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## Transition in Occupations of Refugees During Resettlement

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## Transition in Occupations of Refugees During Resettlement

### Abstract

*Background:* Human displacement is a social problem that has occupational implications. There is a significant gap in the research focusing on the refugee experience and the impact of this experience on their occupations as they transition to living in the US. This study seeks to capture the experience of refugees and the impact of this transition to the US on a broad array of occupations.

*Method:* This research is a qualitative study. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with two participants who have legal status as refugees living in the US.

*Results:* Thematic analysis generated three themes: (a) contextual barriers to occupation, (b) belonging, and (c) adaptation. Refugees experienced a variety of contextual barriers, both systemic and socio-cultural, that impacted their ability to engage in meaningful occupation leading to a lack of belonging. Refugees adapted to these barriers by adapting their occupations. In addition, the researchers found social networks to be important for positive occupational engagement throughout country transition.

*Conclusion:* This research adds to occupational science literature regarding the occupational impact of the refugee experience, as well as supporting occupational therapists to address issues of occupational deprivation with refugee populations.

### Comments

The authors report no potential conflicts of interest.

### Keywords

refugee, occupational deprivation, resettlement

### Credentials Display

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The ever-increasing incidence of human displacement and its associated social problems pose a considerable concern worldwide. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the world's population of displaced persons was at its highest recorded levels in 2018 with 70.8 million people being forced from their homes, including 25.9 million refugees (2019).

Human displacement is a complex social problem that can be experienced quite differently depending on the type of displacement. Refugees have a distinct type of status and experience from other displaced persons, including those who are defined as immigrants, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, or forced migrants. Refugees have had legal status with the United Nations since 1951. A refugee is defined as “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence,” who is unable to return home out of safety concerns, and who is granted forms of protection by receiving refugee status (<https://www.unrefugees.org/>).

Resettling to a new country is a significant life transition for refugees. The resettlement process involves the admittance of refugees from an asylum country to a host country that has approved their permanent resettlement (UNHCR, 2017). Refugees face myriad challenges during the resettlement process, which include maintaining and adapting their meaningful occupations and transitioning to new occupations. Occupational science, the study of human occupation, is called to seek out research to illuminate the diversity of occupation and differences in culture (Hocking, 2009). The resettlement process has implications for occupational science, with the potential for refugees to experience occupational deprivation, which involves restriction from participation in meaningful occupations because of factors outside an individual's control (Whiteford, 2000).

### **Refugee Resettlement in the United States**

In the last century, the United States (US) has periodically experienced an influx of refugees and displaced persons from a variety of countries. In 2016, the largest groups of refugees to the US came from the Democratic Republic of Congo, followed by Syria and Burma (Igielnik & Krogstad, 2017). Despite the number of refugees worldwide reaching the highest levels since World War II, the number of refugees resettled to the US has decreased because of a new refugee admissions ceiling set by the Trump administration in January 2017 (Krogstad, 2019).

California plays an important role in refugee resettlement. Of those refugees accepted in the 2019 fiscal year, 1,800 were resettled in California. The state ranks fourth nationally for the number of refugees resettled, following Texas, Washington, and New York (Krogstad, 2019). Refugee arrivals in California have declined in recent years, but the number of refugees from the Middle East remains high. California accepted the largest number of Syrian refugees (1,450) in the fiscal year 2016, the second largest origin group in the US (Radford & Connor, 2016).

### **Literature Review**

#### **Impact of Displacement on Occupations**

##### ***Work and Productive Occupations***

Employment is necessary for the integration of refugees into society and to address their needs for self-esteem, language acquisition, and socialization (Trimboli & Taylor, 2016). Work contributes to the development of identity for asylum seekers, helping to relieve social isolation and building networks with the outside world (Lintner & Elsen, 2017). Despite these benefits, refugees face barriers to employment when they resettle. Some refugees earned a steady income in previous jobs in their home country but earned low wages in the US. Others faced difficulty finding employment because their credentials from their nation of origin were not recognized in the country where they resettled (Gupta & Sullivan, 2008). Refugees also faced a transition from white-collar jobs to blue-collar jobs when their skills or credentials were not transferable (Huot et al., 2016). Even

when employment was attained, there was a “lack of familiarity with workplace practices and norms” (Gupta & Sullivan, 2008, p. 28). Changes in gender roles were also experienced because some women cared for the family in the home in their country of origin but entered the workforce in their new country (Huot et al., 2016). Policies prohibiting asylum seekers from gaining paid employment while in the application process, such as the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 in the United Kingdom, add to the “impact of legislatively imposed occupational injustice” (Burchett & Matheson, 2010, p. 85).

