Health & Place 35 (2015) 52–59

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Health & Place

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/healthplace

Two sides of the same coin: Factors that support and challenge the wellbeing of refugees resettled in a small urban center

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 27 January 2015
Received in revised form
9 June 2015
Accepted 25 June 2015

Keywords:
Refugee
Resettlement
Wellbeing
Environment
Diversity
Urban

ABSTRACT

For refugees who undergo permanent resettlement, characteristics of the resettlement context influence their ability to heal from pre-migration persecution and achieve a sense of wellbeing. This ethnographic study examines the impact of place-related determinants on the sense of wellbeing experienced by refugees resettled in a small urban center. The paper reports on the results of in-depth interviews that were conducted with ten former refugees in St. John's, Canada. We found that challenges and coping resources both emerged from the same aspects of the city, including its built environment, natural environment, history, culture, and low ethnic diversity. Future research should attend to how aspects of the resettlement context can simultaneously challenge and support refugees' sense of wellbeing.

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1. Introduction

Refugees are those who have fled their home countries due to a fear of persecution based on their membership in a social group (UNHCR, 2010). Some countries, such as Canada, offer permanent resettlement to a limited number of refugees annually. Although permanent resettlement allows refugees to establish a new life in a safer place, they must still cope with the effects of pre-migration trauma as well as post-migration challenges (Carswell, Blackburn, and Barker, 2011). Place-related determinants of health have been shown to have a strong impact on the mental and emotional wellbeing of refugees who are resettled in high-income countries (Beiser, 2009; Beiser et al., 2011; Lamba and Krahn, 2003; Simich et al., 2012). The current paper examines the impact of settling in a small urban center on refugees' sense of wellbeing. Using data from an ethnographic study conducted in the small city of St. John's, we demonstrate that challenges and supports for resettled refugees' sense of wellbeing can be traced to the same aspects of the environmental, social, and historical context.

There is a significant gap in the literature regarding the experiences of refugees who are resettled in small urban centers. Most research in Canada examining refugee resettlement is conducted in the three large cities of Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal (Hansson et al., 2012). These cities receive the greatest numbers of immigrants and refugees (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012). Moreover, they have sizeable cultural and linguistic communities, multiple settlement services, and high ethnic diversity (Statistics Canada, 2013a). Ethnic and linguistic diversity in the resettlement context can help refugees build social networks and access services (Stafford, Newbold, and Ross, 2011). Currently, NL has relatively low ethnic and linguistic diversity: only 1.36% of the province's population identified as visible minorities in the 2011 National Household Survey, compared to the national average of 19.07% (Statistics Canada, 2013a). Additionally, only 1.5% of the province's residents speak a language other than English or French[1] at home (Newfoundland and Labrador Statistics Agency, n.d.). Most current residents of Newfoundland claim primarily Irish and English ancestry, and there is a large population of Aboriginal peoples especially in Labrador. Seven per cent of NL's population identifies as Aboriginal, including First Nations, Metis, Inuit, and those with multiple Aboriginal identities (Statistics Canada, 2013b).

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[1] Both English and French are official languages in Canada.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2015.06.009
1353-8292/© 2015 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

NL receives around 100 Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs) every year, a very small number compared to other provinces (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012). Twenty-four asylum seekers came to the island in 2012, and that is the highest number in nine years (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012). Unlike GARs who are accepted by the government and for whom settlement services are offered, asylum seekers are not eligible for any services in St. John's. The small number of asylum seekers in the province can be attributed to the lack of support and infrastructure available in St. John's to help them navigate the refugee claimant process (CBC News, 2014). The province has one federally-funded settlement agency and English school, and these are accessible only to GARs and permanent residents.

The majority of immigrants and refugees who initially come to NL do not stay in the province. A recent report found that NL had the lowest immigrant retention rate amongst all Canadian provinces (Okonny-Myers, 2010). Most refugees who are assigned by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) to be resettled in NL eventually move to other provinces, where they may find family or friends, more employment opportunities, and greater ethnic diversity (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2005; 2007; c.f. Sarma-Debnath and Kutty, 2006). The province's limited retention of incoming refugees and immigrants was the primary reason that St. John's was chosen as the site for this study.

