"I Remember When Donald Trump Was Elected. It Broke a lot of Refugees' Hearts": Refugee Perspectives on the Post-2016 U.S. Political Climate

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Abstract: Recent U.S. refugee policy and political rhetoric have sanctioned anti-refugee sentiment, fostering beliefs of refugees as other, threatening, or less than. Following the transition into the Trump administration, interviews with 88 refugees resettled long-term in the U.S. were conducted to examine the impact of the post-2016 political climate. Major themes included feelings of uncertainty regarding refugee status and stability, changes in perception of U.S. citizenship, and a sense of unwelcome. The harmful effects of political environments must be recognized in order to appropriately support refugee communities through social service programming and advocacy. Social workers can elevate refugee voices while working to improve resettlement services and enhance supportive social policy. Increased attention to refugee perspectives may facilitate understanding and decrease stigma moving forward in a new political era.

Keywords: Refugee, forced migration, resettlement, political climate, United States

As forced migration increases globally, options for resettlement are declining. The world is experiencing a record number of people fleeing violence (Cumming-Bruce, 2019). Nearly 80 million people are forcibly displaced, of whom 26 million are designated refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2021a). As established by the United Nations 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol, the latter ratified by the United States (U.S.) in 1968, nations agreed people should not be forced to return to countries where their lives and freedoms are threatened (UNHCR, 2011). Moreover, nations agreed upon who qualifies for refugee status and what legal protections and rights refugees should consequently receive (UNHCR, 2011). Despite this global agreement, many nations are cutting assistance to refugees. Borders are closed due to perceptions of financial, security, and cultural risks (Betts, 2015; Long, 2013). The Global North dominates discourse regarding how and by whom refugees should be aided, maintaining an emphasis on border protection at the expense of those who are displaced (Besteman, 2016; Oelgemoller, 2017).

In recent years, refugee resettlement to the U.S. has reduced drastically. Prior to 2017, the U.S. led the world in refugee admittance numbers (Radford & Connor, 2019). Though the number of those admitted comprised only a fraction of the world's forced migrants, this legal immigration pathway authorized those admitted to obtain permanent residence after one year and citizenship after five years. In fiscal year (FY) 2016, the U.S. resettled 84,994 refugees (U.S. Department of State, 2018). Beginning in the summer of 2017, an executive order suspended the refugee admissions program for 120 days for the stated purpose of protecting national security (Nauert, 2017). In FY 2017, refugee admissions decreased to 53,716 refugees (U.S. Department of State, 2018). The number of resettled refugees

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continued to decrease in FY 2018 to 22,491 people, less than half of the admissions ceiling (U.S. Department of State, 2019). The admissions ceiling was reduced again to 18,000 people for fiscal year 2020, a record low since the formal creation of the U.S. resettlement program in 1980 (Krogstad, 2019; U.S. Department of State, 2019). Due to political restrictions and COVID-19 related suspensions (Chishti & Pierce, 2020), the number of people resettled in FY 2020 was only 11,814 (Rush, 2020). This rapid reduction in the U.S. resettlement program resulted from intentional political decisions driven by anti-immigrant ideology.

Beginning with his campaign and extending into his presidency, Donald Trump targeted and excluded refugees. Candidate Trump described aims to limit Syrian refugee admissions and prohibit groups based on religion, seeking "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States" (Khan et al., 2019; Taylor, 2015, para. 1). In 2017, the Trump administration banned residents of seven predominantly Muslim countries from entering the U.S. (Gökarıksel, 2017; Pierce et al., 2018; Thurish, 2017), leading to a 91% decline in the number of Muslim refugees accepted into the U.S. over the next two years (Bier, 2018). In February of 2020, an expanded travel ban further restricted refugee access by limiting immigration from additional countries in Africa and Asia (Kanno-Youngs, 2020; Krogstad, 2019). Since the 2016 election, refugee access to the U.S. has decreased, one of many outcomes resulting from executive orders and legislation that expanded reasons for deportation, tightened criteria for asylum, slowed visa processing, and increased screening procedures, detention, and deportation (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2020; American Immigration Council, 2020; Pierce et al., 2018; Thurish, 2017).

The antagonism embedded in anti-immigrant legislation affects refugees through all stages of migration. Since 1980, over 3 million refugees have resettled in the U.S. (U.S. Department of State, 2019). Recent political changes may adversely affect those who previously resettled in the U.S. through promoting a hostile, anti-immigrant environment. Derogatory political discourse and anti-immigrant policies portray refugees as different, unwelcome, and threatening (Grove & Zwi, 2006; Hogan & Haltinner, 2015). Limited resources and a lack of community support in host countries negatively impact refugees beyond the initial resettlement period, leading to poverty and psychological distress (Kim, 2016). Environmental factors impact refugees' ability to successfully navigate a new culture (Sangalang et al., 2019). Concern for safety and wellbeing in the U.S. among resettled refugees has increased as a result of anti-immigrant policy, specifically antagonistic sentiment and policies targeting Syrians and Muslims. Upon initial resettlement in the U.S., Syrian refugees reported feeling well-received (Gowayed, 2020). Over time, however, exposure to U.S. discourse led to recognition of anti-immigrant racialization (Gowayed, 2020). In the post-2016 U.S. political climate, harsh anti-immigrant conditions affected resettled and resettling refugees in terms of safety, acceptance, and opportunities for success. This study further examined how refugees who resettled to the U.S. were affected by this antagonistic U.S. political climate. Moreover, this study explored how refugees have responded to the post-2016 political climate, with implications for social workers in areas including resettlement services and policy advocacy.