Engagement in meaningful occupations contribute to identity formation and are often used to express one’s identity (Phelan & Kinsella, 2009). Smith et al. (2013) explored the meaning of traditional weaving for Karen women living in the US and how weaving related to their identity. Berr et al. (2019) examined how access to work impacted professional identity formation for Syrian women living in Germany. Lintner and Elsen (2017) found work to be a “bridging element to the outside world and, in particular, an opportunity to be socially connected” with the ability to build these social and professional networks being an important factor for well-being, identity, belonging, and social inclusion (p. 83).

### ***Social and Cultural Occupations***

While some research focused on the individual experiences of refugees, Smith (2013) studied the impact of the resettlement transition on the social network of the Somali Bantu. The researchers found that some social supports were maintained but others were impacted negatively by the transition to a new culture. Specifically, a small number of refugees were able to navigate the new environment and became conduits for their less adept counterparts. The geographical separation of refugees puts many of them at a disadvantage and significantly disrupts the continuity of their social support systems.

Adrian (2013) explored the intersection between identity, occupation, and place by looking at the occupation of music-making for immigrants and recently resettled refugees. The participants found “choir-singing to be a cultural occupation capable of encompassing their emergent, multi-faceted identity in the US, thereby facilitating the adjustment process” (Adrian, 2013, p. 160).

### **Role of Occupation in Adjustment, Integration, and Adaptation**

Integration into a new country can involve a process of “starting over,” requiring the individual to be aware of differences between their past and present community, to learn “how things work” in their present community, and to negotiate performances in new contexts (Huot et al., 2013). Occupational engagement supports both adjustment and integration during transition (Huot et al., 2013). Mondaca and Josephsson (2013) explored the occupational engagement experiences of Chilenas migrants and found a “role of occupation in the creation of liminal spaces that make it possible to bridge past and current dimensions of the participants’ experiences” (p. 73). Occupation can play a role in this intermediate phase, helping migrants transition to a new life. Werge-Olsen and Vik (2012) found that the process of engaging in activity promoted continuity and was connected to a smoother transition, creating a sense of “community” after disruption from familiar activities. Engaging in altruistic occupations can enhance a positive sense of self and “occupational constancy” between past and present occupations (Smith, 2018). Gupta and Sullivan (2013) explored the link between occupation and adjustment, integration, and reconstruction with 13 immigrant women (some had refugee status) who resettled to the US, where occupations helped alleviate the pain of separation from their home country. Integrating specific cultural activities can ease a transition in occupation. Smith et al. (2013) studied the experience of Karen refugees and found that encouraging Karen women to continue a familiar activity (weaving) helped facilitate the transition to Western culture. The Karen women benefited from the continuity of activities between their old and new

countries; similarly, other refugees found success in resettling by continuing previous activities in a new context (Werge-Olsen & Vik, 2012).

In the scoping review by Huot et al. (2016), occupational adaptation was a prominent finding for multiple studies focusing on forced migrants. Forced migrants sustained a sense of continuity between their home and host countries by adapting their occupations (Huot et al., 2016). When encountering deprivation or imbalance, forced migrants often adapted, altered, abandoned, or added new occupations (Connor Schisler & Polatajko, 2002; Huot et al., 2016).

### **Occupational Deprivation Awaiting Resettlement**

Occupational deprivation is a process that occurs over time, spanning from before seeking asylum and continuing into an individual's time in a refugee camp (Whiteford, 2005). This process was most noted for refugees who were placed in displacement camps and refugee centers awaiting resettlement. The occupations of those awaiting resettlement can be impacted by their ability to fulfill their roles linked to gender expectations (McElroy et al., 2012) and the limited opportunities and lack of occupational choices in a particular center (Morville & Erlandsson, 2013; Steindl et al., 2008). This occupational deprivation created feelings of powerlessness and stress for refugees and generated negative impacts on their health, well-being, sense of humanity, and sense of belonging (Darawsheh, 2019; Morville et al., 2015).

Huot et al. (2016) conducted a scoping review highlighting the occupational deprivation that refugees encountered during encampment while awaiting resettlement and afterward because of limitations in the host country. Occupational imbalance was particularly notable in research focusing on refugee women, where balance was enhanced through engagement in leisure and productive occupations (Mirza, 2012; Smith, 2012; Smith et al., 2013). This occurrence of occupational deprivation and imbalance contributed to the impact of refugee transition on host countries, adding complexity to the social problem of human displacement.