1.1. Background

Refugees experience significant persecution and loss leading to their displacement. Experiences of adversity do not stop after resettlement, as moving to a different country brings a new set of losses and difficulties including language barriers, poverty, and the loss of social networks (Pumariega, Rothe, & Pumariega, 2005; Tilbury & Rapley, 2004). The process of resettling in an unfamiliar place, compounded by the material and emotional losses of displacement, can have a negative impact on refugees' sense of wellbeing. Despite the challenges that refugees face before and after resettlement, most refugees in Canada are mentally and emotionally healthy (Beiser, 2009; Lamba & Krahn, 2003; Simich, Roche, & Ayton, 2012).

Traditionally, resettled refugees have been constructed in research as vulnerable to mental illness due to pre-migration suffering or trauma (di Tomasso, 2010). This view has been critiqued for disregarding the lived experiences of the majority of resettled refugees who do not develop mental illness (Beiser, 2009; Gozdziak, 2004; di Tomasso, 2010). Importantly, the traditional emphasis on pre-migration trauma undermines the influence of the post-migration experiences and the resettlement context on resettled refugees' sense of wellbeing (Beiser, 2009; Ryan, Dooley, & Benson, 2008; Schweitzer, Brough, Vromans, & Asic-Kobe, 2011). Refugees' sense of wellbeing after migration depends on personal resources such as language fluency, as well as on social resources such as the availability of social capital and accessible services (Beiser, 2009). As such, in this paper we have chosen not to use the psychiatric language of mental health when exploring refugees' experiences during resettlement. Rather, we focus on wellbeing as a subjective experience of "life satisfaction, affect (happiness), and coping abilities, considered in a social, political, and psychological context" (Whittaker, Hardy, Lewis, & Buchan, 2005). As such, our work is aligned with health promotion approaches that conceive of wellbeing as a holistic experience that is not limited to the absence of illness (Antonovsky, 1979; Buchanan, 2000).

1.2. The ethnographic context

St. John's is the capital city of Newfoundland and Labrador (NL), the most eastern province of Canada. Lying on the eastern tip of the island of Newfoundland, the city of St. John's has a population of just over 200,000 people (Newfoundland and Labrador Statistics Agency, 2014). Forty per cent of the population of the province resides in St. John's, and the remaining portion of the population is scattered across small towns and rural areas (Newfoundland and Labrador Statistics Agency, 2014). Rocky cliffs jutting out into the sea and high hills characterize the landscape of the island. The foggy climate and rocky coast are at once beautiful and formidable. Residents of the province have traditionally lived off of the land and sea, but in 1992 the cod fishery was closed to commercial harvesters. This cod moratorium had a devastating impact on the province's economy, resulting in a loss of 35,000 jobs (Mather, 2013). In the years since, NL has seen an extensive out-migration of laborers who travel to other parts of Canada in search for employment (Nolan, 2007). Despite a recent increase in offshore oil jobs, there continues to be a net outmigration of laborers from NL to other provinces (Provincial Population Growth Strategy, 2014).

Over the last decade, the provincial government has stressed the need to attract and retain more immigrants and refugees as a strategy to counter the rapidly declining and aging population (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador 2005; 2007; 2014). This suggestion has been met with some hostility. For instance, the journalist Stephen Nolan (2007, p. 142) argues that by promoting immigration as a population growth strategy, the provincial government is neglecting "the population's desperate need for their own people to stay and contribute to the province." This resonates with what Baker and Bittner (2013) term the 'zero-sum game' attitude towards immigration in Atlantic Canada, based on the assumption that benefits to immigrants result in a loss for local residents. Likewise, a recent study examining the experiences of school-aged refugees in St. John's found that they faced significant discrimination in the school environment (Baker, 2013).

Despite these reports, there has been very little research conducted on the experiences of refugees who resettled in NL and decided to remain in the province. It is not clear why some resettled refugees decide to stay in NL, and how the challenges and supports they find in St. John's affect their sense of wellbeing. St. John's offers a unique context to study the influence of place-related determinants of health on resettled refugees' sense of wellbeing, because it differs from other resettlement contexts that are commonly studied. The results presented below demonstrate the impact of environmental, social, and economic characteristics of the resettlement context on refugees' sense of wellbeing in a small urban center.