Theory: Othering of Refugees

Othering occurs when groups of people are seen as inferior or different based on particular characteristics, such as refugee status. With roots in post-colonial theory, theories of othering point to implicit messages regarding race, ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status that reinforce concepts of belonging for some while setting others apart (Borrero et al., 2012). Through societal narratives and social classification, refugees are disenfranchised and considered other by majority groups (Borrero et al., 2012; Brons, 2015; Hatoss, 2012; Massey, 2007). Othering towards refugees in the U.S. occurs when people are stigmatized with negative labels in political and social rhetoric, with refugees described as being different, less than, or dangerous. Labels used to other people with a refugee background include terms such as alien, helpless, dependent, and needy, or terms that over-emphasize an aspect of identity such as ethnic, Black, or Muslim (Baak, 2019; Grove & Zwi, 2006; Hatoss, 2012; Ludwig, 2016). Such terms are often collapsed into over-simplified notions and loaded with derogatory meanings. Societal narratives regarding group characteristics contain messages and assumptions that are circulated and absorbed by the public. Both intentionally and unintentionally, people form classifications that categorize people into groups of societal relevance based on these narratives (Massey, 2007). When faced with threat or uncertainty, people are more likely to classify and categorize others in a way that produces prejudice towards particular groups (Massey, 2007). For refugees resettling to locations where a threat mentality is common, members of host communities may meet newcomers with a sense of fear and distrust, further setting them apart as other (Hogan & Haltinner, 2015; Massey, 2007; Weis, 1995).

Anti-refugee narratives and labels are embedded within recent U.S. refugee policy and suffuse far-right nationalist rhetoric. The Trump administration's emphasis on linking refugees to national security risks without merit reinforced a threat mentality regarding refugees. Intensified screening processes foster suspicion (Grove & Zwi, 2006; Massimino, 2017; Merheb, 2005), where those who pass strict hurdles to resettle in the U.S. are still deemed dangerous and criminal (Grove & Zwi, 2006; Ratnam, 2019). Intensified vetting and control efforts also solidify power disparities created through othering, where the out-group is considered inferior and dependent on in-group approval (Brons, 2015).

In addition to prioritization of border control, former President Trump fomented a culture of anti-minority rhetoric. In a quest to "make America great again," Trump insinuated that minority groups, including refugees, threaten the country and stand in the way of America achieving greatness (Gökarıksel, 2017; Gökarıksel & Smith, 2017; Grove & Zwi, 2006). Additional Trumpian rhetoric that served to other and diminish refugees included reference to people originating from "shithole countries," conflation of Syrian refugees with ISIS (the Islamic State), and stating a preference for White immigrants from Europe (Chiu, 2019; Scott, 2018, para. 1). Such rhetoric sanctioned racism, stereotyping, and discrimination against minority groups (Konrad, 2018), and may translate to othering at the local, individual level.

When refugees are seen as other, they may be racially profiled, kept at the borders of U.S. communities, and depicted as lucky but unworthy recipients of U.S. charity (Grove & Zwi, 2006). Discrimination on the basis of gender, nationality, religion, and race places

refugees in multiple minority out-groups. Thus, many refugees in the U.S. face discrimination because of their status both as refugees and as racial minorities. Moreover, Muslim refugees face additional prejudice due to religious affiliation (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Qasmiyeh, 2010; Gökarıksel, 2017; Gökarıksel & Smith, 2017). Though anti-Muslim sentiment is not new (Adida et al., 2019), Trump invited and encouraged Islamophobia by targeting predominately Muslim countries in speech and legislation. Since Trump's election, anti-Muslim sentiment increased (Mogahed & Mahmood, 2020), as did Muslim-directed hate crimes (Jamal, 2017). Refugees face barriers to belonging and acceptance when they are perceived as different or unwelcome by the receiving society.

Refugee individuals and groups manage and respond to othering behaviors in diverse ways. Despite long-standing practices of othering towards minority groups in the U.S., intensified under the Trump administration, resettled refugees find ways to assert and create belonging. Many newly-resettled Americans, or new Americans, declare their claim to American ideals, even under an administration that worked to limit access to such ideals (Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2020; Rizvi, 2017; UNHCR, 2018). Refugee narratives highlight the injustice of othering and call for a recognition of refugee rights to belonging and participation in host-country societies (Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2020; Rizvi, 2017; UNHCR, 2018). These same narratives assert a deep understanding of the founding premises of the U.S. and U.S. politics, in addition to the assertion of refugees' own social capital. These new Americans highlight the impermanence of refugee status, which serves as a vehicle for resettlement and belonging in a new nation (Rizvi, 2017; UNHCR, 2018; Zetter, 2007). This mindset recognizes the refugee experience not as leading to permanent marginalization but to legal migration, and eventual citizenship. Although refugees have been socially marginalized, the legal nature of their migration to the U.S. therefore grants them a form of insider status. While Trumpian rhetoric has increased othering in U.S. society, many new Americans resist othering and push back against politicized boundaries.