In summary, there are a limited number of studies from an occupational perspective of those who have refugee status, with many of the studies focused on voluntary international migration (Bennett et al., 2012); forced migrants, including refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons (Huot et al., 2016); or studies whose participants included both immigrants and refugees (Adrian, 2013; Gupta & Sullivan, 2013). The experiences of forced migrants may vary depending on official status and displacement transition. Huot et al. (2016) encouraged future research to explore specific sub-populations of forced migrants, and such research should avoid merging immigrants and refugees in single studies. Research has also been conducted on the impact of displacement using an occupational lens but focused on specific occupations, such as work and social or cultural occupations and not on an overall occupational impact of transition.

More research is needed to explore the specific contexts surrounding the refugee population (Mayne et al., 2016). Multiple studies explored the experience of refugees in refugee camps (Darawsheh, 2019; McElroy et al., 2012; Steindl et al., 2008), refugee houses (Lintner & Elsen, 2017), and asylum centers (Morville & Erlandsson, 2013; Morville et al., 2015; Morville & Jessen-Winge, 2019) and those awaiting their asylum applications (Ingvarsson et al., 2016). This experience is located in the context of awaiting resettlement. The location of resettlement impacts the occupational participation of refugees. A variety of studies have explored the experience of refugees relocating to the US: Minnesota (Adrian, 2013), a Mid-western urban area (Gupta & Sullivan, 2013), a large metropolitan city in the Midwestern US (Mirza, 2012; Mirza & Heinemann, 2012; Mirza et al., 2014), and an urban area of the western United States (Smith, 2012; Smith, 2013, Smith et al., 2013; Stephenson et al., 2013). This study seeks to capture the experience of refugees after resettlement, focusing more broadly on the impact of occupations overall, in an attempt to learn more

about how the context impacts their occupations in a less-studied region (San Francisco Bay Area) that still accepts large numbers of refugees.

The research question aims to capture this unique experience: How do people who are refugees experience their occupations through transition to the US San Francisco Bay Area?

### **Method**

To understand the occupations of refugees and the effect of transition on their occupations, it was important to gain insight into their lived experiences. A qualitative research design was used to better understand the lived experiences and perspectives concerning refugees. The design was used to gather in-depth information about the experience of being a refugee and how the phenomenon of being a refugee impacts their occupational engagement. The researchers drew from the Person, Environment, Occupation (PEO) model (Law et al., 1996) and concept of transition (Blair, 2000) to guide the development of questions for a semi-structured interview. The interviews averaged 1 hr, took place in a location of the participant's choice, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. All participants provided informed consent. The Dominican University of California's institutional review board granted approval of this research.

### **Participants**

Participant recruitment included those 18 years of age and older who had the United Nations protected status of refugee, had resettled to the San Francisco Bay Area within the past 5 years, and had lived in the US for more than 1 year. Participants were not required to speak English. Confidential translation service was available to the researchers if needed but was not used.

### **Recruitment**

Participants were recruited at a non-profit fundraising event for an organization that provides employment and training for refugees in the San Francisco Bay Area. This type of approach was necessary because the large refugee support organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area refused research requests because of privacy concerns for this vulnerable group and lack of contact with refugees post resettlement by these organizations.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was conducted using the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). In Phase 1, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data and read and reread the interview transcripts. In Phase 2, the researchers independently generated initial codes using the qualitative software package Dedoose (version 8.0.42) to organize and code the interview transcripts. Team members then met to discuss their initial codes. Initial codes were compared and contrasted for each interview as a group until consensus was reached regarding core codes. In Phase 3, the researchers searched for themes across codes. In Phases 4 and 5, the researchers together reviewed themes and then defined and named themes. The final thematic structure was collectively decided by research team members.

### **Rigor**

The use of group consensus in Stages 2, 3, and 4 of thematic analysis was an attempt to minimize bias and enhance trustworthiness. After initial coding, member checks were used for additional rigor, which included text and email communication with the participants for clarifying questions and quote accuracy.

### **Results**

Two participants, Javad and Jawid, were interviewed (see Table 1). Javad was a student who fled Iran, spending approximately 2 years in Indonesia awaiting refugee status. He subsequently immigrated to the US. Jawid was a medical doctor who transitioned directly to the US from

Afghanistan. After a thorough analysis of the interview transcriptions, three prominent themes were identified: (a) contextual barriers to occupation, (b) belonging, and (c) adaptation.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Demographics*

<b>Pseudonym*</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Country in Transition</b>	<b>Year in US</b>
Jawid	25-30	M	Afghanistan	Afghan	None	2
Javad	20-25	M	Iran	Afghan	Indonesia	1

*Note.* \*Pseudonyms chosen by participants.

