

EXAMINING REFUGEE INTEGRATION: THE EXPERIENCES OF BOSNIAN AND VIETNAMESE COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

The global refugee crisis has reached unprecedented levels, with millions of forcibly displaced individuals seeking refuge across the world. The United States, while maintaining the largest resettlement program, is a critical player in offering a new home to those in need. As the U.S. experiences shifts in immigration policy under the Biden administration, the country is expected to welcome an increasing number of refugees in the coming years. This emphasizes the importance of understanding the challenges and obstacles faced by refugee groups during the integration process. This abstract highlights the urgency of addressing these issues as we strive to provide a safe haven for those seeking refuge.

Keywords: refugee crisis, forced displacement, resettlement, integration issues, immigration policy

Introduction

By the end of 2019, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had identified 79.5 million forcibly displaced people globally, including 26 million refugees, 45.7 million internally displaced people, 4.2 million asylum seekers, and 3.6 million Venezuelans displaced abroad (UNHCR, 2020a). These numbers represent the highest recorded level of human displacement in refugee history (UNHCR, 2020b). Some refugee host countries offer refugees the opportunity for permanent third country resettlement, and despite declining numbers allocated for resettlement during the Trump administration, the United States maintains the largest resettlement program in the world (UNHCR, 2020c). As this crisis continues to grow, and refugees continue to be resettled in the United States, it is increasingly important to understand the integration issues refugee groups face. Further, with the new immigration policy, which has shifted under the Biden Presidency, the U.S. is expecting an increasing number of refugees for the next several years.

Literature Review

It is important to note that there exists no single agreed-upon definition of refugee integration (Hyndman, 2011). This becomes problematic when attempting to measure refugee integration success. Academic researchers commonly use employment status and earnings, language abilities, educational attainment, legal or health status,

and housing status as indicators of integration (Hyndman, 2011). These indicators, however, primarily measure economic integration into a host country and fail to take into account social integration. This study will instead use socialization with mainstream Americans as a measure of social integration.

Age when entering a host country has frequently been found to be an important predictor of refugee integration success. A Migration Policy Institute study observed that refugees who arrive in the United States at a younger age have more opportunities than adults to complete additional education and develop stronger English skills, and therefore, typically have greater integration success (Capps et al., 2015).

Research also suggests that older immigrants, particularly those arriving at age 60 or over, have the most difficulty with integration (Hyndman, 2011).

Language skills are a significant asset for refugees attempting to carve out a livelihood for themselves in a new country. Multiple studies conclude that increased English proficiency enables refugees to achieve economic self-sufficiency faster than those with limited English skills (Capps et al., 2015). Furthermore, a Demos Integration Hub study found that English language ability accounts for 17% of the employment gap between British-born residents and immigrants (including refugees) in the United Kingdom (Crawford, 2015). Prior research observing the integration tendencies of Bosnians in St. Louis found that lack of English competency caused Bosnian refugees to experience occupational demotion in the United States (Matsuo & Tomazic, 2006). Language barriers have also been shown to be preventative of non-native-born people in the United States receiving access to healthcare (Flores, 2006). Understanding and accessing healthcare is a critical component of integration into a host country, and lack of English proficiency frequently inhibits refugees in the United States from receiving the care they need.

Locus of control has been cited, though rarely studied, as a significant factor in accounting for refugee adaptation in a host society (Matsuo & Tomazic, 2006). Researchers have studied the impacts of both internal locus of control, a sense that outcomes are determined by personal effort, and external locus of control, a sense that outcomes are determined by external factors, such as fate and luck, in relation to certain refugee issues in their host states. However, research linking locus of control specifically to refugee integration outcomes is lacking (Young, 2001). In terms of its relationship to adaptation, internal locus of control has been studied to a much higher degree, though research is still limited. For example, a Norwegian study found that Bosnian refugees with a higher internal locus of control experienced higher feelings of competence, which are related to integration (Van Selm et al., 2002). In contrast, researchers have primarily studied external locus of control as it relates to the mental health of refugees (Bhugra, 2004). There is a dearth of research regarding the impact of external locus of control on the integration success of refugees. Although some studies have combined internal and external locus of control as an indicator of refugee life satisfaction, life satisfaction is still not a direct representation of integration success (Matsuo & Poljarevic, 2006; Young, 2001).

Several studies have explored the relationship between perceived discrimination and refugee integration outcomes. For example, a recent study of refugees in the Netherlands found that refugees who experienced greater discrimination were more likely to wish to return to their home countries, and therefore, achieved lower integration results (Di Saint Pierre et al., 2015). A study in which interviews were conducted with refugees throughout the European Union discovered that discrimination acted as a fundamental barrier to refugee integration in those host states (Mestheneos & Ioannidi, 2002). Discrimination prevents refugees from feeling welcome in their host state societies, and consequently, from forming the important social connections that facilitate integration.