2. Methods

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in St. John's between September 2013 and July 2014. The first author conducted participant observation and in-depth interviews. This paper is based on the results of the interviews, which commenced after receiving the approval of the NL Health Research Ethics Board in December 2013. Ten participants, five women and five men, participated in a total of 17 in-depth interviews. Eight participants had arrived in St. John's as Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs) and two had arrived as asylum seekers. The participants had lived in the city between 4 and 20 years and all were able to converse comfortably in English. The participants were between the ages of 20 and 55 and were all employed. All had undergone post-secondary education in their country of origin or in Canada. They were originally from countries in Europe, Latin America, and Africa.[2] The names of

[2] Given the small number of refugees who remain in Newfoundland, the participants' specific countries of origin will not be identified in this paper to protect

all participants used in this paper are pseudonyms. All ten interviewees were recruited through the assistance of key contacts who were religious leaders, community service providers, and health service providers. The key contacts were asked to approach individuals whom they knew had come to St. John's as refugees or asylum seekers, and to provide them with information pamphlets about the study. These potential participants then contacted the first author directly or requested that the key contact introduce them to her.

The first author had an initial meeting with participants to introduce the study and obtain consent. During this initial meeting, the interviewer situated herself relative to the study as an immigrant to Canada and a recent newcomer to St. John's. Following the initial meeting, the first author conducted an interview lasting 1–2 h with each of the ten participants. Of the ten participants, seven volunteered to participate in second interview. In the second interview, participants were typically more candid about their views, having developed a sense of familiarity and trust with the interviewer. The second interview also allowed us to revisit and further explore ideas expressed in the first. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The analysis of interview transcripts and the field notes was an iterative process that began while fieldwork was ongoing. Ethnographic content analysis was used, as outlined by Murchison (2010).

3. Results

The themes that emerged in this study demonstrate a sense of dynamic ambivalence towards the resettlement context. The participants connected their emotional trajectories during the resettlement process to the geographic, social, and historical characteristics of St. John's and of NL. Initial feelings of homesickness, isolation, and doubt were exacerbated by the strangeness of the city's urban design, climate, demographics, and culture. Over time, as the participants began to form social relationships and became more familiar with the city's history, climate, and urban landscape, they found support and reassurance in these self-same aspects of the city. The small size of the city, which shocked and distressed several participants upon their arrival, was later portrayed as a positive attribute – the small size of the city made it feel more familiar and safe as the participants settled into it. Similarly, other aspects of the province such as its natural environment, colonial history, and low ethnic diversity were connected to initial (and sometimes ongoing) causes of distress as well as sources of support, coping, and reassurance. These environmental characteristics impacted the participants' sense of wellbeing in dynamic ways that changed with time and as they became more familiar with the place. The emergent ideas presented here demonstrate that aspects of the resettlement context do not fall into static categories of 'supports' and 'challenges,' but that aspects of the environment have a fluid impact on wellbeing that changes through time and experience.

3.1. Built environment

All participants in this study came from large cities with populations greater than that of St. John's. As such, the small population of St. John's and the urban design of the city gave some participants what we term 'urban shock.' Like culture shock, urban shock occurred because the arrival context differed in essential ways from the context to which the individual was accustomed. The discrepancy between the metropolis they had expected and the actual size of St. John's led some participants to feel initial distress and doubts that St. John's could become a home to them:

> When we first came to Toronto, it was definitely, "Wow!" you know, this is the reality. This is amazing. This is even better than what we expected. And then after, you know, Toronto was not the final stop, and when we came close to the island, from the airplane you can see. My little [sibling] started crying, like "What is this? There's nobody living here!" Somebody waited for us at the airport and they drove us to the [temporary housing in busy neighborhood]. So we thought, like for us that was completely isolated, but we were like, "This is okay, because it's close to the airport, so this must be a completely rural area of the city." Actually I work by there now and every time I pass I always remember. If only I knew that this was one of the *main streets* in St. John's, you know, but I thought it was just a rural area, right? *(Jasmina)*

The urban design of the city was identified as a factor that exacerbated the sense of isolation for newly settled refugees. One participant spoke at length about the difficulty his family experienced traveling across the city to access basic services. Poor snow removal, lack of safe pedestrian spaces, and an inadequate public transportation system all contribute to the isolation he described:

> There is an assumption in the city that everybody either has access to a car, or is very close to the services they need. And it is a pretty bad urban planning kind of an assumption, because when you come here as a newcomer, and you are not of a very high income bracket, you are pretty vulnerable to the routes that public transit can take, and those routes can be pretty lengthy, can be far from the places where you need to go. In our case the grocery store was far from where we lived, so we had to walk for about 20 min to the grocery store in the coldest of times in winter, through uncleared sidewalks, and in the middle of the road with plastic bags in our hands, and walk back. And it was a big challenge actually, because I guess it impacts in some ways how comfortable you feel in the area, just being able to access some of these services. *(Adnan)*

