Building Community: Connecting Refugee and Canadian Families

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Abstract

Objectives. This paper reports on an investigation of factors that promote or impede the development of social cohesion in communities receiving refugee newcomers largely of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) backgrounds. This community-based research was completed in collaboration with a community partner – a settlement agency dedicated to supporting people with immigrant and refugee backgrounds.

Methods. Interviews were conducted with refugee newcomers, professionals working with refugee populations, individuals involved in private sponsorship of refugees, and long-term community residents.

Results. Results focus on the essential relational and contextual issues to consider when designing a program to build social connections. Together, the findings suggest the value of trying to replicate how relationships form organically, the need to collaborate across systems, and the importance of addressing societal narratives about how newcomers are perceived.

Conclusions. Recommendations regarding the process of creating a community program are offered. These findings will be shared with a range of stakeholders in order to co-create and implement a new program for enhancing social cohesion in our community.

Keywords: Social Cohesion; Refugees; Community-Based Research

Public Significance Statement. An increasing number of individuals are displaced around the globe, challenging communities to welcome and integrate newcomers. Programs to build social cohesion between newcomers and long-term residents should attempt to replicate organic relationship-building and capitalize on newcomers' strengths. Efforts must be attuned to needs and strengths found in specific local contexts.

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Global displacement rates have soared to an all time high (United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees, 2018). The success of multicultural countries, such as Canada, depends on their ability to promote social cohesion as they grow in cultural diversity (Ali, 2017). Communities worldwide are striving to create and sustain community well-being (e.g., civic participation, social inclusion, mutual trust; Anderson, 2017), with explicit attention to what it means to create a "welcoming community" for individuals with immigrant and refugee backgrounds (e.g., Esses, Hamilton, Bennett-AbuAyyash, & Burstein, 2010). Many multicultural communities have designed and implemented innovative programming to foster social connection among their residents, such as mentorship programs focused on preparing newcomers for the workplace or further schooling (Bradford & King, 2011; Griffiths et al., 2009). Many of these programs are grounded in research demonstrating that positive intergroup contact increases intergroup empathy, promotes positive intergroup attitudes, and decreases threat perceptions (e.g., Hewstone & Swart, 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Our research was motivated by a desire to understand which approaches to social cohesion were considered most helpful in our community and why.

In this paper, we report on the results of a community-based qualitative study that examined the experiences of locals, newcomers (largely from MENA countries), and professionals working in settlement organizations and government, as they each considered how to create *social cohesion* among newcomers and long-term community members. Social cohesion has been conceptualized as an ongoing movement towards social harmony by some (Markus & Dharmalingam, 2013), or as a by-product of experiencing belonging by others (Andreasson, 2016). Jenson's (1998) definition, widely used in contemporary research (e.g.,

Dandy & Pe-Pua, 2013) and as a foundation for increasingly refined definitions of the construct (i.e., Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017) argues that social cohesion includes five inter-related dimensions: belonging, inclusion (economic), participation (civically and in the community), recognition (mutual respect; absence of discrimination), and legitimacy (institutional and public policies upholding social cohesion). The current study adopts this multidimensional understanding of social cohesion. We focus on social cohesion rather than social integration, because social cohesion implicitly recognizes the responsibilities and benefits to both newcomers and locals, whereas the term social integration is often used on a linear manner to index the degree to which newcomers have assimilated into the existing local milieu.

The benefits of social cohesion amongst newcomers and long-term residents in migrant receiving contexts are robust. Community-level social cohesion (e.g., equality and inclusion) is linked to better health (e.g., Putrik et al., 2015) and to individual experiences of belonging and recognition (Jeannotte, 2003). Further, individual social support and belonging are related to better health and psychological well-being for migrants (Correa-Velez, Gilford, Barnett, 2010; Fazel et al., 2012; Khanlou, 2009). Similarly, social inclusion predicts prosocial behavior and fewer peer problems amongst newcomer youth (Nathan et al., 2013) and transnational identity development and enhanced self-agency in newcomer adults (Oleschuk, 2012). Finally, among undergraduates, mutual learning relationships with refugees fosters increased recognition of personal privilege and social inequities, and increases motivation to enact structural change (Hess et al., 2014).

Despite evidence for the benefits of social cohesion, building cohesive communities that include newcomers is challenging. For example, as newcomers arrive, established residents may fear the local changes that new neighbors will bring (e.g., Esses, Hamilton, & Gaucher, 2017). In

particular, perceived economic competition over limited resources can create barriers to viewing the social cohesion as a responsibility shared by established and new residents alike (Burhan & Leeuwen, 2016). Refugee youth experience challenges to feelings of belonging at school, reporting difficulty developing friendships, bullying, racism, marginalization, and limited support from school personnel (Guo, Maitra, & Guo, 2019; Wilson-Forsberg, 2012).

National and Local Context

Canada admitted 46,700 refugees in 2016 (UNHCR, 2017), the majority of whom were from Syria (33,266). Refugees to Canada are admitted through one of three streams: Government Assisted Refugees (GAR), Privately-Sponsored Refugees (PSR), and Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR; Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, 2016). The GARs receive one year of government-funded financial and resettlement support; they are usually referred by the UNHCR based on their protection needs. Similarly, PSRs are also supported financially and practically for a year, but by groups of private citizen sponsorship groups rather than government. Government and sponsorship groups support the BVOR refugees half-and-half. All refugees (in contrast to asylum seekers) are given permanent resident status when they arrive in Canada. For this reason, we refer to them as newcomers in this paper rather than refugees.