This review of the literature demonstrates that age of refugees when arriving at a host state, English proficiency, and discrimination have all been studied in depth. However, social aspects of integration and locus of control have been studied to a much lesser extent. As stated, locus of control has rarely been studied in relation to refugee integration outcomes at all. Therefore, this study expands on previous literature by clarifying the respective impacts of age when arriving at a host state, English proficiency, and discrimination on refugee integration. Furthermore, this study fills an important research gap by exploring the impacts of internal and external locus of control on refugee integration.

Context of St. Louis, Missouri

This study focuses specifically on the integration challenges of Vietnamese and Bosnian Refugees in St. Louis. In the 1980s, in the wake of the Vietnam War, St. Louis became home to vast numbers of Vietnamese refugees (Gilsinan, 2013). As a result of this influx of refugees, combined with secondary migration, by 2010, over 8,000 Vietnamese refugees and immigrants were living in St. Louis (Pfeifer, 2010). Additionally, starting in the mid-1990s, due to the Bosnian Civil War, Bosnian refugees began resettling in St. Louis in droves (Gilsinan, 2013). Federal resettlement policies, along with secondary migration, have resulted in approximately 70,000 Bosnians living in St. Louis (Rivero, 2015). Given the substantial refugee populations of Vietnamese and Bosnians in St. Louis and their differing lengths of residence in the United States, these two groups provide informative cases to study refugee integration success in St. Louis. This study aims to explore determinants of Vietnamese and Bosnian integration success. Based on human capabilities theory, which stresses human agency and control over one's potential in order to achieve fulfillment in life, the study primarily explores the impact of internal and external locus of control on the integration capacity of these two groups (Sen, 1989).

This study explores three research questions: 1) what is the impact of internal and external locus of control on refugees' integration into mainstream American society, 2) what is the impact of age when the refugee came to the United States on his or her integration into mainstream American society, and 3) what is the impact of English competency and perceived discrimination on refugees' integration into mainstream American society?

Methods

Data

The data set used for this study is part of a larger project that explored immigrants' adaptation to American society, focusing on those after mid-life (> 40 years old) to explore their perspectives on life course, cultural accommodation, and life satisfaction. While the original sample size was 330, 110 cases were extracted for the current study (30 Vietnamese refugees and 80 Bosnian refugees). These sample sizes were originally set for the purpose of quota sampling for the larger study with six different ethnic immigrant groups. The data were collected through interview surveys with the assistance of students who were able to communicate in potential participants' languages.

Variables

The Stephenson Multigroup Acculturation Scale (2000), which consists of 32 items, was used to measure Integration into American Society, Perceived Discrimination, and English Competency.

Integration into American Society was measured by three 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree ($\alpha=0.624$) with higher values corresponding with more integration into American society.

Perceived Discrimination was measured by a five 5-point Likert-scale, ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree ($\alpha=0.875$) with higher values corresponding with more perceived discrimination.

English Competency was measured by a six 5-point Likert-scale, ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree ($\alpha=0.922$) with higher values corresponding with more English competency.

Locus of Control was measured by one of the three dimensions of the Belief in Personal Control Scale (BPCS) (Berrenberg, 1987), which measured general external control. The items were further divided into *Internal Locus of Control* with a four 5-point Likert scale and *External Locus of Control* with a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree ($\alpha=0.615$ and $\alpha=0.603$, respectively). Higher values correspond with higher levels of locus of control, respectively.

As to demographic variables, besides Sex and Age, Age Came to the U.S. was used as a control variable because previous research indicates that this variable has an impact on integration results (Schaafsma & Sweetman, 1999).

Data Analysis

This study used five separate multiple regression analyses with a stepwise method, without removing insignificant variables, to explore the impact of several variables on refugees' integration into mainstream American society. IBM SPSS Version 27 was used for the data analysis.

Results

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Among 110 subjects, there were 50 males and 60 females. Means for Age and Age Came to the U.S. were 56.77 (SD=12.108) and 41.77 (SD=12.236), respectively. This sample may be somewhat older than the entire refugee

population in St. Louis because the original project focused on refugees after mid-life (> 40 years old). Means of Integration with Mainstream Americans, English Competency, and Perceived Discrimination were 9.981 (SD=2.512), 14.818 (SD=7.028), and 8.038 (SD=3.861), respectively. Means for External and Internal Locus of Control were 12.963 (SD=2.808) and 13.990 (SD=2.647), respectively.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variables	N	Mean(SD)
Age then R came to the US	109	41.77(12.34)
Internal Locus of Control	109	13.99(2.65)
External Locus of Control	110	12.96(2.80)
English competency	110	14.82(7.03)
Perceived discrimination general	104	8.04(3.86)