In addition to the power of refugee narratives in fighting against othering, many in the U.S. reject anti-immigrant narratives. An estimated half of Americans (51%) support refugee resettlement (Hartig, 2018), prioritizing a humanitarian responsibility to resettle displaced people (Garinther et al., 2019). Many social workers and others within refugee resettlement organizations have responded to political legislation, sharing facts, stories, and research in opposition to the Trump administration's stance (Amnesty International USA, n.d.; Center for Migration Studies, 2020; International Rescue Committee, 2020; Schacher, 2019). Social service agencies remain committed to expanding and improving services provided to resettling refugees (Douglas et al., 2017; McNeely & Morland, 2016; Mendenhall et al., 2017; Ross et al., 2019). Despite this advocacy and commitment, Trump's deliberate effort to disrupt resettlement systems (Beers, 2020), alongside reductions in admissions and funding, led to agency closures and a scale back of services (Darrow & Scholl, 2020).

The voices and narratives of refugees, including those who push back against othering, are rarely heard within U.S. political discourse and some majority communities. A lack of proximity promotes perceptions of refugees as distant foreigners, contributing to an "us" versus "them" mentality (Grove & Zwi, 2006). Such cognitive distancing enables negative rhetoric from political figures to dominate narratives regarding refugees circulated

throughout U.S. media. To overcome this gap in understanding, this study examined the perspectives and experiences of people resettled as refugees in the U.S. within an anti-immigrant political climate.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Various sampling methods were used to identify participants for this study. To be eligible, participants had to be 18 years of age or older and havemigrated to the U.S. as refugees at least five years prior. Participants were purposively sampled based on gender, national origin, and age from multiple agency and community settings located within the central capital area of one state in the intermountain west region of the U.S. (Creswell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Refugee social service agencies also assisted with recruitment by sharing informational flyers about the study with potential participants. Additionally, some social service agencies allowed research assistants to share information about the study with clients in their offices, at local events, and in classes serving refugees. Convenience and snowball sampling methods were also used, in that people were referred to the study through word-of-mouth and community networks, with refugee community leaders and interview participants recruiting most participants. The resulting sample was comprised of participants with diverse demographic characteristics including nationality, gender, religious affiliation, educational attainment, age, length of time in the U.S., and English language proficiency. Refugee service agencies as well as a project community advisory board, composed of refugee community leaders and service providers, contributed to the project design and methods. The advisory board was comprised of five individuals who reviewed project protocols, design, and findings throughout the duration of the project, typically meeting during each transition phase of the project. The research team involved trained graduate and undergraduate students, including some with refugee backgrounds who themselves resettled in the U.S. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained for all study procedures.

Interviews were conducted at a location of the participant's choosing, including service agencies, community centers, libraries, and participants' homes. Interviews were conducted in locations where participants could not be overheard or influenced in a way that would restrict responses. If family members or others were present at the location of the interview, research assistants inquired about participants' comfort and preference with continuing the interview or identifying a more private location. Each participant was assigned an ID number that was attached to their data and interview content, thus assisting in protecting confidentiality. The option for interpretation was made known to potential participants during the introduction of the study and initial scheduling of the interview. In some instances, interpretation was used for the scheduling of interviews. Interviews were conducted by research assistants in English, through trained interpreters for interviews when needed; 23 interviews were conducted with an interpreter. Interpreters were accompanied by research assistants when conducting interviews both in person or over the phone. Prior to beginning the interview, research assistants provided participants a consent form reviewing the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and potential harms of

participation, such as sensitive questions that may bring discomfort. Research assistants reiterated that participation was voluntary and that participants could decline to answer any interview questions. Participants were also provided a list of mental health and other relevant resources when needed. All interviews were audio-recorded. Interviews lasted approximately 75 minutes, and participants were compensated $20. Interviews were conducted between June 2017 and November 2018.

Interview Content

The interview began with a series of questions regarding demographic characteristics and experiences in the U.S. Participants described their age, gender, marital status, birth place, and length of time since initial resettlement. Safety was examined using one question from the World Health Organization brief quality of life assessment (WHO, 2012), where participants described how safe they felt in daily life using a five-point Likert scale with response options from 1 (*very unsafe*) to 5 (*very safe*). Open-ended questions then examined perspectives on resettlement and the contemporary political climate. To explore the impact of the political climate on the lives of participants, interviewers asked, "How has the current political and social situation related to refugees in the U.S. affected you?" Three additional probes were used as needed to further explore potential areas of impact, including, "Have you felt an increase or decrease in your safety?," "Can you provide any examples of how things have changed recently?," and "Can you describe any experiences you've had with law enforcement?"

Data Analysis

All English language content of the interviews was transcribed verbatim, including the English translations of the 23 interviews conducted using interpretation. The research team conducted line-by-line coding to identify key themes emerging from the interviews until saturation was reached and no new codes emerged from the narrative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research team then analyzed the codes to determine the most prominent themes in the interviews, ultimately resulting in major themes and related sub-themes. Second cycle coding methods then involved two research team members coding each transcript for major themes and related sub-themes within NVivo. The two major thematic categories examined in this paper include "political climate" and "citizenship." Sub-themes related to political climate included "worsened political climate," "fear and safety in the political climate," and "mixed feelings regarding the political climate." Sub-themes related to citizenship included "benefits of citizenship," "practicality of citizenship," and "personal meaning of citizenship." After completing the coding process, major categories and sub-themes were reviewed, alongside immersion within the original transcripts, to summarize views and experiences related to the political climate (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2012).