In comparison to other countries, Canada has a political and social context that is relatively favorable to newcomers (e.g., includes a multicultural ideology; van de Vijver, 2017). Nonetheless, prejudicial beliefs (e.g., Islamophobia) and discrimination are still ever present, and Canadian communities do not fully include newcomers as equals. In addition, the government no long funds initiatives with the objective of building friendships between newcomers and Canadian volunteers. Previously, the Host Program focused on facilitating settlement by providing opportunities for networking and interaction between newcomers and Canadians (CIC,

2004), in recognition of the "two way street" principle which identifies the integration of newcomers as a shared responsibility between new arrivals and Canadians (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, CIC; 2004). However, starting in 2008, when federal settlement programming was transformed, only some aspects of the Host Program were retained in the newly imagined Community Connections program (e.g., career mentoring, conversation circles), leaving a gap in services that might foster social cohesion.

Our local community of about 350,000 (Statistics Canada, 2017) is home to a large aging population. Although local universities draw a diverse international student population, the community is predominantly White (European heritage). Visible minorities constitute only 14% of the metro area (Statistics Canada, 2017). Further, few individuals of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) descent live in the community. In the 2016 census, individuals of West Asian (e.g., Iranian) and Middle Eastern descent constituted 1.3% of the local population, and North African individuals 0.2%. This is a markedly different demographic from larger Canadian cities like Montreal where 1 in 10 people have MENA origins (Statistics Canada, 2017). Importantly, within the Canadian context, MENA individuals and communities are tracked through Canadian census data, and considered "visible minorities" by the Government of Canada. This provides researchers and political leaders opportunities to address ethnocultural needs that are not afforded in contexts where MENA individuals do not have a federally recognized racial or ethnic category (i.e., United States Census).

Community-Based Research Process

We used a Community-Based Research approach in this project, the consensus term that has emerged in Canada (Janzen, Ochocka, & Stobbe, 2016), and note that the values, goals, and procedures are closely aligned with what others refer to as Community-Based Participatory

Research (CBPR; Collins, Clifasefi, Stanton, The LEAP Advisory Board, Straits, Gil-Kashiwabara, et al., 2018). Our underlying goals are consistent with CBPR's emphasis on using research findings to develop programming and resources for underserved communities in order to address systemic disadvantages and achieve greater equity in society (Israel, Eng. Schulz, & Parker, 2013; Wilson, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2018).

Our methods incorporated all three hallmarks of community-based research outlined by Janzen and colleagues (2016). First, the research is community-determined. The research was co-conducted with a community partner, the staff of a local settlement agency, from its inception, so that the goals reflect their priorities and the findings are relevant to them (Minkler, 2005). The specific focus on social cohesion arose from our collaborative work delivering a series of community workshops together. During these workshops, the need for better social inclusion of newcomers from the Middle East and North Africa was identified. Among the recent newcomers of MENA decent, concern among our community partner staff, and newcomers themselves, was greatest for GAR families, who experience disparities in social engagement opportunities compared to PSRs. For example, sponsoring families frequently invited children from PSR families to attend sporting and cultural events with them and PSR parents benefited from multiple sponsors who offered assistance in navigating the schools and other aspects of life in Canada. GAR families, in contrast, had few similar opportunities.

Second, at each stage of the research process, we aimed to create an equitable partnership with our community partner (Janzen et al., 2016). A community researcher with both professional and lived experience with the topic was employed on the research team. Our methods included active collaboration in all phases of the research, including preparation of the grant proposal, research design (e.g., feedback on the interview questions, input into who in the

community to include as interview participants), data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and dissemination of findings. Because we have worked together for several years, the researchers and community partners have developed an authentic partnership characterized by mutual trust and respect, that is essential for successful community-based research (Minkler, 2005). And third, the goal of this research was action and change (Janzen et al., 2016). Our purpose is to co-create knowledge that will be useful in the community as stakeholders design and implement a program to increase social cohesion. These next steps are discussed further at the end of the paper.

The interview protocol included both open-ended questions, to allow participants to express their ideas and priorities related to creating social cohesion locally, as well as specific questions that asked participants to comment on four prototypical program models. We focused this paper on the ground-up themes the participants taught us regarding the range of factors to consider *prior* to creating a program, rather than questions about prototypical program models. Many of the themes discussed in this paper are expected, logical, and fitting with existing research on intergroup dynamics and social cohesion. However, because of their pervasiveness across participant groups, this paper highlights these key relational and contextual building blocks of successful efforts to foster social cohesion. By doing so, we hope that the themes can act as a road map for researchers, direct service workers, and policymakers developing specific programming in their own communities.

Methods

Participants

A semi-structured interview guide was used to interview participants individually or in family groups (2-3 siblings together, spouses, or parent-child dyads). Specifically, we completed

eight individual interviews with people working with newcomer populations (Professionals), five with people involved in private sponsorship (Sponsors; six people), four with long-term residents with no previous involvement with newcomers (Long-Term Residents; five people), and 16 with newcomers with refugee backgrounds (Newcomers; 24 people).