**Theme 1: Contextual Barriers to Occupation: “It’s Like Zombie City”**

Both of the participants found barriers to their occupations in the physical environment, social environment, and in the systems of their host country. The San Francisco Bay Area has limitations in the physical environment, including accessible transportation and potential long commute times for those without a car. This lack of accessible transportation impacted the participants’ ability to perform their occupations. Jawid discussed challenges with his commute and the impact it had on making his appointments:

It was hard in the beginning when I came here. The transport was different, so I used to lose my way a lot. I didn't know how to use the bus, and then after some time, I learned how to use the BART [Bay Area Rapid Transit] and bus but still, I have some degree of difficulty going to the doctor and taking appointments and stuff. (Jawid)

The lack of community in the social environment also influenced engagement in meaningful occupation. Javad was accustomed to an environment in Indonesia, his transition country, which had a thriving social atmosphere with an abundance of people outside. This environment granted more opportunities to engage with his community easily. Javad contrasted this experience with the social context of the San Francisco Bay Area:

People walking in the street, selling food in the street. Here there is nothing. When I got here, I was with my friend, and I said, there is no people in the street. It’s like zombie city. He said, why are you saying that. In Indonesia, people are everywhere; there is always people walking. (Javad)

Despite both of the participants being multilingual, they reported language being a social barrier. Jawid expressed his difficulty with understanding and communicating nuances of humor in his new host country as a barrier to connection. Jawid shared, “I needed to, to speak in another language, and it’s very difficult to connect with people in another language. For example, uh, you can’t make jokes [laughs] because the culture is different.”

Systemic barriers included policies on housing, education, and work. Jawid discussed the systemic barrier of an assigned living situation in which he was unable to influence where he was placed. The participants had limited choice when it came to the location of placement. Because of limited funds for refugee resettlement programs, housing was often provided as cheaply as possible, which had implications for quality of life, safety, and access. Jawid was relocated to Oakland and experienced issues with safety: “It’s not a very safe place. Uh, I lived here since about 2 years, and in this 2 years I was robbed two times.”



Jawid also experienced a systematic barrier regarding his education qualifications failing to transfer over from the country of origin to the host country, requiring him to take alternate forms of employment, which were those industries available in the San Francisco Bay Area:

The most important difference is the job. When I was in Afghanistan, I work as a medical doctor. Here I work, I . . . my first job was working in, on an assembly line in [car company] factory, after that I, uh, I found a job as a barista [laughs] in a coffee shop. (Jawid)

These barriers denied Jawid the opportunity to engage in his preferred work occupation as a medical doctor. Javad also experienced barriers to work and education when he was in his transition country, leaving him deprived of his productive occupations:

Some classes they have for us, music class, some English class. But when you are in Indonesia, the people who are still over there they are like in stress because of the process. They cannot go back to their country, and they don't know when they can make it to another country. Then you can't work, you can't go to university, so it is just stressful over there. (Javad)

The physical, social, and systemic barriers led the participants to experience restrictions in the quality of their occupational engagement and daily life as well as occupational deprivation when they are deprived of meaningful work or social connections because of factors outside of their control.

## **Theme 2: Belonging: “They are Living Somewhere Else Where They do not Belong to that Place”**

The participants developed a sense of belonging through their identity as immigrants, feeling that they were part of a social network or community in their experience of cultural difference.

### ***Identity***

Part of the process of transition for refugees is taking on a new title and status of “immigrant” or “refugee.” The title of refugee immediately marks the person as an “other,” someone different from the rest. Becoming a refugee typically means the loss of more than homeland and includes the potential loss of previous identities. For Javad, he identified himself as an immigrant in his country of origin, despite being born there, because his family were immigrants. He spoke about his experience of being an immigrant and the impact of his sense of belonging:

Because I was an immigrant in Iran, we were immigrants. For Afghan people who lived in Iran, it was very difficult. For example, I was born in Iran. For immigrant people in Iran, the situation is very different. So they have low opportunity because they are immigrants. (Javad)

Javad expanded more about his experience as an “other” in his home country, demonstrating sentiments of discrimination because of his social status:

Yeah, it's better, for sure, than living over there. I feel not like guilty like when I was over there. I can say, for example, the bus if you are sitting over and the bus is full. I am not saying all the people, but there are people who say “you are an immigrant, why are you sitting on the chair?” (Javad)

Alternatively, Jawid did not speak directly about his own identity as a refugee but commented about his perception of how people of a host country view refugees and immigrants:

They should, I think, some people here when they know that somebody is from Afghanistan or somewhere else, they think that, how should I say this, they have a lower opinion of people from there . . . people should understand that although the culture is different, people everywhere are the same. So they should know us as humans. (Jawid)

Part of Jawid's identity was in being a medical doctor, but systemic barriers required him to pursue medical assistant training, which stripped him of this previously valued identity label. In addition to a decrease in status from a doctor to a medical assistant, there is an added layer of being out of place in a female-dominated field:

Yeah, medical assistance is very different from medical doctor. Yeah, it's a just taking blood pressure and temperature yeah [laughs]. Yes, so, that's the difference. And in the class here, there are a lot of girls in the class here. I think it's a girl's job or something, medical assisting.

The experience of these refugees involved layers of identity. Identity as an immigrant or refugee, work identity, and a sense of belonging to a group of people. Each of these identities was impacted by the transition process.

### ***Social Networks***

Cultural and social reliance on family and social networks in their home country was not the same as the host country, which impacted their sense of belonging. This lack of social networks had implications for job attainment, housing, and social relationships. The participants had to use more formal resources and support, such as the refugee agencies, or create their support network:

Over there if you know someone, for example, they can just offer you job or they have friend, they can say, here is a guy that wants to work and yeah because we're immigrants, it was bit difficult. Here, when we came, there was an organization called IRC that helped people who came to US, refugee people, they help them finding job, finding house. (Javad)

Jawid initially did not have the same social network advantages that Javad had and was randomly paired with a roommate that he did not know. Javad had a friend he had met while in Indonesia and was able to stay with that friend for 6 months, which allowed him to make new connections and find a place to live:

Here, actually, I was really lucky that I have a friend here. When I come here I went [to] their house and then they had a room for me available, yeah, it was super good, and it's a great place, yeah. I was living in Berkeley for like 6 months, and then after that, I made a lot of friends. My friends helped me find another place, so yeah, in San Francisco. (Javad)

Having a social network, even one friend, helped him to create connections and establish a sense of belonging and had a dynamic impact on other areas of his life.

### ***Culture Shock***

The participants discussed how changes between the culture of their home country and the culture of the host country impacted their sense of belonging. Javad commented on the significant differences in culture between his country of origin and living in the San Francisco Bay Area:

Yeah, there is when I came here, there was culture shock. Yeah, I had that culture shock really different here. Like how can I say? The rules I really like it here. For example, for

driving it is a lot different. Also the religion. Over there it's mostly Islamic. And the clothing is much different. (Javad)

Culture shock permeated multiple occupations in their lives. Javad expressed a difference in culture that was notable, including changes in routine and feeling different from others: “Okay, in here, so I grew up over there I go with people with my friends, it was a regular routine. When I got here pretty much not really feeling weird or something but some difference, yeah.”

This sense of difference or feeling out of place can impact a sense of belonging, and the participants took means to create individual strategies to address this. Connecting with others was so important that Jawid started to create a phone app to address this barrier, which would be relevant in the San Francisco Bay Area culture as a way to make social connections:

I thought about an application for other[s] because here there are a lot of Afghans and in the United States, but you can't find them easily. So I thought if I create an app so that only for Afghans and Dari and Pashto language it will be a good idea to find nearby people, and I created that application, but some of the work remains to be done. So it's not finished. (Jawid)

The participants felt they did not belong as a result of the differences in their everyday routines, activities, religion, and dress. The participants actively addressed this lack of belonging by trying to create connections with people who were from a similar area and culture.

### **Theme 3: Adaptation: “Whatever I Can Do is What I Do”**

In the transition of refugees from their home country to the host country, refugees encountered barriers in the environment to engage in occupation. These barriers impacted their sense of belonging, which led to adaptation using their internal strengths and resilience and can be seen in the way that they adapted their occupations. During transition, Javad mentioned that some refugees became hopeless and took their own lives, while others persevered and maintained hope about the future. This liminal space, from when a person leaves their home country to when they are granted asylum, can lead to increased stress:

Mostly people are staying for just 2 to 3 years. I know some friends who are still living there 7 to 8 years. They can't do anything; they are just waiting. They have hope to make it to a new country. For me, it was almost 4 years. I'm just really in regret of those times. When you are there, you can, for example, do some online courses or things, but when you are there in that situation . . . you just cannot focus on anything. Yeah, you just, ah, I have some friends who suicide themselves because of the stress. (Javad)

Jawid demonstrated his internal strengths and resilience in response to challenges in his host country, “Uh no, the place where I live, it's not a very safe place. Uh, I lived here since about 2 years, and in this 2 years I was robbed two times [laughs].” Specifically, the presence of the laughter when describing the event, as well as the participant's attitude at the time of the interview, revealed his coping skills and perspective about the barriers he has faced.