Member checking was used to increase trustworthiness of the study findings (Sandelowski, 1993). After coding was completed, findings were summarized in presentation form. Using contact information provided by participants during the interview process, participants were contacted by research team personnel and invited to review the summative findings from the interviews and give feedback. These meetings took place at

a local social service agency. Prior to beginning each meeting, the purpose of the member checking process, in addition to confidentiality, was reviewed. Additionally, participants provided consent for their participation in this portion of the study. Research assistants then presented the project findings, after which participants were divided into smaller groups to discuss whether they approved of the summative findings and if major themes were missing. In total, 34 participants participated in five focus group discussions. On average, the presentation and focus group discussions lasted one hour. Compensation of $10 was provided for attending. No changes to themes regarding political climate or citizenship emerged as a result of these member checking discussions. When quoting participants, general demographic details are provided. To ensure participant anonymity, only characteristics that applied to multiple participants are provided.

Results

The sample (n=88) included an equal number of male and female participants. A majority of participants were originally from Africa (58%). Participants' age ranged from 18 to 84 years. Over half (52%) of participants were married. On average, participants had lived in the U.S. for 10.8 years. On a five-point Likert scale from 1 (*very unsafe*) to 5 (*very safe*), the average rating of participants' safety in their daily lives was 4.1. Additional participant demographics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Characteristics of Study Participants*

	n (%)
Gender	
Male	44 (50%)
Female	44 (50%)
Regional Nationality	
Middle East	21 (23.9%)
Africa	51 (58.0%)
South/Southeast Asia	16 (18.2%)
Marital Status	
Married	46 (52.3%)
Widowed	4 (4.6%)
Divorced or separated	11 (12.6%)
Never married	27 (30.7%)
	Mean (*SD*), Range
Age (years)	38.6 (14.5), 18-84
Time in the U.S. (years)	10.8 (5.4), 5-34
Safety in Daily Life*	4.1 (0.9), 2-5
*1 (very unsafe) to- 5 (very safe),	

Participant responses regarding the political climate covered a range of issues. Many spoke about the impact of the political climate on their personal lives and on the lives of their family members, including those living in the U.S. and those living abroad. Some participants indicated a general unawareness or disinterest in politics, with few comments on this topic. Others reflected on the 2016 election and the Trump administration with a range of judgements including dislike and distrust, neutrality, or support.

While most participants said they had not been physically harmed, they had observed a shift in U.S. society towards unacceptance and intolerance. Three primary sub-themes related to the political climate and the Trump administration emerged. First, respondents alluded to an overall feeling of uncertainty about their status in the U.S. and the status of family members seeking to join them. Second, participants spoke about changes in their perceptions of U.S. citizenship. Lastly, participants described an overarching sense of unwelcome, manifest through discrimination and fear-filled rhetoric. These three central themes are examined below.

Uncertainty

"Their mind is not peaceful at all. Government bringing the changes every day, and what is… next?"

Respondents experienced uncertainty and concern regarding their standing in the U.S. after the 2016 election. Referencing Trump's campaign promises to ban Muslims from entering the U.S., build a wall along the U.S.-Mexican border, and deport "illegal immigrants," participants observed negative sentiments directed at non-citizens. For many, this created an air of uncertainty about their own status in the U.S. As explained by a female participant who migrated from Burundi, "I thought he was going to kick me out too. Because I don't have, like, the right document. I mean, I have my green card and social security, but I don't have my citizen[ship]." As in this example, many respondents felt vulnerable to changes regarding immigration policies made by the Trump administration because of their refugee backgrounds.

Multiple participants touched on the dilemma of not knowing where to call home. In response to a question regarding what worried him the most, a male participant who had been in the U.S. for approximately nine years reported, "…departure from the country. Going back to home. We don't have a home if we go back." After making the U.S. their home, many feared being sent back to their countries of origin due to Trump's influence. Many remarked that their countries of origin would no longer feel like home, and they feared for their safety should they be sent back. For example, a male originally from Somalia said:

> *People start to question. Like is this the place I want to be or should I go back home? And they can't go back home because like they know there [are going to] be the issues back there…far more so [worse] than here.*

A female participant who migrated from Iraq described the psychological nature of such insecurity. She said, "It did have an effect on us psychologically and we're not sure what's going to happen in the future with the new situation." Overall, respondents reported living in a state of fear-induced unknown, wondering what changes would come next.

"It didn't just affect us, it affected a lot of people overseas."

Fear of the unknown and of the future not only affected participants' lives, but paused the plans of family members and friends waiting to come to the U.S. President Trump's

orders to suspend refugee admissions for 120 days and later to ban admission from specific countries alarmed, confused, and saddened respondents. As explained through an interpreter by a male participant who had lived in the U.S. for about 8 years, "When he heard about that law preventing refugees to come to the United States from certain countries, he said that was not right in his mind." Participants knew the need for resettlement remained, as a female who migrated from Rwanda said, "Families are still trying to come, like [to] see if things can be better…." Additionally, participants voiced uncertainty about how long the ban would last and wondered whether their family members would ever be able to join them in the U.S. Participants expressed fear and concern for loved ones who remained in countries affected by conflict and were prohibited from seeking safety in the U.S. As a female participant originally from Iraq described:

> *…these people are not safe now. They are outside, the presidential administration has stopped them from coming to the U.S. They are in war zones. They are suffering, they are dying. But if [those] changes [had] not been in place, we would have been able to help more people.*

Thus, in addition to worrying about their own status in the U.S., respondents described uncertainty about how others would fare as a result of delayed or cancelled family reunification and resettlement opportunities.