Although the layout and size of the city contributed to a sense of distress and isolation, some participants felt that the small size of the city was conducive to fostering a sense of familiarity. Participants perceived that it would be more difficult to grow familiar with people and spaces in a larger city:

> There was some point in time that we were also thinking about moving, but my parents still like it here. They like that it is safe, they like that you still see people, people still say "hi" to you on the streets and stuff like that…When you go to school, if you see always the same people, you get more comfortable, you get more used to it than if you, for example, go to a big city and then you see one person, you know, one year and then maybe next year you are going to see them again, right? *(Jasmina)*

One of the common reasons for remaining in St. John's mentioned by participants is the belief that it is a safe place to live compared to larger cities. For example, Beatrice is a black woman who spoke at length about feeling excluded in St. John's. Despite this, she believes that living in a smaller city is safer than a larger one, where she might be the target of more direct racial hostility:

> Here, though you feel like you are not integrated, like you are not accepted among them, you have peace because nobody bothers you. The crime rate is low, and nobody come to break in your house, or because you are colored people to harm you. But if it were in other environment that [chuckle] they don't like the colored people at all, how are you going to survive? So

(*footnote continued*)
their anonymity.

> it would be worse, I think. *(Beatrice)*

3.2. Natural environment

Newfoundland has a cool, windy climate. The mean January temperature is −7 °C and the mean July temperature is 15 °C (Hiller, 2014). It is typically overcast and rainy year-round. Regardless of their country of origin, participants described the Newfoundland climate as oppressive. Ernesto spoke about his first job in St. John's, which involved outside labor. He explained that he was physically unprepared to deal with the cold, because he could not afford to buy winter clothes:

> I was ill-dressed for the weather. This was in November and that was one of the coldest winters ever. That was a really hard winter. So we didn't have – I mean, this [points to dress shirt] is pretty much what I wore. I had a suit that I brought. Very expensive Italian suit, nice expensive suit that was useless here, right? This [points to sole of shoe] came out, because these shoes were meant to wear in a nice place that came with heat and you know – they were good expensive shoes. But they were not to be worn with salt and stuff, so they came apart and I could put my hand in [mimics inserting fingers between sole and upper of shoe]. And that's how we were walking on the snow and all that stuff, you know. *(Ernesto)*

Participants explained that the lack of sunlight exacerbated their distress and homesickness after resettlement. Camilo explained that walking his children to school in the winter caused him and his children significant distress:

> That was the first impression that shocked me was the snow, and the temperature would be low, my kids they were crying, my younger ones were crying most of the time. We had to walk from [neighborhood] to the school. Very, very cold, it took us 15–20 min in the cold, walking and we never, never in our lives walk. Never had to do that kind of thing. So my daughter was crying – whenever we went to school in the wind, very strong, she ask me, "Daddy, why don't we go back to [country of origin]?" I felt so bad, yeah. Sometimes I felt very down, you know? That, my God, this is not right. This is totally wrong. But I was thinking, if I go back to [country of origin] then they're going to be killed. So I couldn't – I really wished I could go back to [country of origin] at that point when I was here at the beginning, because I felt for my kids it was *too hard* for them to bear the cold. *(Camilo)*

Even after living in St. John's for many years, participants still felt that the climate continued to pose a challenge:

> And the weather here was really a big challenge, and the lack of sunlight is still a challenge. And I think it will always be – to me anyway. I mean, I am here and this is what my life is all day [gestures to walls with no windows], pretty much. *(Ernesto)*

Conversely, several participants described the natural environment of NL as offering a healing landscape. The majority of the province is undeveloped wilderness, with places for hiking, camping, fishing, hunting, and berry picking. Several participants felt that the landscape of NL facilitates emotional healing and a sense of wellbeing, and that the accessibility of nature was a strong reason to stay in the province. For example, Doris felt that the hills and coastline of St. John's reminded her of her country of origin:

> We stayed and we like it and to me it reminded me more of where I came from, it's all hills and valleys and it's very peaceful. Yes, it depends on what you're looking for. Yes, and I was looking for that peace and calm, so we stayed. *(Doris)*

Engaging with nature is one of the strategies participants used to manage feelings of distress. For example, this was Irina's advice for newly settled refugees:

> Especially if you are homesick or depressed, go to the ocean, waves are helping you, look like they giving you advice. Calming your nerves. Fishing–fishing is good when depressed. Or picking blueberries in the season. *(Irina)*

