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Bergquist, Gretchen; Soliz, Jordan; Everhart, Kristen; Kreimer, Lee; and Braithwaite, Dawn O., "Investigating Layers of Identity and Identity Gaps in Refugee Resettlement Experiences in the Midwestern United States" (2017). *Communication Studies Theses, Dissertations, and Student Research*. 39.

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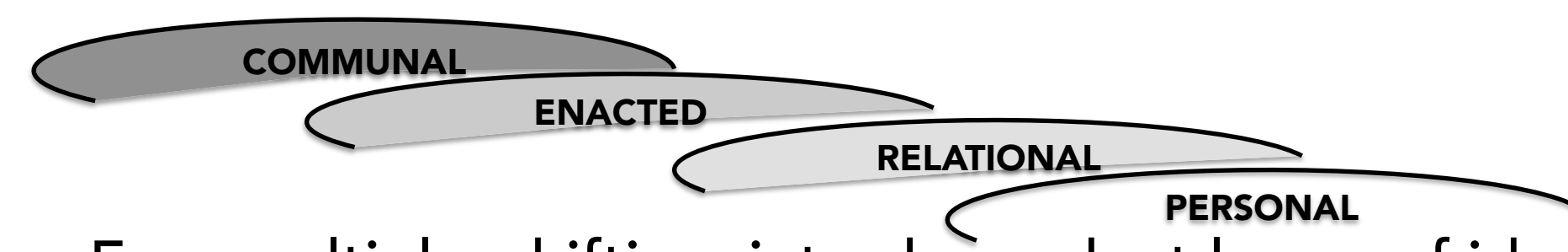
Investigating Layers of Identity and Identity Gaps in Refugee Resettlement Experiences in the Midwestern United States

Gretchen Bergquist, Jordan Soliz, Kristen Everhart, Lee Kreimer, & Dawn O. Braithwaite
Department of Communication Studies

Rationale

- Post-migration, refugees experience changes within personal and community relationships that have dramatic effects on their sense of self and, in turn, well-being.
- During resettlement, refugees are forced to reconceptualize identity as they encounter and integrate into a new host country and culture.
- Tensions emerge when integrating one's self-concept into a web of new personal and social networks while simultaneously managing and adapting to larger social norms and public attitudes in the host country.
- The epicenter of tensions and experiences that create turbulence in the lives of refugees is the negotiation and reconceptualization of identity within relationships and across communities.

Communication Theory of Identity



- Four multiple, shifting, interdependent layers of identity simultaneously construct the overall sense of self.
- Incongruence can emerge between layers, generating an identity gap.
- How refugees experience layers of identity provides the foundation for identifying and understanding potential identity-related tensions that likely play a role in negative psychosocial outcomes during resettlement.

RQ1 Results: Layers of Identity

Participants indicated that during the relocation process they were forced to confront many challenges and adapt to new contexts. In turn, this adaptation comes with implications to their identity and sense of self.

Personal Identity

- As **embracing the title of refugee** with a sense of pride.
- As **temporal and not reflecting a current self-concept**.

Enacted Identity

- As **cultural distinctiveness**; as a **cultural home**; as a way to **continually embrace and identify with** the country and culture of origin.
- As **assimilation**; as a way to discursively assimilate to the new host culture.

Relational Identity

- Family as providing a cultural home**; a **sense of belongingness** when resettlement forced a departure from larger kin networks.

Communal Identity

- As providing a **sense of place**, even when the geographic home was gone.
- As a **support structure resulting from shared experiences** that cannot be found elsewhere.

Method

Participants

- In-depth interviews were conducted with 26 refugees (12 = female, 14 = male) who had been living in a Midwestern city in the United States from six months to 15 years.
- Countries of origin included Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Colombia, and Myanmar (formerly Burma).

Data Collection & Analysis

- Interviews lasted between 60-180 minutes and were audio recorded for transcription.
- Using interpretive analysis, transcripts were reviewed to identify salient themes within the data reflecting the research questions.
- Negative case analysis was conducted to review and refine emergent themes.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do refugees experience the personal, enacted, relational, and communal layers of identity during resettlement?

RQ2: How, if at all, do refugees experience identity gaps during resettlement?

RQ2 Results: Identity Gaps

Identity gaps emerged as:

Personal ↔ **GAP** ↔ **Enacted**
Tensions between a secure sense of self and how one's sense of self could be presented to the non-refugee community.

Personal ↔ **GAP** ↔ **Relational**
Tensions occurring within personal relationships in the family.