Altered Perceptions of Citizenship

"I applied for citizenship, just to be on the safe side."

Numerous participants spoke about pursuing citizenship as a protection against the Trump administration's immigration changes. A male who migrated from Myanmar/Burma described the sense of immediacy he felt surrounding citizenship when he said, "as soon as you reach five years, don't wait. Apply for U.S. citizen[ship]…I'm okay because I'm a U.S. citizen, so I feel more secure than someone who is stay[ing] [a] refugee." Like this participant, others felt citizenship provided more permanency in the U.S. than refugee status or permanent residence. A female originally from Sudan explained a shift in the meaning of citizenship following Trump's election. She said, "it used to be about pride that I am a U.S. citizen…because of the political situation right now, it's more about feeling safe and secure. Because of the administration we have right now, you could be deported for whatever reason." For many, the fear of being deported because of a refugee background was assuaged by security obtained through citizenship. Referring to President Trump, a young adult originally from Rwanda said, "I kinda dodged that bullet…because I am a citizen now, which means he can't do anything to me." These respondents felt immune to policy changes because of their status as citizens. As a male originally from Bhutan said placing citizenship in opposition to refugee status and/or identity, "I was tagged as a refugee for so long. Today I am a citizen." Comments on this topic also indicated the derogatory nature of the refugee label, which could be mitigated by the label of citizen.

"I just felt like it didn't mean a thing."

While some respondents perceived citizenship as a safeguard, others felt that citizenship lost meaning in the Trump era. A young adult who migrated from Somalia explained:

...all that chaos was happening and everybody was freaking out who wasn't a citizen. And I realized [citizenship] didn't really mean anything to me because I had the same fears...For me it's more of a paper and in all honesty, it doesn't help me in any way...once Donald Trump was elected.

For many, having citizenship was overshadowed by minority or refugee status. As described by a male participant who had lived in the U.S. for approximately 12 years, "Donald Trump always say[s]…you [weren't] born here. Even if you get [citizenship], you [are] still gonna go back where you came from. So what's the point?" Similarly, a female originally from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) said, "No matter [if] you are a citizen. You started as still a refugee." Regardless of efforts undertaken to obtain citizenship, some participants felt they continued to carry stigma as foreigners subject to deportation and separate from the broader community. Essentially, citizenship became tainted within an environment that indicated newcomers did not belong.

Unwelcoming Atmosphere

"…they say go back to your country."

Negative messages about immigrants and refugees from President Trump, the media, and society led participants to question their sense of belonging. Respondents explained that they came to the U.S. in search of a new, safe home; however, within this political climate, they received messages of rejection due to nationality, race, or religion. A male originally from Iraq explained his experience of feeling unwelcome in the U.S.,

Like if you ask me what home is, home is where you work, where you have your wife, where you have your memories, where you have your house. And I have that here. And I was like, okay I'm starting and everything was going right and I was shocked really...I feel like I am an American...and people are like, no you are not.

Participants felt unwelcome because of their backgrounds, with some respondents internalizing negative messages. A female college student said, "I will never fully belong here." Additionally, some respondents explained they felt ostracized by people who voted for Trump because of his views regarding immigrants. Such beliefs were explained by a young adult male who said, "[this state] selected, I mean, it was the majority of people that voted for Trump. So the refugee community felt that everybody in [this state] was for him and not for [us] ...they're against refugees and they're against immigration." For many respondents, the political choice of a community to elect a leader such as Trump denoted a broader social culture of unwelcome rejection.

"Yeah, I think there is a lot of fear mongering going on…Just kind of spreading fear."

In addition to feeling like outsiders or perpetual foreigners, participants described a growing sense of fear in response to unaccepting, pejorative societal narratives. Respondents mentioned discriminatory rhetoric in the media alongside negative portrayals of refugees. As described by a female who migrated from Nepal, "I can see… some of the news and all, like they hate immigrant[s] or they hate refugees." Comments addressed threatening rhetoric from political leaders and citizens through the media that led participants to question their safety. As described by a female participant with children:

> *I don't watch TV and sometimes I can't read the news on my phone and whenever I see a lot of things happening, especial politically… it can make someone go crazy because you feel like, "oh my God," this is the country that I thought I was supposed to settle, and now there [are] so many things going around. You [are] very scared.*

Noting the plethora of unwelcoming messages from many sources that target refugees, participants also reported fearing for their safety because of race or religion. A Black male participant described the fear he felt as a Muslim:

> *Sometimes when I see the things that are happening on TV, it just basically makes me feel like I need to watch out, you know. I need to be aware of my surroundings because sometimes…people do things that you're not expecting [them] to do. And then all this politics that's going on…just brings out a different person…Like I said, I'm Muslim. And it just makes [Muslims] feel like if they go outside, they're being targeted because… [of] all the things that they see in the news.*

In addition to messages of fear spread through the news and media, participants described fear within religious or ethnic communities. Multiple participants referenced "talk" where community members circulated concerns. A female who had been in the U.S. for 9 years reported, "I even heard that…if I leave the house because I'm covered with hijab they might abuse me or shoot me or kill me, so I've gotta stay in the house." Additionally, a female who migrated from Iraq commented on her fear of violent acts against Muslims when she said, "I hear it through WhatsApp groups that we have or some girlfriends…they send these messages: 'On a certain day they're gonna do this and on this day they're gonna do that.'" As a result of political, media, and community commentary, many participants feared for their wellbeing.