Language barriers made certain steps of the transition difficult, but Javad persevered: “When I was doing my process, like my papers . . . I needed to go by myself and that was very difficult, but now I pretty much get used to the process and whatever I can do is what I do.” The participants recognized the challenges in their environment and used their strengths and abilities to do what was in their control. Perseverance and keeping perspective on their experiences have helped them to adapt and transition.

### ***Changes in Form of Occupations***

To adapt, the participants modified the form of their occupations, essentially keeping the same meaning and function. The occupational form refers to the what, how, where, and who of a given occupation, its “observable aspects” (Larson & Zemke, 2003, p. 80). For example, after Javad moved to the San Francisco Bay Area he did not have access to a local Shia mosque, but he continued to engage in aspects of his spirituality in a different form by praying at home and celebrating holidays through fasting and ritual. Javad noted that these occupations were all previously co-occupations with his family, friends, and community at large. According to Jawid, drinking alcohol as a social and leisure occupation is legal in the US and, therefore, he can participate in it publicly with friends. This would not be acceptable in Afghanistan. Jawid discussed drinking with friends in the desert because of the illegal nature of the activity:

Some things that are, for example, drinking here. It’s legal. It wasn’t legal in Afghanistan. We used to drink beer, but it was all away from the police and stuff. Yes, um. Going to bars. There’s no bar in Afghanistan. Um, other than that I don’t have any new hobbies here. (Jawid)

Javad also changed the form of his sports from soccer to basketball, but his participation in sports seemed to maintain the meaning and function of socializing and participating in a team sport:

Again, you, over there, always with friends doing things, like playing soccer. Here, you barely find people playing soccer. It is more of baseball and basketball. But I am now playing basketball with some friends. I like it now. The different things is sports we do a lot, like every week.

### ***Termination of Occupations***

The participants not only adapted by changing the form of some occupations but also ceasing participating in some occupations altogether. Javad shared that he picked up the occupation of guitar playing while in transition in Indonesia, then he quit playing after resettling in the US because it was no longer meaningful to him. Javad shared that his family did not value music before he resettled, and it does not add to his life now after resettlement. The purpose of the occupation was to occupy his time as he waited to move onto the next step; this occupation itself was a coping method that had fulfilled its purpose.

### ***New Occupations***

In the transition, the participants also expressed taking up new occupations to adapt. Jawid discussed the sociocultural change of speaking to women in public. The context of this interview is two female interviewers in a public park:

Uh, for example, in Afghanistan, uh, you, if you go to [laughs] for example a girl, and you want to talk with her. She won’t talk with you or if you do that and people see, you will be arrested by police. (Jawid)

Barriers that might have previously existed in their home country were removed, which allowed the participants to pursue new interests and ways of engaging in occupations.

### ***Maintenance of Occupations***

Some occupations were maintained despite the relocation. Jawid shared that he did not experience barriers in accessing his interest in computers: “I like computers and computer programming, so I had a computer there, and I have one here, too.”

Through this transition, the participants shared that their occupations have changed in form, but they were able to maintain their meaning and function. Through adapting how they perform occupations and making decisions about which occupations to continue, take on, or to give up, the participants were actively engaged in a process of adaptation.

### **Discussion**

The refugees' experience of occupation through their transition and resettlement to the San Francisco Bay Area involved encountering barriers to occupation, struggling to find belonging, and an active process of adaptation. The participants in this study were experiencing a transition from their home country to the US. The transition was a forced migration and brings with it a discontinuity of ways of being and doing. According to Blair (2000), "discontinuity requires alteration to routine, habit and the taken-for-granted configuration of occupations. It requires personal awareness and recognition of the event and new responses to deal with the results of the discontinuity" (p. 232). The findings of this research highlight the ways Javad and Jawid experienced barriers to occupation and a sense of belonging. Despite these challenges, they were able to persevere and actively adapted their occupations to maintain meaning and participation.