Professionals. Professionals (75% female) were 39.62 years (SD=13.02) on average (range: 18-54). All but one had a migrant background, including European, the United States, Caribbean, African American, Arab, and East Indian origins. The average length of residence in Canada for those born outside was 13.33 years (SD=8.07). Participants worked in settlement agencies (n=5), community cultural organizations (n=2), and a municipality (n=1) for an average of 5.40 (SD=7.61) years (range: 0.14-23 years).

Sponsors. Sponsors (66.7% female) were 58.67 years (SD=18.41) on average (range: 25-78). Two-thirds had a migrant background, including Israeli, UK, and South African backgrounds. The average length of residence in Canada for those born outside was 37.75 years (SD=14.57). The participants had sponsored 1-3 newcomer families or individuals. The Sponsors reported Christian and Jewish religious backgrounds (often non-practicing).

Long-Term Residents. Long-term Residents (60% female) were 54.80 years (SD=9.98) on average (range: 39-65). Only one had a migrant background (South India), living in Canada for 49 years. The Long-term Residents all reported Christian religious backgrounds.

Newcomers. Newcomers (54% female) were 21.52 years (SD=8.70) on average (range: 12-44). The newcomers were from Syria (n=15), Libya (n=3), Iraq (n=3), Sudan (n=2), and Lebanon (n=1). All but two spent two or more years as a refugee in another country prior to arriving in Canada. Participants had lived in Canada for an average of 21.96 months (SD=14.14). All reported a Muslim religious background (one non-practicing). The background of these

newcomers matched fairly closely the larger refugee community in terms of country of origin. The sample likely over-represents young adults compared to the local newcomer community.

Procedure

Purposive sampling was used to identify Professionals. Sponsors and Long-Term Residents were recruited through local advertisement (social media, flyer posting) and snowball sampling. The majority of Newcomers were invited to participate personally by our community partner. Interviews (30-60 minutes) were conducted in Arabic (for 81.2% of Newcomer interviews) or English in a private location of the participants' choosing (commonly their home or place of work, the partner agency, or our research offices). The Arabic language interviews were all conducted by the same person, who had experience working with individuals from many MENA countries and therefore was accustomed to different Arabic dialects. If unsure, she sought clarification from a participant during the interview.

The semi-structured interviews focused on participants' perspectives on how to cultivate social cohesion between newcomer and long-term residents in the local community. Participants were also invited to brainstorm ideas for local programs that would facilitate these cultural bridging relationships. Additionally, participants provided feedback on four different (researcher-identified) prototypical program models for achieving this goal (e.g., 1:1 mentoring of individuals or families, programs providing volunteer opportunities for newcomers). All participants were compensated for their time. Interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed. The interviews that were conducted in Arabic were transcribed verbatim by the interviewer. The same researcher then translated the Arabic transcription into English. Transcripts were not coded until they were all in English. Prior to starting each interview, participants reviewed written informed consent and we verbally covered key aspects to ensure

understanding. The university ethics board approved our research design.

Researchers

The interview and data analysis team consisted of a faculty member, a graduate student, a community partner (case manager at settlement organization), and a community volunteer with a degree in psychology. The researchers brought a diversity of experiences – empirical, clinical, and personal – to understanding newcomer adjustment and social cohesion. The researchers were of varied ethnic, religious, racial, and national backgrounds. Two were of MENA origin and all had some form of migrant background. Authors had advanced training in research interviews with newcomers, qualitative data analysis, and community-engaged research approaches.

Approach

This research was guided by values of collaboration, openness, cultural humility, and respect for dignity. Our predisposition was to uncover the range of ideas people hold (e.g., about how to foster social cohesion), rather than identify a consensus answer. We attempted to provide a safe space for individuals to express their true opinions without fear of judgment. For example, we asked open-ended questions and approached each interview with curiosity and the assumption that the interviewee was the most knowledgeable person in the interview. Nonetheless, we recognized we could not fully erase the inherent power dynamics at play.

The approach to inquiry was descriptive and pragmatic. We strove to deeply understand and clearly describe a small representation of the multitude of community member perspectives on how to create belonging and social cohesion in our city. Our community partner has the goal of clarifying these perspectives in order to develop a unique local program that builds bridges between newcomers and established residents. Thus, our research questions were pragmatic and locally contextualized (e.g., How can we make newcomers feel more welcomed here? What has

kept you as a long-term resident from connecting with newcomers?).

Analytic Process

The data were analyzed with MAXQDA using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first author, using a descriptive coding process, first analyzed 75% of the data. This involved using small chunks of data, or a "splitter coding" style – a few sentences of text or less (Saldaña, 2009). Four hierarchical categories were developed a priori: barriers and facilitators of social cohesion, recommendations for programming, evaluation of specific program models, and sponsorship group dynamics. Within these categories, individual codes were thematically grouped, and sub-categories developed based on shared content. In order to elevate all perspectives, codes were retained regardless of the number of participants they represented. These data were triangulated across researchers as the remaining authors undertook a two-step process to independently review the coding scheme.