"Ever since he became a President…people are racist. They can even show it now."

Participants relayed numerous experiences of discrimination in a country where White individuals comprise the majority in-group and maintain a stronghold of power as opposed to racial minority, out-group individuals. When speaking about the shift to Trump's presidency, a male participant originally from Iraq stated, "The first thing we started feeling [was] racism." Referencing discrimination, a Black female participant added, "I think it's always been there…after this last election it's really increased." Moreover, participants felt this behavior was sanctioned by the President of the U.S. and emulated by citizens.

Describing racism, a female originally from Sudan observed, "nobody hides anything [any] more. Because the President is doing it…so people are doing the same thing." This quote indicates that while othering views existed in the past, people were emboldened to follow Trump's lead in othering or discriminatory behaviors.

Respondents described feeling discriminated against both in word and in action. A male who migrated from Iraq shared:

> *…you feel it when you're out on the road, when you're out doing your own thing on a daily basis. You feel that you're not really that comfortable...Sometimes it's people's looks and sometimes you can tell when somebody's looking at you...like they're welcoming you here. And sometimes they're looking at you like you're not welcome.*

Others recounted inappropriate stereotyping or prejudiced remarks. A female originally from Afghanistan said, "Some people see us as the bad humans…I've had people say something really rude and disgusting…I am a good person. I am not a terrorist." Another Muslim female described her experience through an interpreter, "On the bus stop where she's waiting for the bus with her kids…people would call her 'ISIS, ISIS.'" Discriminatory remarks such as these left participants feeling afraid, misunderstood, and set apart.

For many respondents, racism and discrimination led to risks in their day-to-day lives. A female originally from Vietnam said, "I felt a bit unsafe when I [went] run[ning]. If I [saw]…a truck with [the] American flag, then I got really nervous because I really don't know what they are going to do." American symbols took on new meanings in the Trump era, where a flag may indicate White nationalist beliefs and anti-immigrant views, leading to uncertainty regarding who can be trusted. A lack of safety was experienced by many racially Black participants who spoke of police brutality and fears regarding law enforcement. A young adult who migrated from Sudan said, "[I've] felt a decrease for my safety…How we [are starting] to see more and more Black people getting shot by people who are supposedly there to protect you." A female participant with two children explained, "nowadays the streets [are] really dangerous…The President came, everything change[d]. Now people [are] killing other people for no reason on the street because of their race." As this participant expressed, many indicated that racism seemed to increase as a result of the Trump election. A young participant originally from Sudan recognized that experiences with racism, prejudice, and fear were not limited to refugees, saying, "it's funny because the political situation, when it gets worse… you could say it targets everybody else too. As a Black person, it would affect me regardless if it talked about refugees or not." These experiences and sentiments indicate the intersectionality and widespread effects of discrimination in a political and social climate perpetuating othering. A middle-aged participant from Iraq expressed a hope for more positive political leadership in the U.S. when he commented, "I wish that our President would not say those things, and see everybody as one. And encourage people to…love each other. Respect each other. Respect is important because together we can make a better place to live." Participants recognized the potential for good that could come from a political platform focused on uniting rather than othering.

Contrasting Views

While the findings described above address perspectives and experiences of the majority of participants, a few respondents had different views about the political climate under the Trump administration. Some remained unaffected or had not experienced changes in safety. A female originally from the DRC described her neutral stance, "I [don't] have any bad thing about government. For me, I'm safe. I [do] not have any battle with the government because I [do] not do anything bad. I just raise my kids." Others made similar comments, emphasizing a focus on family, life, or appreciation for relative safety found in the U.S. compared to their country of origin. Additionally, a few participants said their specific community or state was welcoming. A male participant who migrated from Bhutan explained:

> *Personally, I would say I'm not seeing a big impact [of Trump's election] yet. Luckily, I know it's a dominantly Republican state, but we are still lucky enough our governor [is] supporting [and] welcoming refugees here. A lot of our great organizations are helping refugees here.*

For these respondents, the services and efforts of local politicians and organizations offset the potentially deleterious effects of the Trump administration. Additionally, two participants specifically spoke in support of Trump for reasons of economic growth and the belief that Trump was acting to keep the U.S. safe.

Discussion

This study analyzed the post-2016 political climate experiences and perspectives of 88 individuals resettled as refugees in the U.S. All participants had lived in the U.S. for at least five years at the time of the interviews and had experienced the 2016 election and subsequent political changes. A few respondents did not share thoughts on the political climate or expressed support for President Trump. However, the majority highlighted increased uncertainty, changes in perceptions of citizenship, and a sense of rejection. Findings illustrate how the political climate during the Trump administration reinforced othering of people who migrated to the U.S. as refugees. The findings inform policy and practice for social workers and others promoting wellbeing and access among refugees and displaced persons.