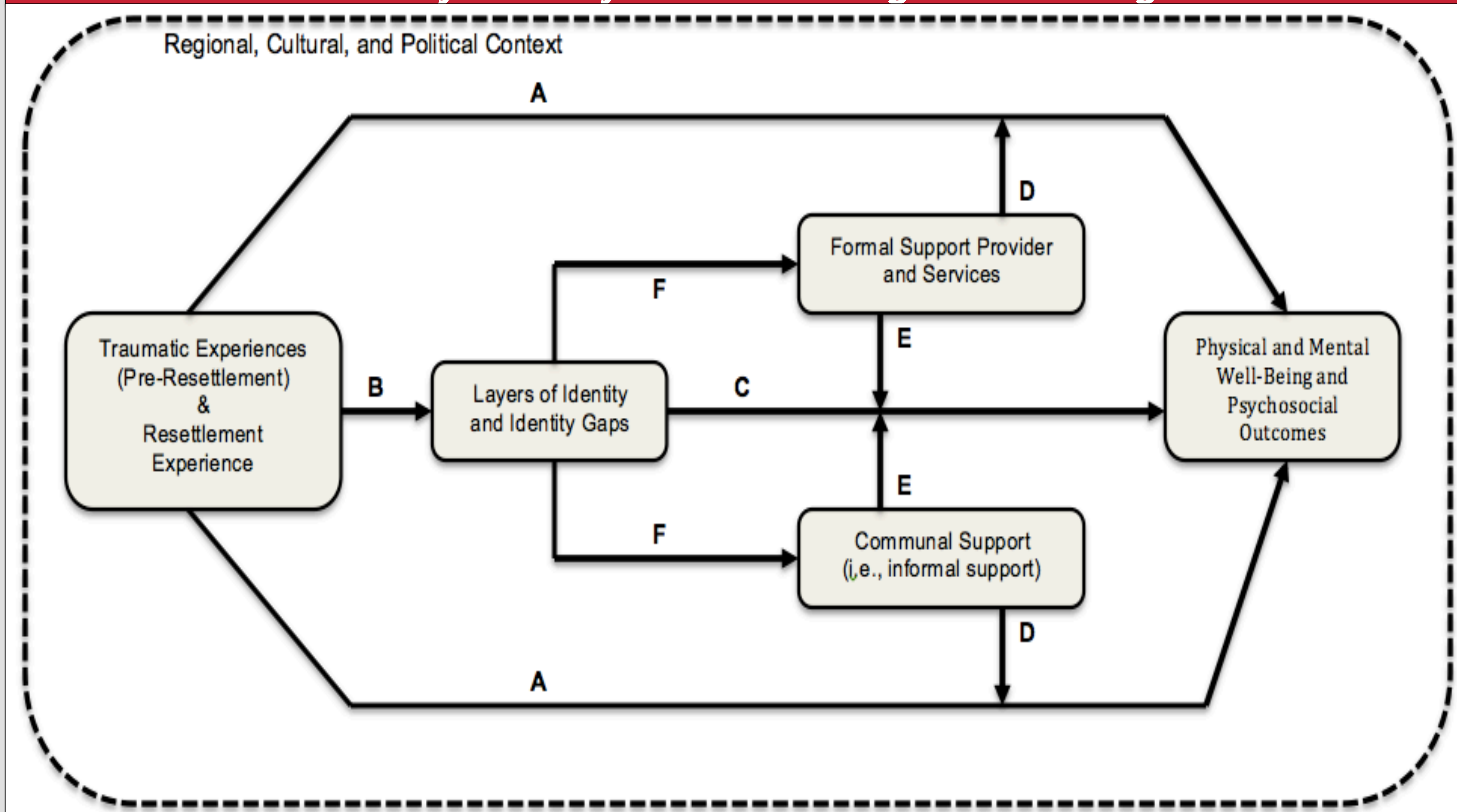
Enacted ↔ **GAP** ↔ **Relational**
Tensions within the family unit and other resettled refugee groups.

Enacted ↔ **GAP** ↔ **Communal**
Tensions from different language and unfamiliar cultural norms.

Relational ↔ **GAP** ↔ **Communal**
Tensions emerged from understanding the individual, but not the larger, collective group.

Communal ↔ **GAP** ↔ **Communal**
Tensions between community expectations and larger discourses reflective of the culture of origin and those within the resettled culture.

Identity Pathway Model of Refugee Well-Being



Discussion

Guided by study findings, the conceptual model serves as a catalyst for future inquiries or interventions to assist individual refugees and refugee communities post-migration. Extant research, interventions, and organizations serving refugees work toward the central goal of improving well-being, thus, the model places *physical-mental well-being* and *psychosocial outcomes* as the focal outcome of coping and adaptation processes during resettlement.

- Path A** → Direct links *pre-resettlement trauma* (e.g., war-related trauma, oppression, political and religious persecution) and *resettlement experiences* with *well-being and psychosocial outcomes*. Facilitating positive psychosocial adjustment post-migration requires considering both aspects.
- Path B** → *Identity pathway* that considers *individual-level differences* present among refugee experiences. Findings demonstrated variability in how refugees make sense of their refugee identity (personal layer), enact this identity on both personal (enacted layer) and relational levels (relational layer), as well as understand and affiliate (or not) with the communal refugee and cultural identity.
- Path C** → Links between narratives and experiences shared by participants and individual well-being.
- Path D** → Links *formal support providers and services* (e.g., government and non-government organizations, advocacy organizations) and *informal support providers* (e.g., communal support from other families and refugee community members) with psychological and mental well-being. The services and support provided can buffer the effect of turbulent and traumatic pre-resettlement and resettlement experiences.
- Path E** → Represents tensions resulting from identity gaps, which can be buffered by formal and informal support providers.
- Path F** → Links tensions related to individual experiences within refugee communities (i.e., communal gaps) and experiences of discrimination or stigma from the broader community, in general, that likely hinder individuals' likelihood of turning to both formal and informal support services.