### **Barriers to Occupation**

The participants faced a variety of contextual barriers—both systemic and socio-cultural—that impacted their ability to engage in meaningful occupation leading to occupational deprivation. Consistent with the literature (Gupta & Sullivan, 2008; Huot et al., 2016), the participants faced systemic barriers to employment and, in one case, a demotion in their profession. Jawid was not able to engage in his career as a medical doctor when he arrived in the US because of a systemic barrier of a lack of transferable credentials between home and host country. This led him to lose his profession and work in several blue-collar jobs, such as factory work at a car manufacturing company, security, and barista. The availability of these jobs is directly related to the industries in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The findings from this study add to our understanding of how the environment where the participants were relocated held hidden socio-cultural barriers to occupation. Social environments had barriers because of the lack of people in outdoor and community spaces, creating a "zombie city." Where the participants used to be able to just walk outside and engage with others, the social environment in the San Francisco Bay Area did not have these affordances where they lived and would not be a typical form of engagement. Language was also a barrier to forming social connections as the participants found it hard to connect to others through humor being lost in translation. Occupations that held meaning for the participants were denied to them or became difficult to navigate because of the new context they found themselves in through their transition to the US.

### ***Belonging***

The barriers to engagement in work and social occupations impacted the participants' sense of belonging. Hammell (2014) defines belonging as a sense of connectedness and participation in occupations with others, both strong indicators of overall well-being. Consistent with the findings from Huot et al. (2016) the connection with their work identity was impacted by career restrictions as well as changes to the demographics of the career. Jawid was training to become a medical assistant and found that it was more of a "female" dominated career in the US, something that he did not expect and with which he could not identify. Huot et al. (2016) examined the transition of refugees to a new environment and found that it is accompanied by the person's efforts to maintain or re-establish identity. The studies focusing on the experience of male forced migrants revealed a struggle to cope when they were unable to continue their past professions upon relocation, leading to a loss of

identity (Stickley & Stickley, 2010; Werge-Olsen & Vik, 2012). The participants in this study faced similar challenges in their professional identity when they were no longer able to continue their profession because of a lack of education that translated in the US.

Huot et al. (2016) found that refugees also took on “new identities” that emerged because of changes in social roles and daily occupations (p. 191). The participants in this study took on the new identity of an immigrant. This new identity came with it a variety of discrimination experiences, including feeling judged, unkindness toward immigrants, as well as barriers, such as decreased opportunities in school and work. Culture shock also diminished a sense of comfort and connection, where traditional ways of being and doing were different in the host country. Similar to Smith (2013), the participants also belonged to an extensive and tight-knit social network in their home country, consisting of close relationships with friends and family. The transition to a new country severed their existing social network with both participants living apart from their families. Structures and networks that encouraged belonging, such as participation in religious occupations, were no longer available in the San Francisco Bay Area.

### ***Adaptation***

Despite contextual barriers and struggles with belonging, the participants took a practical approach to the challenges they faced, focused on what steps they could take, and persevered through failure. Huot et al. (2016) reported how forced migrants’ outlook on the future was impacted by occupation deprivation, with fluctuations in hopefulness and hopelessness for the future. This perspective was also influenced by asylum seekers who felt ensnared in a locked system and were waiting to be granted asylum or refugee status. However, the participants in our study had been granted refugee status and were no longer in the process of waiting. Their outlook for the future might have been more positive and practical because they no longer experienced the uncertainty that might exist for asylum seekers.

To adapt, immigrants must reconfigure and reconstruct their occupations (Gupta & Sullivan, 2013). This is especially true of forced migrants, specifically refugees, where their transition is often unexpected and outside of their control. When faced with contextual barriers, the participants in this study responded through occupational adaptation, defined as a response to occupational challenges (Schkade & Schultz, 1992). Occupational adaptation was practiced through adapting, ceasing, adding, or maintaining occupations across their transition. Huot et al. (2016) discussed “how adapting occupations could serve as a way to bridge gaps between dominant cultures within the migrants’ home and host societies” and “maintaining a sense of continuity in their lives” (p. 190). In the past, Javad would have prayed in the mosque and participated in religious practice with his family, but he adapted to praying at home in the absence of a Shia mosque. This finding was also similar to the study by Gupta and Sullivan (2013) where participants prayed at home in the absence of a familiar spiritual environment. It is interesting to view this adaptation through the occupational science perspective of form, function, and meaning (Larson & Zemke, 2003). The form of the occupation, or the observable aspects, has changed. The occupation now takes place alone and at home, becoming a solitary practice and not a co-occupation with family and the community. The meaning or function is maintained: practicing their religion and praying to Allah.

Occupations that were ceased seemed to be those that could easily be substituted for a similar occupation or that lacked meaning in a new environment. Javad was no longer able to access soccer but felt that basketball was a team sport he could easily substitute in its place. The form of the sport changed to American sports but provided the same meaning and function because it was about playing sports with friends and having social interactions as an outcome. Jawid took up guitar playing as a temporary occupation while in transition in Indonesia. He ceased playing the guitar

when he transitioned to the US as it was a new occupation that was not meaningful for the long term and might have only held meaning while waiting on his refugee application.