In step one of the process, the researchers examined the first author's individual codes, evaluating for appropriate fit within each category and subcategory. Throughout the process, all researchers made liberal use of reflexive coding memos to track emerging patterns, ideas, questions, and to maintain discussion about the data as the analyses developed. Second, researchers provided feedback to the first author concerning the findings in step one, as well as the higher-level conceptual organization of the coding scheme. This feedback was used as the basis for a fuller group discussion, in which the researchers worked collaboratively to refine the conceptual frame guiding the coding scheme. The first author then reviewed the previously coded transcripts in light of the revised coding scheme and coded the remaining transcripts. To further ensure the trustworthiness of the analyses, one of the participants (a professional with MENA origins and a migrant background) reviewed the themes and their descriptions.

Results

The majority of themes reflected individual, relational, and contextual factors that foster or impede the development of social cohesion. Two of the three factors are consistent with the integrative risk and resilience model of the adaptation of immigrant origin children and youth (Suárez -Orozco, Motti-Stefanidi, Marks, & Karsiaficas, 2018). First, similar to Suárez-Orozco et al (2018), individual-level factors included qualities of newcomers that may facilitate social cohesion (e.g., cultural knowledge, openness to new experiences, language abilities). Importantly, similar qualities among long-term residents were also identified. These themes are not presented here in the interest of space. The *Contextual factors* speak directly to key elements of the political and social contexts of reception highlighted by Suárez –Orozco et al. (2018). The *Relational factors* emerged solely from the ideas expressed directly by the participants, and identify key interpersonal dynamics that encourage social cohesion.

Relational Factors

Five relational themes were identified which highlighted interpersonal considerations that facilitate or interfere with a sense of connection and cohesion (see Table 1).

The first theme, *In-group and Outgroup Relationships are Needed*, focused on the different needs that are met by in-group and outgroup members. Same-ethnic community members often serve as bridges to the larger community in early settlement (Spaaij, 2012) and are seen as sources of support and safety: "*I think having that initial welcome and that initial connection who speaks your language, there's some comfort and a safety feeling. Helping to build confidence so you can brave… so when you do go out into the larger community it's nice to have a welcome and people who are on your side*" (Professional, 53-year-old female). They also provide a comfortable place to ask questions without appearing "*too un-Canadian*" and a

reassurance that people with similar backgrounds can thrive in Canada.

Several participants mentioned that the same-culture community is not always supportive (e.g., judgmental about not wearing a hijab), providing a reminder that different newcomers have distinct needs and desires: "*Yeah, I mean like there are Syrian refugees, but it does not mean, if they are Syrian, I am Syrian, everything, what we do in our life should be the same. It's not.*" (Newcomer*,* 23-year-old female). These perspectives reflected the diversity within the community of people with MENA backgrounds, and the fact that not all participants felt equally comfortable or welcome within the broader Arabic-speaking community. There is only one mosque in the region, and some participants spoke about the challenge of building relationships even within the Muslim community due to differences in language preferences. Other participants experienced themselves as minorities within this community (e.g., ethnically Kurdish), or spoke of the challenges of being perceived by non-Muslims as a singular group, similar to findings reported by Wang, Raja, and Aher (2019).

Some participants also highlighted the freedom and growth that can come from relationships outside of one's cultural community. For example, the participants noted that relationships with Canadians provided opportunity to learn how to access services and understand the unwritten rules that govern interactions in the new community, resulting in greater confidence and better social integration (Cederberg, 2012; Kunz, 2005). The simultaneous value of in-group and out-group connections mirrors the concepts of bonding social capital (support from others from the same background) and bridging social capital (which links newcomers with social networks in the receiving society; Hope, 2011).

The second theme, *Have an Excuse to Meet*, reflected the delicate balance between having a focus for activities designed to bring together newcomers and long-term residents, and

the importance of cultivating a relaxed atmosphere to encourage genuine interactions. Having a reason to meet alleviated potentially awkward social pressure. Activities like artwork, sports, food, gardening music, and dance were preferred as easy ways to connect even with language barriers (e.g., Hancock, Cooper, & Bahn, 2009; Marsh, 2012). "*We've always had great success where you know, you guys put in a soccer team... Get together afterwards there's food and opportunity for them to sit and chat and stuff*" (Professional 47-year-old male). Equally, participants cautioned against too much structure, preferring interactions that are flexible, open-ended, informal, and casual so that social exchanges feel safe and authentic (see also Montesanti, Abelson, Lavis, & Dunn, 2017). *"...I get really scared when it's something specifically set up where you're here to meet people, I get anxious! But I feel like casual situations where you can connect, you can hear other people's stories in a casual, maybe homely situation… it's easier to adjust and take your own time"* (Professional, 18-year-old female).

Food was frequently identified as a means of building community with low language demands, as sharing food was described as a natural bonding experience. *"There's something magical about food and drink…a way for people to get together and have a chat over a cup of tea and just a natural way for people to build friendships"* (Long-Term Resident, 52-year-old female). Preparing and eating food was also desirable because it was open to all ages and is seen across cultures as a way of taking care of each other. "*People really open up and the whole idea of breaking bread and sharing a meal. It's such a human thing. We all eat and it's such a human connection*" (Professional, 53-year-old female). Many specific ideas were offered for programming that involved food, such as multicultural dinners, themed dinners with an educational component, and cooking competitions.

