occupational therapy would be to foster the development of refugee self-efficacy as this is tied to successful resettlement. Self-efficacy is commonly a goal of OT intervention; however, it is especially pertinent for this particular client group. Refugees encounter many contextual barriers, and have a variety of experiences during their resettlement. Additionally, the reasons for their initial displacement may differ. Therefore, each person will have a different perspective and challenges.

One of the main themes of this research was the presence of role loss and meaning change for both participants' occupations. This is another area where occupational therapists are perfectly equipped to guide and promote resilience factors.

As is often the case, these authors recommend further research focusing on the experience of refugees in the U.S., since there is a significant gap in the current research. Additionally, further research into the importance of resiliency during transition and resettlement for refugees is necessary as this is a fairly novel finding.

## **Limitations**

Study limitations include that large organizations in the U.S. that aid refugees do not generally partner with researchers as they are, understandably, protective of their clients. Therefore, recruiting participants was difficult, and the researchers were forced to pursue other, less effective avenues for recruitment. There may be self-selection bias as part of the recruitment process, as both participants were found as the result of a social event. Both participants have similar demographics, which could affect the generalizability of the findings to a larger, more diverse refugee population. The number of participants is much lower than ideal for a qualitative study. While part of the study design, researchers recognize that one interview is not necessarily sufficient to build rapport with participants; a follow-up interview may have been helpful in garnering more in-depth information and providing answers to some questions that arose.

## Conclusion

The number of refugees worldwide continues to rise, whereas research involving these populations continues to be limited, particularly in the United States. This study aimed to add to current research on refugee groups from an occupational perspective. It was designed to capture the subjective experience of refugees as they transition to a new country. The major themes found were that transition affects everything about resettlement, adaptation of occupations, contextual barriers, internal factors, and sense of belonging. All of these elements then influence participation in occupations (Figure 1). The key findings include 1) refugees may keep some of the same occupations, but will change the manner in which they participate throughout resettlement, and 2) how a refugee navigates their occupations during transition is related to their social network throughout resettlement. An additional finding is the significance of resilience to the process of resettlement, and that resilience may affect occupational engagement. In general, more research in this area is needed and, more specifically, occupational science literature focusing on resilience factors and how resilience affects country transition and resettlement. Additional research is important for the future of occupational therapy involvement with people who are refugees.

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## **Appendix A**



**CONSENT FORM TO BE A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT  
DOMINICAN UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA**

1. I understand that I am being asked to participate as a Participant in a research study designed to assess certain personal experiences related to being a refugee. This research is the main aspect of an Occupational Therapy Program capstone called Transition in Occupations of Refugees During Resettlement at Dominican University of California. This research project is being supervised by Karen McCarthy, OTR/L, OTD, of the Occupational Therapy Department at Dominican University of California.

2. I understand that participation in this research will involve taking part in at least a one-hour, in person interview which will include a personal life history, as well as thoughts and feelings on the topic of being a refugee. The interview will not exceed 2 hours.

3. I understand that my participation in this study is completely voluntary and I am free to withdraw my participation at any time and for any reason.

4. I have been made aware that the interviews will be recorded via audio. All personal references and identifying information will be eliminated when these recordings are transcribed. All Participants will be identified by randomized numbers only and the master list for these numbers will be kept by Karen McCarthy in a locked file, separate from the transcripts. Transcripts will be seen only by the researchers and their faculty advisors. One year after the completion of the research, all written and recorded materials will be destroyed.

5. I am aware that all study participants will be furnished with a written summary of the relevant findings and conclusions of this project. Such results will not be available until December 1, 2018.

6. I understand that I will be discussing topics of a personal nature and that I may refuse to answer any question that causes me distress or seems to be an invasion of my privacy. I may elect to stop the interview at any time.

7. I understand that my participation involves no physical risk, but may involve some psychological discomfort, given the nature of the topic being addressed in the interview. If I experience any problems or serious distress due to my participation, my interviewer (Kimberley, Jacqueline, Adam, or Jennifer) will provide a list of resources (see Appendix C) . My interviewer can be contacted at (DUOCRefugeeProject@gmail.com).

8. I understand that if I have any further questions about the study, I may contact the student researchers at [DUOCRefugeeProject@gmail.com] or the research supervisor, [Karen McCarthy, (415) 482-1904, karen.mccarthy@dominican.edu]. If I have further questions or comments about participation in this study, I may contact the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants (IRBPHP), which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. I may reach the IRBPHP

Office by calling (415) 482-3547 and leaving a voicemail message, by FAX at (415) 257-0165 or by writing to the IRBPHP, Office of the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dominican University of California, 50 Acacia Avenue, San Rafael, CA 94901.