Hierarchical Regression Analyses

As demonstrated in Table 2, all five models showed a good fit ($p < 0.001$). In the first model, Internal Locus of Control had a significant positive impact on integration ($B = 0.247$, $p < 0.01$), such that those who scored higher on this variable are likely to be integrated into mainstream American society. While English Competency, which was added in the second model, was not significant, Internal Locus of Control remained statically significant ($B = 0.187$, $p < 0.05$). When Perceived Discrimination was added to the third model, English Competency had a significant positive impact on integration ($B = -0.181$, $p < 0.01$; $B = 0.093$, $p < 0.01$, respectively), and Internal Locus of Control retained a positive impact ($B = 0.202$, $p < 0.05$). Those who scored high on Internal Locus of Control, high on English Competency, and low on Perceived Discrimination were more likely to be integrated into mainstream American society. When External Locus of Control ($B = -0.263$, $p < 0.01$) was added in the fourth model, while Internal Locus of Control and English Competency were no longer significant, Perceived Discrimination remained significant ($B = -0.169$, $p < 0.01$). The full model showed a good model-fit ($F = 7.149$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = .271$). Age when the respondent came to the United States did not have a significant impact on integration into American society ($B = 0.017$, $p = 0.472$). While Internal Locus of Control was no longer significant, it had a positive impact on refugees' integration into American society. However, External Locus of Control continued to have a negative impact on integration into American society ($B = -0.257$, $p < 0.01$), such that the lower respondents scored on external locus of control, the more likely they were to integrate into American society. English Competency was not significant and Age Came to the U.S. did not have a significant impact on integration with mainstream American society.

Table 2: Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Socialization with Mainstream Americans (Standardized Coefficient)

Independent Variables	Model1	Model2	Model3	Model4	Model 5
Internal Locus of Control	0.247(0.26)**	0.187(0.21)*	0.202(0.22)*	0.159(0.18)	0.150(0.17)
English Competency		0.067(0.19)	0.093(0.27) ***	0.064(0.19)	0.084(0.25)
Perceived Discrimination			-0.181(-0.29) ***	-0.169(-0.27)	-0.163(-0.26)***
External Locus of Control				-0.263(-0.30)	-0.257(-0.29)**
Age came to the US					0.017(0.09)
Constant	6.613***	6.440***	7.309***	11.632***	10.635***
R ²	0.076	0.110	0.1888	0.267	0.271
ΔR^2	0.076	0.034	0.078	0.079	0.004
F-Statistics	8.179**	6.122**	7.567***	8.850***	7.149***
ΔF	8.179***	3.834	9.416***	10.497***	0.521

*p,0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Discussion and Conclusions

One surprising aspect of these results is that the age when the respondent first came to the United States had no significant impact on refugee integration. This finding directly contradicts prevailing research. It is possible that Bosnian and Vietnamese refugee groups achieved integration results regardless of age when entering the country due to strongly established enclaves of those societies in St. Louis. Although internal locus of control only had a marginally significant positive impact on integration in the multiple regression analysis, it acts as a significant predictor of integration in the hierarchical regression analysis. A larger sample size would likely make internal locus of control also significant in the multiple regression analysis. The result that increased internal locus of control produces higher integration is a significant finding for refugee integration research. It makes sense that refugees who believe they have personal control over outcomes in their lives will have a greater sense of empowerment and motivation, and therefore, will put in greater effort to integrate and enjoy greater integration results. The results show that refugees with a lower external locus of control experience higher social integration. This is also plausible, as refugees who believe that outcomes in their lives are controlled by luck or fate will be

less likely to feel motivated to take steps to improve their lives. Understandably, external locus of control produces a defeatist attitude that inhibits refugees from seeking solutions to integration obstacles. This also represents a significant finding for refugee integration research. Finally, English competency and perceived discrimination had predictable impacts on refugee integration. These results confirm previous studies that have found English competency and discrimination to be important predictors of refugee integration.

Still, this study found that English competency was only marginally significant in the multiple regression analysis and only significant in one of the models of the hierarchical regression analysis. It is possible that language skills are not as important as other predictors of integration for some refugee groups.

This study has achieved some important findings in terms of predictors of refugee social integration success. However, it is important to note the study's limitations. First, with 110 participants, the sample size is fairly small. Second, the study is limited to Bosnian and Vietnamese refugees, and these results may not apply to other refugee groups. Also, the study is limited to the St. Louis area, and refugee experiences may be different in different cities in the United States. Finally, Bosnian whiteness and Vietnamese inclusion in the Asian "model minority" stereotype may prevent these results from applying to other refugee populations.

Future research should draw from this study and expand its scope to other cities and other refugee populations in the United States. Expanding the study to Middle Eastern and African refugees would be extremely valuable given the current magnitude of refugees integrating from those regions. This expansion may help clarify whether age when coming to the United States and English proficiency are still important factors in refugee integration. Finally, future research should further study the relationship between internal and external locus of control and refugee integration. This study has helped to uncover the importance of those relationships. Future research should endeavor to validate those relationships and solidify their significance for different refugee groups in different areas of the country.

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