The third theme, *Follow the Newcomer's Lead*, reflected the importance of placing

newcomers' priorities and preferences at the center when creating social cohesion programming. A key aspect of building relationships was listening deeply to newcomers and trying to understand their perspectives and desires. Relatedly, participants stressed the importance of tailoring programs to meet needs identified by newcomers, rather than needs that others perceive. "*We used to throw things together and say oh the community will come if we create it but, that's not the way it always works. We always want to talk to who we are trying to serve to find out if this is going to be a benefit to you and if you would like to do it.*" (Professional, 47-year-old male).

The fourth theme, *Value the Contributions of Newcomers*, emphasized the value of highlighting the contributions of newcomers and seeking reciprocity in relationships. Central to this theme is inviting newcomers to share their unique knowledge and talents in the new community. Teaching about their culture, sharing an artistic talent or trade skill, leading cooking class, or giving Arabic lessons, can all forge social connections. "*They have skills, they have strength, they have things that they do have to offer, so if they're working form that identification and like "Oh, I could offer this." "I could teach this*." (Long-Term Resident, 58-year-old woman). Further, expressing and sharing one's culture helps generate confidence and belonging in a new community (e.g., Lewis, 2015).

Contributing was a key value for newcomers, who do not feel comfortable as the objects of charity. Thus, a benevolent community member who frames their role as "helping" newcomers may not engender true feelings of belonging. As one participant noted, highlighting newcomer contributions might also influence community attitudes regarding newcomers: "*They have this idea like you are taking our jobs, you are taking our… No. OK, you are giving back, so you really want to be part of it, and give back because you respect this community*" (Newcomer,

young adult female).

The focus on mutuality and equality in relationships – sharing stories and learning from each other -- stands in contrast to implicit concepts of hierarchy that are embedded in terms like "mentorship," often used to describe programs that connect newcomers with Canadians. Instead, participant perspectives were more consistent with the field of inclusion, which argues that relationships that foster belonging are reciprocal: built on shared experiences, freely chosen and desired, and associated with feeling valued and respected (Mahar et al., 2013).

Finally, the fifth theme, *Active Community Outreach*, described the need to make explicit, intentional efforts to reach out to newcomers in the community. Many participants provided examples of identifying the natural leaders or "bridgers" who take the initiative to introduce themselves to new people in the community. *"My Mom used to never leave the house but she (Avon Salesperson) came to our door and she introduced herself, and so my Mom – being very polite – would show her hospitality and probably invited her in for tea and they would have a chat and that's how it happened"* (Long-Term Resident, 52-year-old female). Others specifically stressed the need to reach out to vulnerable individuals in the newcomer community, such as women at home with young children. Active and consistent outreach may be required to engage the people who may benefit the most from social cohesion programming.

Contextual Factors

These relational factors exist within and interact with six contextual factors that highlight key considerations about the environment in which social connections develop.

The first theme, *Are Societal Attitudes Welcoming?,* addressed the attitudes and stereotypes that long-term residents hold regarding newcomers. This theme was strongest among the newcomers. Experiences with discrimination quite directly interfere with belonging and

sense of community. One newcomer (mother of young children) described how chronic discrimination from a neighbor had severely harmed her trust in Canadians and violated her sense of safety. Another described a fear that community members would label newcomers as troublemakers, as had occurred in their refugee communities in Turkey. Yet another participant experienced alienation reading comments on the Canadian Citizenship and Immigrant Facebook page. Across groups, participants describe negative attitudes that some Canadian hold towards newcomers, born out of ignorance (e.g., welfare burden, taking jobs). *"You just hear kids and people going "oh they're taking our jobs", and there's still such a severe misunderstanding, so I think just lack of education" (Professional, 18-year-old female).* Attitudes of fear, pity, or threat all contribute to an atmosphere that impedes the development of a sense of community. Active efforts to counteract and disconfirm negative attitudes may be required to create conditions that support belonging (e.g., Kreibaum, 2016), even in a country where multiculturalism is part of the national identity.

The second theme, *Who is Responsible?,* addressed perspectives on who is responsible for creating and administering programs to facilitate social cohesion. Participants offered a diverse range of opinions. Newcomers and sponsors most commonly identified the settlement sector, followed by government. Government involvement signaled the priority of the issue. Several participants discussed the value of placing individuals with newcomer backgrounds in charge, and a few stressed that we are all responsible. Many participants, and especially professionals, spoke to the importance of collaboration and partnership in creating programming. "*I would …advocate for a partnership and to have joint leadership - like a representative from the immigrant and refugee communities, whether that could be: an agency, or just someone who has been here longer and is really involved, as well as a representative from interested*

Canadian-born families" (Professional, 26-year-old female).