Political rhetoric contributed to a felt sense of being othered for most refugee participants. Overt and covert messages elevated by the Trump administration promoted perceptions that ostracized refugee and other minority populations (Gökarıksel, 2017; Gökarıksel & Smith, 2017; Grove & Zwi, 2006). Resettled individuals experienced these negative narratives through portrayals in the media, community discussions, and day-to-day interactions. Experiences of discrimination and racism were recounted by many. Participants also spoke about fear in their communities given unreceptive messages in the media and in their social circles. While antagonistic rhetoric targets refugees, religious minorities, and others in broad categories, these messages were personalized and experienced by individuals and families. Discriminatory labels and acts led refugees to question their personal safety and their sense of home. However, refugees also

acknowledged their disapproval of such othering and discrimination, noting their lack of control over their status as refugees and their rightful claim to resettlement in the U.S.

In the aftermath of the 2016 election, participants observed increased antagonism towards immigrants and refugees. The choice of U.S. voters to elect Donald Trump indicated to refugee participants that anti-immigrant sentiment was common, if not universal. Far-right rhetoric and nationalist narratives that portrayed refugees and immigrants as outsider threats (Hogan & Haltinner, 2015) were perceived as acceptable to the majority of the country. As participants lived with this new reality in the U.S., symbols such as the American flag took on new meaning. In effect, growing perceptions of refugees as dangerous served to jeopardize the safety of refugees, rather than the majority community (Amuedo-Dorantes et al., 2021; Masterson & Yasenov, 2018; Sakib & Ishraque Osman, 2019).

Identities are intersectional, with race and religion influencing othering experiences in addition to refugee status. Fears of being targeted and experiences with discrimination were particularly pronounced for participants who were Muslim or Black. Those with these racial and religious identities in particular experienced losses of freedom, belonging, and safety. Increases in Islamophobia (Jamal, 2017; Mogahed & Mahmood, 2020) involve not only othering attitudes but behaviors that could lead to physical and emotional harm. Additional research could examine how aspects of identity intersect and amplify vulnerability. Most participants had some marker of difference from the White, Christian, English-speaking majority populations residing in the U.S. Many participants, however, indicated that refugee status became an increasingly salient out-group categorization in this political environment. Tied to the meanings associated with refugee status, such as dependency, race, and danger (Baak, 2019; Grove & Zwi, 2006; Hatoss, 2012; Ludwig, 2016), some participants verbalized personal distancing from the refugee label, for example, by speaking about how they had obtained citizenship and found more belonging and safety in doing so. As such, refugees fought back against othering and prejudice by leveraging citizenship status.

The meanings of resettlement and citizenship shifted as a result of growing hostility towards refugees. Though all participants came to the U.S. legally with eventual access to permanent residence and citizenship, the 2016 election led many to question their immigration status and ability to remain in the country. Participants were also troubled by bans on refugee admittance. As nations reduce access to resettlement in the face of increased need (Betts, 2015; Cumming-Bruce, 2019; Krogstad, 2019; Long, 2013; U.S. Department of State, 2019), possibilities for acceptance and security become tenuous. Former refugees questioned their own place of home as well as possibilities for others, while maintaining the belief that they should belong and obtain acceptance within American society. For some, citizenship became a protection from immigration policy changes. Participants who saw citizenship as a marker of safety noted that citizenship indicated a change in their identity that perhaps spared them from restrictive policies targeting foreigners. Citizenship ideally signifies belonging, in that it facilitates access to universal values of liberty, democracy, and mobility (Haggis & Schech, 2010); however, such values were not felt by all participants. For some, citizenship became tainted in an environment consistently indicating they did not belong. Similar sentiments regarding the

meaninglessness of citizenship were found among Liberian refugees resettled in New York (Ludwig, 2016). These refugees from Liberia felt the refugee label remained their primary ascribed identity, regardless of other markers of identity such as U.S. citizenship.

Findings indicate the role of power in shaping resettlement discourse and policy. Refugee communities have little to no influence on which countries will provide resettlement opportunities and what related services will entail. Resettlement processes are guided by nations in power and focus on border maintenance in ways that further disenfranchise and other refugee communities (Besteman, 2016; Brons, 2015; Darrow & Scholl, 2020; Oelgemoller, 2017). In this study, participants recognized the power of othering attitudes and rhetoric in reduced resettlement opportunities (Bier, 2018), fearing further restrictions based on these attitudes. A shift in discourse and policy can occur as refugee voices are prioritized, including the voices of refugees advocating for their rights to safety and belonging in U.S. society.

Study findings have implications for social work practice. Attention to refugee experiences and concerns is essential, particularly during times of change and stress. Social workers can ensure that refugees are aware of their legal rights and opportunities for change of legal status, including those regarding permanent residence status, citizenship, and family reunification. Care can be taken to ensure false assurance is not provided when uncertainty surrounds potential policy changes. Further, opportunities for ongoing dialogue with affected communities can be maintained as policies are challenged within court systems or evolve through local implementation. Social workers can ensure relevant information is accessible across communities where fears and rumors may jeopardize wellbeing and safety. Additionally, social workers and others working in resettlement can recognize information and service gaps, responding through promoting legal, translation, health, economic, or other services where needed.