3.3. History, culture, and othering

A recurrent theme in the interviews was the difficulty of entering established social groups in St. John's. The theme of feeling excluded emerged when participants spoke of their experiences in different contexts, from schools and businesses to neighborhoods and religious communities. Interestingly, participants simultaneously attributed their exclusion to the history and culture of Newfoundland and used these explanations as a way to cope. For instance, Jonathan drew on the colonial history of NL to explain the exclusory culture that newcomers face in St. John's:

> Establishing partnerships here is really hard, because you have to essentially show them that you are looking out for them. But they won't accept it, right? They won't trust you, right? Especially if you're foreign, because there's a history. Well you know, Newfoundland over the last five centuries has been a place where a colonial influence tries to make money out of it, somebody sells it to someone-another place. Like, there's an entrenched idea that Canada's always trying to screw over Newfoundland, or England's always trying to screw over Newfoundland- *someone's* always trying to screw over Newfoundland. And in a sense, they're right. Because Newfoundland was put together and run by merchants, and they were always trying to maximize profit, and the living conditions here were not never something that was valued. The people who settled here didn't have the choices. *(Jonathan)*

All the participants or their immediate family members had experienced Othering behavior, "which serves to mark and name those thought to be different from oneself" (Weis, 1995). The intent behind Othering behavior was often ambiguous, but included comments or questions that highlighted a person's differences. Several participants attributed Othering questions to a curiousity about outsiders resulting from the homogeneity and historical isolation of Newfoundlanders. In the following quote, Jasmina demonstrates a sympathetic attitude to people who highlight a newcomer's difference:

> I think in general they don't mean to hurt anybody, I think it's just that they are curious. They are surprised, you know-of course, just going back to your own self, if you see somebody in your community like back home, we also don't have a lot of people who are not white, and then if somebody [who looks different] comes, you're going to be asking, you know what I mean? So it's normal for people to be curious, as long as they're not judgmental. *(Jasmina)*

One of the most common Othering experiences that participants encountered is constantly being asked, "Where are you from?" or "You're not from here, are you?" Although some, like Jasmina, attributed these questions to curiousity and were not offended by them, others felt that these questions reminded them that they don't belong in St. John's. A concern with who is an outsider and who is an insider is deeply rooted in Newfoundland culture (Devine, 2005), and this is apparent in everyday interactions in which people attempt to locate one another in the social categories of hometowns and families. As such, "where are you

from?" is a question often asked when people first meet. For those who routinely face more hurtful forms of discrimination, such as refugees, this question appears to challenge the legitimacy of their presence in Canada. Refugees, who have been disconnected from their country of origin and who were persecuted based on their ancestry, ethnicity, or beliefs, may feel particularly targeted by this question.

Several participants described a moment of revelation, sometimes after many years of living in St. John's, when they realized that Newfoundlanders use Othering discourses with each other, as well as with foreigners:

> I found that all the guys that were from away were experiencing the same isolation that I was feeling. Even though they were living here with family or acquaintances. You know, they felt left out and discriminated against. And I was really, really surprised to find out, like "But you're from Corner Brook![3]" – "Same thing if I were from China or India, you know!" or "Townies and baymen[4], we don't get along together." That kind of thing. I was like, "What?!" Okay, now I know that I'm not the only one swimming in strange waters [chuckles]. I don't feel alone, you know? Being the weird guy? No. *(Michael*).

3.4. Social support

It was clear from the interviews that the support of others was critical for refugees' ability to cope with the challenges of resettlement. Participants described the overwhelming loneliness and social isolation that some face when they come to St. John's. Linguistic isolation contributed to this, since eight of the ten participants did not speak English upon their arrival. Participants identified social and linguistic isolation as barriers to overcoming the difficulties and loss experienced prior to their migration. Beatrice stressed that a resilient attitude alone is not enough – it is only empowering when one can share this attitude with others who provide support:

> You make up your mind that you can. You have to work hard to survive all those things and to make it, and that gives you courage. But when you are with other people, you share your testimony, you share your experiences. You share. It is a kind of encouragement, uplifting for you. *(Beatrice)*

While most Canadian provinces have multiple federally-funded agencies that support immigrants and refugees, there is only one such agency in NL. This limited offering of settlement services is presumably due to the fact that very few immigrants and refugees come to NL and remain in the province. Some participants found that the limited settlement services in St. John's exacerbated their sense of social isolation after their arrival. Jasmina noted that settlement workers offered her family assistance during the first month after their arrival, but that support stopped abruptly:

> I remember when we moved to a different house, like nobody ever came. Again, you know, you don't have to help me, but maybe just to ask, "How are you?" Nobody came to see if you like the house, I felt like they just had to get their job done. And it was okay because my family we are very-because we went through so much in our life, we were independent. We really work hard for it. But definitely somebody who maybe went through a lot, who can't do stuff on their own, you know, it would be harder for them for sure. *(Jasmina)*

Similarly, Jonathan's academic experience was impacted by the fact that there were limited English as a Second Language (ESL) services in the school he attended. During his first year after arrival, as a student in junior high school, he recalls having only one or two ESL classes each month, leading to feelings of confusion and disorientation. This was a major source of stress for him that adversely affected his wellbeing:

> What ended up happening was that I became completely disengaged with school, and for a while I suffered from chronic heartburn. So that meant I ended up skipping a lot of classes. That was actually one of the biggest threats throughout my education here. I missed a lot of class. *(Jonathan).*

Living in a place with low ethnic diversity means that many newly settled refugees do not have the informal social support of others who share their cultural or linguistic background. Some participants felt that some kinds of practical advice and emotional support can only be provided by people who share a similar language or culture. Alternatively, other participants benefited from the support of local residents who did not share their background. Several participants had been 'partnered' with a local family that acted as their social hosts during their resettlement. Those who had been part of such a partnership identified their hosts as playing a key role in helping them become connected to the city:

> These people were very friendly, supportive, all the time. "What do you need, what do you want? Do you need clothes, do you need this? You need a ride home, you.?" [They] visit your house in Christmas time, when sometimes you feel alone, they were there for you. Taking you to different places-that was very nice. *(Camilo)*

Because most refugees who are resettled in St. John's move to other Canadian cities within the first two years, those who participated in the interviews represented an exception. We asked them whether they had considered moving away, and why they did not leave the city. One explanation was that the poor economic situation in Newfoundland made newly arrived refugees and local residents relate better to each other. Adnan emphasized that this was reason enough for his family to stay here, despite acknowledging that moving to a different city would have brought them into contact with more people from their country of origin and more employment opportunities:

> A lot of it was the way in which we had been received here, and a lot of it was that when we first moved here, Newfoundland and Labrador was not prospering. In fact, it was still lagging behind most of the provinces in Canada, and we were a have-not province and going through many economic problems. And I think in retrospect there was something that we didn't realize at the time, but over time we noticed we shared something in common with Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, which was that people did not have much but they wanted to share what they had with you. And that generosity of spirit really made a difference for our family, because we lost materially everything we had. And so we had come to realize that what really matters is this kindness and generosity and *spirit* that people have that really matters in life. And to see people here who were in many ways going through their own financial, economic difficulties, but who were willing to extend their hand to help you, I think made us realize that these were good people that we were surrounded by, and more than anything we wanted to be surrounded by good people. *(Adnan*)

Genuine social connections helped newly settled refugees grow attached to the city, despite the stress of physical isolation and the difference in climate and culture:

[3] A city in Newfoundland.

[4] 'Baymen' is a term used to refer to people from villages and outport communities. Townies and baymen are terms indicating the perceived difference between those living in urban and rural communities.

> I guess those are the little things that begin to connect you to a place, it's that sense of the way people feel, the way they celebrate things, the way they live their lives. But not the superficial pieces that you only see as a stranger, but the inner parts of people's homes and lives, and stories about their families, and it's that connection I think that makes you ultimately realize that you're no different than anybody else, and those differences that you saw when you came here initially like the climate, like the streets, like distances in the way urban planning is done, and the little social norms – those are just, I guess minor points and insignificant pieces as compared to the human connections that you make. *(Adnan)*

Surprisingly, some participants felt that there are benefits to living in a place with low ethnic diversity, where newcomers are not likely to socialize exclusively with others from their country of origin. This was seen to be beneficial in two ways: first, it allowed new arrivals to form connections with people from different cultures. For instance, Irina felt that her and her children's close connections to people from different backgrounds contributed to her sense of wellbeing:

> I am so happy that I've met good people, that's one reason I stay connected with them, like sisters and family, like brothers and sisters from different cultures. I am very grateful to live here, my kids feel more comfortable here. They have lots of friends, sisters, cousins from other cultures. *(Irina)*