The third theme, *Is the Receiving Community Available?,* addressed key considerations about the *availability* of community members to join efforts to welcome newcomers. Participants noted that local community awareness of the arrival of newcomers waxed and waned in concert with political and media attention. When Canada accepted a large number of refugees in 2016, community support was high. However, as one Sponsor noted, "*we are not in that moment anymore*" and the community spirit of collective action has dissipated. Furthermore, many participants discussed how the Canadian lifestyle and local social atmosphere was not conducive to welcoming newcomers and building connections. First, Canadian families were seen as too busy to be involved, making it hard to even capture people's attention in the first place (e.g., to attend events). The self-focused priorities of local life and closed social atmosphere of the community also kept Canadians from making connections. "*There are people who have been living here for a long time, so they already have their group, their family, their community, I don't know if cliquey is the word*" (Long-term Resident, 58-year-old female). This is often in stark contrast to the communities from which newcomers came, further increasing their sense of disconnection.

The fourth theme, *Is the Receiving Community Ready?,* addressed dynamics that affect a community's *readiness* to effectively build social connections and cohesion. For example, people in positions of planning and leadership must know who is coming to the community. Our location includes 13 distinct small municipalities, and there is little communication across sectors. With no centralized governing body, programs in one municipality did not know who was arriving in a neighboring municipality, even though those newcomers would be accessing their services. This made it difficult to plan for the unique needs of different groups, or to consult

with newcomers on their needs and desires.

Readiness is also affected by the ease with which people hear about opportunities to be involved in welcoming newcomers. Programs cannot launch if volunteers, mentors, or potential friends cannot be recruited. Many factors discussed above, such as busy lifestyles or beliefs that social integration is the government's responsibility, affect the ability to engage the local community successfully. Mid-sized cities such as ours are perhaps in the most challenging position: we do not have large established ethno-cultural communities to serve as natural welcoming bridges into the community, and yet we do not have the ethos of welcoming and shared responsibility that is sometimes found in smaller and/or rural communities (e.g., Abu-Ghazaleh, 2009).

Further, participants discussed practical matters of readiness to launch specific programming, such as difficulty securing sustainable funding or finding appropriate physical space in terms of size, affordability, or capabilities (e.g., commercial kitchen space). The need for space that accommodates cultural norms related to male-female interactions in Muslim communities was also highlighted (e.g., open spaces so genders can meet separately).

The fifth theme, *Are there Opportunities to Build from Familiarity?*, addressed the places in the community where social connection programs could capitalize on locations of familiarity and comfort. Frequently identified places were those where newcomers were already receiving supports (e.g., settlement agencies, cultural community associations), as well as places in the community where interactions between newcomers and long-term residents happen naturally, such as English language classes, schools, and sporting events. Children and their activities were seen as a comfortable way to connect, acting as important entry points to connections that are more meaningful. "*I mean like we all have experiences where you know, through sports or what*

have you, kids meeting each other and then the families kind of start to become connected after having that repeated experiences" (Sponsor, 25-year-old male). Similarly, religious locations played a prominent role in connecting. For example, the mosque was a place to meet friends, socialize, and build a sense of family that was missing. At the mosque, shared values across cultural and linguistic lines are emphasized as one means of fostering belonging.

Finally, the sixth theme, *Flexible Programs allow for Natural Linkages Over Time*, addressed the importance of building in flexibility to programs to allow for natural linkages to form over time. For example, some suggested a large initial gathering to identify natural matches in the community (rather than artificially pairing newcomers and established residents up too soon). "*You'll be with whole families, you'll have the chance to talk to this family, and that family…and then choose which family you are more interested in and you have a same sharing point together, you know? Which one you were closer to?*" (Newcomer, 23-year-old female). Other examples described branching into the social network of a new friend, or branching off on one's own, after initial introductions, to pursue relationships outside of formal program structures. "*This program is to help newcomers, right, and this newcomer found a friend and he is happy with, so your job is done, don't keep them under the program supervision and restrictions*" (Newcomer, 25-year-old male). This theme also included the importance of planning for programs over the long-term, recognizing that genuine relationships require consistency, regularity, and time to develop.

Discussion

The participants provided substantial insights into factors to consider when creating a program to foster social cohesion among newcomers and long-term community members. Many of the themes identified complemented existing literature (e.g., barriers created by language and

discrimination, same-ethnic peers as bridging agents, connecting over food). Several less

common themes also emerged, such as the value of flexibility and the importance of tuning into

the specifics of a particular community (as what "works" will be locally-constructed). More

broadly, the results highlight social cohesion as a multidimensional community-level construct,

not just an interpersonal construct. That is, in response to questions about how to create social

cohesion, the participants spoke to essential structural and process considerations that implicitly

included dimensions of social cohesion beyond belonging, such as encouraging full participation

in the community as equals, recognizing the contributions newcomers add to the community, and

the need for systemic changes in how sectors communicate (legitimacy) in order for social

cohesion goals to be realized (Jenson, 1998). Our findings provide broad guidelines for how to

build community-based programs that have roots in human rights based approaches and in

community-based approaches to service provision.