9. All procedures related to this research project have been satisfactorily explained to me prior to my voluntary election to participate.

**I HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND ALL OF THE ABOVE EXPLANATION REGARDING THIS STUDY. I VOLUNTARILY GIVE MY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE. A COPY OF THIS FORM HAS BEEN GIVEN TO ME FOR MY FUTURE REFERENCE.**

---

Signature

Date

## **Appendix B**

**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS  
DOMINICAN UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA**

\*Appropriate prompt questions asked throughout.

- Eg: Can you tell me more about that?

**Opening**

- Could you describe a typical day for you in (home country/during transition/now)?
  - Ask about one timeframe at a time Person ● What has changed for you personally since arriving in the U.S.?
- What cultural aspect of living in the U.S. stands out/ stood out to you?
- How do you feel about accessing care services throughout transition?
- Were/are you able to get the help you may need?
  - If they access services: Do you feel like your care team understands you, or you them?

(if unable, do they bring in translators or match you with people of your culture or language?)

**Environment**

- How did/do you feel about accessing the community before, during, and after resettlement?
  - If needed, examples are (safety, comfort, confidence, welcoming/etc).
  - Access meaning transport, community mobility, etc.
  - One period of time at a time
- If language was a barrier, how were you able to adapt to that barrier then and how is language impacting you now?
- How impactful was your experience of finding housing?
  - Prompting examples could include “on your sense of personal safety, comfort & security”

- How is your home now different from your home in (home country)?
  - Please describe what your home now is like, versus where you are from.

### **Occupation**

- Are there activities that you used to do in (home country) that you stopped before you came to the U.S.? What were they? What caused that change?
  - Are you satisfied with your activities?
  - Asked one at a time.
- Are there activities that you did during your transition period that you don't do now? What were they? What caused that change?
  - Asked one at a time.
- Can you tell me about some cultural occupations from home? (Town, Country, etc)
- How has your experience finding and/or gaining employment changed?
- What were/are your educational occupations?
- If you could do anything that you used to do (if there were no limitations) what would it be?

### **Closing**

What do you want people to know about you as a person, a refugee, other roles?

## **Appendix C**

**MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES  
DOMINICAN UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA**

**Crisis services:**

**ALAMEDA COUNTY** Crisis Support  
Services of Alameda County 24-hour  
Crisis Line 1-800-309-2131

**MARIN COUNTY**  
Psychiatric Emergency  
Services 24 hours / 7 days  
(415) 499-6666

Family Service Agency of Marin 24-Hour  
Suicide Prevention & Crisis Hotline (415)  
499-1100

24-Hour Grief Counseling  
(415) 499-1195

**SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY**  
Mental Health Services The  
Crisis Intervention Center Crisis  
Phone - 24-hour Response (209)  
468-8686

**Support services:**

**211** <http://www.edenir.org/> 211 is a free, non-emergency, confidential, 3-digit phone number and service that provides easy access to critical health and human services, including referrals to mental health resources. 24 hours a day, 7 days a week with multi-lingual capabilities. Outside of area: 888-886-9660.

**Alameda Health System. Highland Hospital Campus. Highland Wellness Center** 1411 E. 31st St. Oakland 94602 510-437-8500  
<http://www.highlandwellnessahs.org> M-F 8:30am-5pm Outpatient psychiatric treatment service, providing daily therapeutic activities. For questions regarding eligibility for care, please contact Financial Counseling at 510-437-4961.

**Coalition for Alternatives in Mental Health. Berkeley Drop-in Center** 3234 Adeline St. Berkeley 94703 510-653-3808 M-Th 9am-3pm F 9am-2pm Client-run, multi-purpose community center for past, present or at-risk mental health clients. Serves persons undergoing significant emotional stress and their families. Free.

**East Bay Community Recovery Project** 2579 San Pablo Ave. Oakland 94612 510-446-7100 <http://www.ebcprp.org> M-F 8am-5pm Counseling, education, support groups (including 12-step groups), information and referral. Adults, youth, family and veterans.

**Mental Health Association of Alameda County** 954 60th St. Suite 10 Oakland 94608 <http://www.mhaac.org> 510-835-5010 Information & Referrals 510-835-0188 Family Caregiver Advocate M-F 9am-5pm Central source of information, referrals, advice and support for people with mental illness, their families and friends throughout Alameda County.

**West Oakland Health Council Mental Health Services** 700 Adeline St. Oakland 94607 510-835-9610 <http://www.wohc.org> M-F 8:30am-5pm Individual and group counseling, case management and crisis intervention for adults, children under 18 and their families.