Social work practitioners can also recognize the detrimental effects of toxic political environments and respond in ways that promote safety, understanding, and belonging. Community-wide efforts that enhance social connection are needed (Welcoming America, 2020), and interactions across differences may reduce far-right tendencies (Steinmayr, 2016). For non-refugee communities, opportunities to learn from and connect socially with people who have come to the U.S. as refugees can de-mystify and personalize the resettlement process. Shared public spaces, even in areas where segregation is common, promote togetherness and cross-culturalism among people with diverse backgrounds (Anderson, 2004). Practitioners may play a role in raising awareness among non-refugee communities, seeking to educate and connect those with diverse backgrounds and create communities that are safe and welcoming. Additional strategies include messaging campaigns, training for clients regarding how to respond to discriminatory actions, provision of safe spaces or emergency contact information, and training regarding legal rights and access. Multiple approaches and strategies are needed to ensure refugees can speak out regarding injustices and have the tools necessary to protect themselves from othering attitudes and behaviors.

Social workers and social service agencies can collaborate with refugee communities in efforts to reject othering behaviors and attitudes. Narratives that contradict anti-

immigrant sentiment are essential (Krumer-Nevo & Benjamin, 2010), promoting the development of empathy (Ghidina, 2019). Growing support for movements such as Black Lives Matter in the U.S. indicates many residents reject long-held racist beliefs and practices such as the over-policing of Black communities (Guskin et al., 2020). The Black Lives Matter movement also demonstrates the power of recognizing individual experiences, with attention to the names of people killed at the hands of police (Black Lives Matter, 2020). Attention to refugee experiences within community events, sport, education, and other avenues may create opportunities for understanding and celebration of refugees. While immigrants have often been pitted against other minority groups in the U.S., Black communities in particular (Tang, 2015), solidarity and partnership with related movements for social justice may empower refugee communities and create space for their unique voices and realities. Social workers can promote these opportunities, recognizing that shared experience and commonalities related to race and religion may also fuel united social action.

At the policy level, social workers can promote opportunities for increased refugee resettlement and improvements in conditions for those who have previously resettled. The Biden administration's commitment to increase and improve resettlement opportunities is a critical and life-saving step (UNHCR, 2021b; White House, 2021). With the expanding numbers of forcibly displaced persons worldwide (UNHCR, 2021a), increased advocacy is needed, including attention to reducing conflicts, promoting options for permanent resettlement, and improving the circumstances of those seeking asylum. Post-resettlement advocacy is needed to expand resettlement services, promote access to education, and address wellbeing. In these efforts, people who have experienced resettlement bring needed perspectives and must be included in discourse and leadership. Efforts of social workers and other providers to elevate refugee voices and experiences within policy and media discourse may bring needed recognition of potential solutions and a shared humanity. Increasing proximity to the refugee experience and highlighting a common ground may reduce tendencies to other those from minority or refugee status.

Further research regarding the refugee resettlement experience is needed. Additional qualitative studies examining the needs and experiences of refugees would assist in hearing, understanding, and elevating refugee voices. Furthermore, studies examining the experiences of refugees in other areas of the U.S. could provide needed insight into the effects of the post-2016 political climate on refugees resettled throughout the U.S. As this study was conducted during the Trump administration, studies examining the effects of the Biden administration and post-2020 policies can bring additional insight to the ongoing experience of refugees amidst changes in U.S. policy and discourse.

Limitations

This study has limited generalizability due to study context and implementation. The sample included participants who resided in the intermountain west region of the U.S. While many participants discussed perspectives regarding the national political climate, further research is needed to examine how contexts vary across the U.S. Procedural barriers included the one-time interview. Approaching the sensitive issue of politics may have been

easier for some participants to do after multiple meetings, or with more time to reflect. Though interviewers and interpreters were diverse in terms of racial and refugee status background, some participants may have been uncomfortable sharing views and experiences with those from different backgrounds. Moreover, given the nature of refugees' cultural and political backgrounds in their countries of origin, discussion of political topics during the interview may have been especially sensitive. As such, some participants may have filtered their answers, sharing only commentary they felt was safe in response to questions surrounding politics. Additionally, although interpreters were offered and frequently used, varying degrees of English language proficiency among participants may have inhibited understanding of interview content and participant answers. Moreover, the full depth of interview content may have been altered through translation. Despite these limitations, the large sample provided access to a diverse group of participants. As all participants had been in the U.S. for more than five years, this study provides a unique perspective on how the political climate influenced refugee adjustment and wellbeing in the aftermath of the 2016 election.

Conclusion

While racism, religious discrimination, and anti-refugee sentiment are not new, antagonistic attitudes and behaviors increased post-2016. Among people who have resettled in the U.S. as refugees long-term, these changes are apparent and difficult to navigate. Study respondents noted an increased sense of uncertainty, changes regarding the meaning and value of citizenship, and an unwelcome environment associated with fear and discriminatory acts. Despite this unwelcoming environment, many resettled refugees are working to successfully navigate U.S. society and push back against societal norms that other minorities, including refugees. Attention to these voices and experiences is critical, as U.S. society considers when and how to respond to forced migration and social inequities. The U.S. resettlement program provides a necessary opportunity for safety and legal status for a small number of forced migrants globally. As refugees become permanent residents and citizens, a climate of welcome, safety, and certainty is needed. Leadership from social workers and others is needed to undo a political climate that encourages disregard and ostracization of refugees, instead restoring opportunities for resettlement assistance and recognizing shared humanity.

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