Leveraging a Human Rights Framework to Develop Social Cohesion Programming

Human rights approaches to health care and social services emphasize the importance of

developing policies and programs that protect and address the rights of all people, that recognize

the impact of social context on wellbeing, and that attempt to eliminate social injustices (Patel,

2019). Several human rights principles featured strongly in participants' views of how to foster

social cohesion, such as respecting individuals by listening to them and valuing their

contributions; promoting autonomy, participation, and inclusion; preventing discrimination; and

ensuring the appropriateness of services for different gender and cultural backgrounds (Patel,

2019). Viewing social cohesion in a human rights framework highlights the value of

incorporating the perspectives and strengths of newcomers and of addressing multiple

dimensions of social cohesion at once. Rather than construing a social cohesion program as a

social service that is generously provided to newcomers, a human rights lens encourages us to create programs for which the whole community is responsible and from which the whole community benefits.

Questions about social cohesion as a human right versus a social service were raised implicitly in participants' discussion of who is responsible for welcoming and integrating newcomers into the social fabric of the community. The messages sent by government have a clear link to public attitudes, which are central to how welcoming a community is (Esses et al., 2017). Models such as Canada's private sponsorship option, in line with the federal integration strategy, implicitly communicate that integrating newcomers is a responsibility – including financial – shared by private citizens. In other countries, the responsibility rests solely with government. Although one model is not necessarily better than another, they send different messages. Private sponsorship may be seen as government abdicating its responsibility to provide for the welfare of refugees who are admitted into a country. Alternatively, private sponsorship provides a means of raising community awareness of refugees and sends the message that newcomers are welcome and valuable members of the community.

Consistent with a rights-based perspective, participants clearly identified what newcomers have to offer a community. Deliberate strength-based efforts to focus on what newcomers bring, as well as what they need, can help disrupt the narrative surrounding newcomers as vulnerable and fragile. Themes from this research remind us that newcomers arrive with a vast array of skills and experiences (e.g., skills in cooking, culture, science, art, weaving, storytelling, etc.), and that social engagement should include explicit efforts to magnify and share newcomer's agency, resources, and strengths. Within the participation dimension of social cohesion (Jenson, 1998), involving newcomers meaningfully in the structures of

community life benefits the newcomer (e.g., increased confidence and belonging, dignity of being treated as an equal), but also long-term community members by expanding individual horizons with new information and skills.

Participants also clearly articulated what *receiving communities* gain from welcoming newcomers. Recognizing the skills and contributions of newcomers highlights ways the receiving community can grow and change from incorporating newcomers, rather than only focusing on how newcomers will join and integrate into the mainstream culture. As more newcomers arrive, and more long-term residents become involved in their lives, the implicit assumption that middle-class Canadian values are the norm may decrease (e.g., Romero, 2008). Explicit efforts led by government, community leaders, and allies to raise awareness of the benefits of newcomers to a community and nation (e.g., neighborhood revitalization, economic development; Smith, 2008) may help reduce economic and social fears community members may have about newcomers (e.g., competition for employment and social resources, Islamophobia; Esses et al., 2017). Greater awareness may lead more people to become involved with newcomers, and the humanizing aspects of personal interaction (e.g., Hewstone & Swart, 2011) will further reduce fears and enhance welcoming, recursively.

Social cohesion is more than interpersonal experiences of welcoming. The economic inclusion and legitimacy dimensions of social cohesion (Jenson, 1998) are inherently bound to factors such as labor practices and neighborhood characteristics (Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda, & Abdulrahim, 2012). In our community, housing is unaffordable and the available housing is small and spread out geographically. This is a poor match for newcomers, who tend to have large families and prefer to live in close proximity and engage socially with similar neighbors. Employment is also a significant concern, as many newcomers arrive with professional

credentials that are not recognized in Canada. These structural factors maintain inequalities by

blocking pathways to advancement. Inequities in access to power and resources maintain the

exclusion and marginalization of newcomers (Saloojee & Saloojee, 2017). Social cohesion

efforts must be designed with these broader considerations in mind.

Community-based Approaches to Program Development: Process Recommendations

The results collectively also speak to the value of adopting community-based research

principles in the service of *program development*. A community-based orientation to research

emphasizes qualities such as genuine partnerships, collaborative and equitable relationships,

engagement of key community members, learning together, and promoting community strengths

(e.g., Collins et al., 2018; Minkler, 2005). Participants implicitly or explicitly addressed each of

these qualities when reflecting on how to create a program to build social cohesion.

For example, consistent with a community-based orientation, the results underscore the

value of engaging a range of stakeholders. Newcomers were particularly attuned to the barriers

created by language and hostile societal attitudes and the value of reciprocity. Professionals,

alternatively, were particularly likely to advocate for listening closely to newcomers'

preferences, spotlighting newcomers' talents, and pursuing collaborations across sectors.

Sponsors' perspectives highlighted food as an entry point to relationships and the importance of

regularity and consistency in relationship-building. Finally, long-term residents drew attention to

ways that lifestyles and prevailing social atmospheres limit involvement and the value of

capitalizing on social settings where newcomers and long-term residents meet naturally. Each

participant group emphasized different parts of the equation; a full picture will result in a

stronger program than would have otherwise been possible.

The results also echoed the emphasis in community-based approaches on the value of

collaboration among people with different perspectives. Rather than working in isolation, program planning may be improved if the process reflects the talents and experiences of many individuals – those with experience doing this type of work, those for whom the work is intended, and those who must participate for the work to be successful. Furthermore, because social cohesion is multidimensional, efforts to enhance social cohesion should be systemic, maximizing coordination among sectors in order to create a holistic approach. In many communities, people are working hard, but independently of one another. Greater coordination across sectors may better address multiple dimensions of social cohesion at once (e.g., economic inclusion, belonging, and recognition). Leadership from local governments to secure stable funding would also elevate the importance of social cohesion in the community.