The only occupation that was mentioned that was maintained without any changes was Javad's occupation of computer programming. This is a virtual occupation without physical or environmental barriers in the San Francisco Bay Area. The San Francisco Bay Area is also a cultural hub of computer technology, offering considerable access to digital occupations for those who can demonstrate the right skill set. It is interesting to note that in a virtual context without barriers, the form, function, and meaning of the occupation remained; it became a bridge to maintained occupations.

Findings from Huot et al. (2016) suggest that when occupations are disrupted by deprivation, forced migrants either adapt existing occupations or change occupations. Occupational change is defined as "adding, abandoning or altering occupations through the use of adapting, restructuring, refraining and reconstruction strategies" (Townsend & Polatajko, 2013, p. 378). Occupational change occurs when individuals are "unable or unwilling to adapt their original occupation to fit their new context and instead replace it with a new occupation" (Huot et al., 2016, p. 190). Javad was a medical doctor before his transition, but external systemic barriers denied him his previous occupation, and he added new occupations of factory work, security, barista, and construction work. These were also professional job occupations that were available in the San Francisco Bay Area. Javad turned to driving as a new occupation in the face of the inadequate public transportation system in the San Francisco Bay Area. Other occupations that were once prohibited became permissible. Both Javad and Jawid now participated in going to bars and drinking, occupations formerly illegal and only done in secret. Talking to women in public was also a new occupation for Jawid that would have led to serious consequences for all involved in his home country. Despite the option to avail of these new occupational opportunities, the participants did not seem to find a strong sense of meaning in them. Their preference seemed to lie in performing their occupations the way they did prior to their forced transition in line with their culture and values. These findings may not be replicated in immigrants who voluntarily migrate, as the participants felt forced to leave their countries for their safety. There was no option to return. Their new environment was vastly different, and their occupations cannot be continued in the same way. The only choices are to adapt and continue to move forward along their process of transition.

### **Limitations**

The study had three primary limitations. First, the study had a small sample size. Recruiting participants was difficult because of obstacles in accessing the large refugee organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area of California. Future research would benefit from establishing a close relationship with a partner refugee organization and establishing a trusted gatekeeper for access to participants. Both participants were recruited from an event held by a non-profit organization for employment training. This could have impacted the diversity of the sample, as each participant was engaged in refugee support services in the community. Second, one interview per participant was not necessarily sufficient to build rapport with them. A follow-up interview would have helped garner trust and add further depth. The researchers were limited to 1 year to complete the study as part of a master's thesis, and IRB ethical approval was granted for one semi-structured interview within a 1-year time frame. Third, there was potential for language misinterpretation. The participants were offered translation services but declined. Future research conducted in the participants' native language, or an option to journal in their language, could add to the triangulation of data. This, in turn, might allow for a more nuanced understanding of their experiences.

## Implications for Future Research and Occupational Therapy Practice

Perseverance and maintaining perspective were mentioned as part of occupational adaptation. Further research into the development of resiliency during transition and resettlement for refugees is needed. Future research could also explore the impact of the environment for refugees who have been resettled for a longer duration, to better understand how refugees navigate and adapt to barriers over time.

This study adds to existing occupational science knowledge by illuminating how the experience of transition for refugees impacts the form, function, and meaning of occupation and leads to occupational deprivation and occupational adaptation. Future occupational science research would benefit from exploring diverse refugee populations and contexts. Because of some limitations in language, research methodologies, such as photovoice, would add a visual element to the data as well as enhance participant involvement and social action as part of a participatory action research approach. In addition to adding to the knowledge base of occupational science, the findings from this study have implications for occupational therapy practice. Occupational therapists have an ethical obligation to promote occupational rights, including the rights of those who have experienced displacement (World Federation of Occupational Therapy, 2019). Occupational therapists working with forced migrants and refugees could support belonging by engaging in a process of identifying the contextual barriers in occupational participation for their population and assist refugees through a process of occupational adaptation.

## Conclusion

Forced migration shapes human occupation. The transition produces a change in environment that can pose new challenges and barriers to occupation, thereby impacting a sense of belonging. The refugees in this study were able to adapt their occupations in ways that maintained certain aspects of meaning and purpose. Despite these adaptations, the participants communicated that life in the San Francisco Bay Area was not the same as their life in their home country. While life in their home country cannot be fully recreated, occupation can be a connecting bridge between their past and present life.

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