Second, some suggested that being separated from one's cultural group allowed introspection and reflection on the losses and conflicts that had occurred in their country of origin. For Adnan, the sparse number of others from his country of origin gave him the space to reflect and make meaning of the conflict he fled, far from the influence of dominant discourses in his cultural group:

> When you're a bit farther removed from the cultural community that you come from, you get the chance to look at the big picture and see how issues are conflated or exaggerated, and understand what the essence of the problems or even the solutions is. […] Living in Newfoundland and Labrador, away from most cultural communities that you belong to, gives you a chance to understand those communities better and gives you a chance to analyze your own cultural baggage. (Adnan)

Some participants spoke of making a deliberate choice to remain in the city, despite the promise of better employment opportunities in other cities. This choice was tied to the belief that connecting to a place comes with effort and dedication, and that setting down roots is an intentional act. Consider the following:

> *Jonathan*: [Other refugees from country of origin] all moved away. They all ended up moving away to find better opportunities.
>
> *Interviewer*: Do you know if they found better opportunities?
>
> *Jonathan*: I don't know. When they did that, then I kind of scratched them off in my mind, because I wasn't interested in them. I felt that they gave up on this place. This is me being very judgmental of them: I felt that they were going to be just as dissatisfied there as they were going to be dissatisfied here, so I've always assumed that no matter what the circumstances are, you have to make the best you can.

4. Discussion

This study contributes to the existing literature demonstrating the influence of place-related determinants of health on resettled refugees' mental and emotional wellbeing (Beiser, 2009; Fozdar, 2012; Lamba and Krahn, 2003; Pumariega et al., 2005; Simich et al., 2003). In particular, the study addresses a gap in the literature regarding the experiences of refugees who are resettled in small urban centers (Hansson, Tuck, Lurie, McKenzie, 2012). It is worth noting that some participants differed in their views of certain aspects of the city (e.g., low ethnic diversity, size of the city), which were seen as challenges by some but were considered unimportant or even positive by others. This points to the diversity of views and experiences amongst refugees, and highlights the lack of a singular 'refugee' or 'resettlement' experience. Despite the diversity of the participants' backgrounds and their views, shared themes emerged in the interviews. These shared themes indicate the impact of place and its related determinants of health on refugees' sense of wellbeing during resettlement.

Studies of refugee resettlement in other cities identify similar challenges to those in St. John's, including the challenges of adjusting to a different culture (Carswell, Blackburn, & Barker, 2011), adjusting to a different climate (Ahmad, Shik, Vanza, Cheung, George, & Stewart, 2004), and a lack of mobility in the city (Wood, McGrath, & Young, 2012). These challenges contributed to the participants' sense of social and physical isolation, making it difficult to form the emotional connections that make a place feel like 'home.' Based on prior research demonstrating the importance of cultural and linguistic communities during resettlement (Elliot & Yusuf, 2014), we anticipated that the low ethnic diversity in St. John's would be another major challenge to refugees' sense of wellbeing. While it may be easier to obtain social support in places with high ethnic and cultural diversity (Stafford, Newbold, & Ross, 2011), our study demonstrates that it is also possible to find meaningful social support in a place with low ethnic diversity. Most participants did not feel that they belonged to a broader ethnic or cultural community, due to the small number of people from any one cultural or linguistic group in St. John's. Regardless, they had established social connections with local residents and other 'Newfoundlanders by choice' (Greenwood, Pike, & Kearley, 2011). In all cases, relationships with people who were more knowledgeable about the social and physical dimensions of the city, including its services, culture, activities, and natural spaces, were critical to newly settled refugees' sense of wellbeing.

Unexpectedly, the results indicate that low ethnic diversity may have positive implications for some resettled refugees' sense of wellbeing. The absence of an established community of people from their country of origin or from their cultural background allowed some participants to undergo a private process of healing far from mainstream cultural narratives of their persecution. This raises important questions about assumptions of cultural communities as sources of support for newcomers. It is clear that for some individuals, communal support can be the most important component for their wellbeing during resettlement (Lamba & Krahn, 2003; Simich, Beiser, & Mawani, 2003). However, there is also mounting evidence suggesting that communities can be a source of pressure and stress during resettlement (Baird & Boyle, 2012; Sohtorik & McWilliams, 2011). This points to the necessity of offering newly settled refugees various opportunities to build social networks with people who do not share a similar background as well as people who do.