Finally, a community-based orientation to program development is likely to result in more effective programming and more successful implementation because the relevant stakeholders have had a central role in its creation from the ground-up. The participants offered many recommendations for designing an effective and sustainable program. For example, a successful program has to address the busy lifestyle of Canadians and should seek to replicate organic relationship development. Relationships that form organically tend to be low pressure, unfold over time, and center on a common interest. Thus, programming could capitalize on naturally forming groups with broader reasons to meet – shared religion, community of women of color, children's activities. The structure of the program should be flexible to be appealing and feasible. A program with too little structure will feel awkward – there should be a reason to meet. But too much structure will stifle natural interaction, reduce flexibility, and feel artificial. Similarly, too many regulations and too much oversight will create barriers to participating and programs may lose momentum. Finally, programs that support grassroots efforts and that are

based in mainstream community structures (schools, recreation centers, community centers) that do not explicitly target newcomers may be preferred over dedicated programming in the settlement sector. This is because some newcomers are reluctant to participate in programing at settlement agencies due to perceived stigma of not being independent (of needing assistance). In addition, basing programing in the settlement sector may send the message that the programming is for the benefit of newcomers only, rather than the benefit of everyone.

A program that reflects these ideas might take many different directions. One example would be a family-to-family pairing through a recreation sports league; the families come together organically through a shared interest (e.g., children's soccer), but some structure is added that encourages families to interact beyond the sports field. Another example might be newcomer-led classes (e.g., cooking) in which the newcomers share their knowledge and talents at a community center or similar venue, perhaps sponsored by a local business. Another idea raised involved creating opportunities for newcomers and long-term residents to volunteer in the community side-by-side. In our next steps, we are analyzing the specific program ideas that were shared in the interviews, comparing them to existing programs, and presenting them to a broad range of community stakeholders to serve as a basis for creating a program for our community.

Limitations and Next Steps

The issues examined in this paper are localized to our community. Consequently, findings may not generalize to all communities. There were also limits to our community-based research strategy. The participants represented a variety of stakeholder groups, but they were not co-researchers. In addition, although multiple partners contributed to the initial identification of the research question and the co-construction of the research plan put forward in a grant application, the data collection and analysis involved one central community partner. The

addition of a community-based research advisory committee guiding this project would have

introduced more perspectives at each juncture, including the selection of methods (e.g., design of

interview protocol) and the interpretation of the data. Furthermore, greater representation of the

diversity of cultures and languages of those with MENA backgrounds on the research team may

have added additional insights. Two of authors have a MENA background, one of which has

substantial employment experience learning the nuances of expression for individuals from

diverse MENA countries. This researcher conducted the majority of interviews with the

newcomers. It is possible, however, that even richer information would have been obtained if the

interviewer matched the newcomer participants on country of origin.

As mentioned, our next steps involve knowledge mobilization and community

mobilization as we act on our findings (Janzen et al., 2016). Our aim has always been to develop

a local program that is co-created by our community-researcher partnership, additional

stakeholders who will be involved in program delivery, and future program participants. The

existing community-researcher partnership team is currently assembling an advisory group of

newcomers, long-term residents, and professionals from multiple sectors with whom we will

share these results regarding the program development process. In addition, as part of the

interview protocol, we asked participants for their views on four prototypical program models;

we will also share those findings regarding desirable and undesirable content and formats of

social cohesion programming. The goal is for these community stakeholders to co-create a

program that builds social cohesion among newcomers and long-term community members that

the partners will implement. The researchers' role will be to maintain an advisory group that

monitors implementation and program evaluation. These expanded partnerships increase the

likelihood the resulting program will meet multiple stakeholder needs, and that the program will

be implemented effectively and in a sustainable manner (Leadbeater, 2010). Broad collaboration

with stakeholders should also increase the value of the programming itself because it will be

more culturally attuned and relevant to the community (Minklet, 2005).

Conclusions

Linking back to Janson's (1998) definition of social cohesion, our findings highlight the

importance of addressing the multiple dimensions of social cohesion within our local

community. Belonging cannot exist in the *absence of* economic inclusion, newcomer community

participation, recognition (i.e., through ongoing efforts to eliminate discrimination) and

legitimacy (i.e., political investment in social cohesion by our municipalities). Mapping our data

onto this framework, it will be critical to bring our key findings to stakeholders with the capacity

to act within dimensions of social cohesion not readily addressed in most community

programming (e.g., businesses and employers, local government representatives). The results

also argue for a fundamental paradigm shift, in which efforts to build social cohesion are not

seen as a service to help newcomers from within the settlement sector, but instead is seen as

community responsibility and goal that lifts everyone up. In this respect, it is critical to frame the

goals of a program to form genuine reciprocal relationships to mutual benefit. Finally, the results

highlight the value of adopting a community-based orientation in creating community

programming, building from the ground-up so that the program reflects the needs, values, and

desired of all relevant community members.

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