The culture and history of St. John's had both a negative and a positive impact on the mental wellbeing of the participants. A culture of mistrusting outsiders made it difficult for participants to penetrate established social circles within their neighborhoods, workplaces, and religious communities. Discrimination and exclusion are common to the resettlement experiences of refugees worldwide, with a demonstrably negative impact on their ability to resettle and flourish in their new home (Elliot & Yusuf, 2014; Fozdar, 2012; Ives, 2007). In our study, we found that some

participants drew on Newfoundland's colonial history to explain and cope with this exclusion. Additionally, recognizing the preoccupation with in-group/out-group membership in Newfoundland culture (Devine, 2005) helped some participants cope with Othering behaviors when they realized that residents of the island are subjected to them, too. This finding demonstrates that the historical and cultural context can mediate the relationship between experiencing discrimination and one's sense of wellbeing.

This duality can be also seen in how participants described the effects of the built environment and urban design of St. John's. The design of the city exacerbated participants' sense of social and physical isolation due to urban sprawl, limited public transportation, the expense of owning a car, and inadequate snow removal that makes walking impractical. Additionally, for participants who lived in large cities before migrating to Canada, the small size and slow pace of life in St. John's led them to experience what we call 'urban shock.' Conversely, some participants came to see living in a small city as supportive of their wellbeing; they perceived a small city like St. John's to be safer and more conducive to a sense of comfort and familiarity than a large city.

Similarly, while the climate caused participants significant distress, the natural environment of NL also provided opportunities to cope with sadness and homesickness. The natural environment of the island provides a therapeutic landscape (Rose, 2012; Williams, 1998) that assists in healing the emotional wounds of pre-migration loss and trauma. Participants identified the ocean, hills, and the island's natural flora and fauna as powerful sources of emotional healing. Outdoor activities that allow direct engagement with these elements of nature (e.g., fishing, berry-picking, watching the ocean) were identified as ways to cope with distress, homesickness, and depression. These findings are aligned with research demonstrating that living close to natural spaces (Maas, Verheij, Groenewegen, De Vries, & Spreeuwenberg, 2006) and to the sea (White, Alcock, Wheeler, & Depledge, 2013) is related to higher perceptions of health and wellness.

The significance of the latter result to refugee studies lies in the fact that the therapeutic landscape was an important reason for some refugees to stay in St. John's, despite the lack of economic opportunities and multiculturalism compared to other cities. Most research on refugees' wellbeing during resettlement focuses on determinants such as social support and employment. It is uncommon for studies of refugee resettlement to consider the natural environment as a determinant of mental health and wellbeing. In light of these results, however, we suggest that the natural environment (or the lack thereof) be incorporated as a determinant of wellbeing in future studies of refugee resettlement.

These results demonstrate that refugees who are resettled in a small urban center such as St. John's do not have access to supports and resources available to those who are resettled in larger urban centers. Such resources include multiple social support services, informal support provided by others from a shared cultural or linguistic background, and the inclusivity that comes with living in an ethnically-diverse city. In St. John's, these resources are lacking but there are sources of support identified by the participants in this study that may not be accessible in larger cities. For instance, the limited urban developments around St. John's made the ocean, hiking trails, and provincial parks very accessible to participants, who found that the natural environment facilitated coping with distress and emotional wellbeing. Access to undeveloped natural environments is typically restricted for those who live in large cities, as it often requires transportation, time, and money. As such, natural spaces and their healing qualities are an example of a resource that was more accessible to participants in this study compared to other refugees who are resettled in larger urban centers.

A notable finding of this study is that the same characteristics of the context led both to factors that detract from refugees' sense of wellbeing and factors that promote coping and healing. Low ethnic diversity, the natural environment, and the culture of NL were all factors that contributed to participants' distress and sense of isolation. Yet, these were also factors that promoted healing and coping in different ways. The participants' ability to draw on characteristics of the context to cope and to heal, even when those same characteristics contributed to their sense of isolation and exclusion, demonstrates refugees' capacity for creative and resourceful resilience. These results also point to the complex relationship between place and wellbeing, indicating that aspects of a place can be simultaneously hostile and supportive. It appears that for the participants in this study, who belong to the small percentage of refugees who decide to stay in St. John's, the supportive aspects of the place were meaningful enough to mediate the impact of its hostilities.

Acknowledgments

This research was conducted while the first author was supported by a Canadian Institutes of Health Research Banting and Best Masters Award and a research award funded by the Canadian Mental Health Association (Newfoundland and Labrador chapter).

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