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Carmen Jacques
Edith Cowan University

Kelly Jaunzems
Edith Cowan University

Layla Al-Hameed
Edith Cowan University

Lelia Green
Edith Cowan University

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Refugees' Dreams of the Past, Projected into the Future

Carmen Jacques, Kelly Jaunzems, Layla Al-Hameed, Lelia Green

Abstract

This article is about refugees' and migrants' dreams of home and family and stems from an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant, "A Hand Up: Disrupting the Communication of Intergenerational Welfare Dependency" (LP140100935), with Partner Organisation St Vincent de Paul Society (WA) Inc. (Vinnies). A Vinnies-supported refugee and migrant support centre was chosen as one of the hubs for interviewee recruitment, given that many refugee families experience persistent and chronic economic disadvantage. The de-identified name for the drop-in language-teaching and learning social facility is the Migrant and Refugee Homebase (MARH). At the time of the research, in 2018, refugee and forced migrant families from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan constituted MARH's primary membership base. MARH provided English language classes alongside other educational and financial support. It could also organise provision of emergency food and was a conduit for furniture donated by Australian families. Crucially, MARH operated as a space in which members could come together to build shared community.

As part of her role, the researcher was introduced to Sara (de-identified), a mother-tongue Arabic speaker and the centre's coordinator. Sara had personal experience of being a refugee, as well as being MARH's manager, and she became both a point of contact for the researcher team, an interpreter/translator, and an empathetic listener as refugees shared their stories. Dreams of home and family emerged throughout the interviews as a vital part of participants' everyday lives. These dreams and hopes were developed in the face of what was, for some, a nightmare of adversity. Underpinning participants' sense of agency, subjectivity and resilience, Badiou argues (93, as noted in Jackson, 241) that hope can appear as a basic form of patience or perseverance rather than a dream for justice. Instead of imagining an improvement in personal circumstances, the dream is one of simply moving forward rather than backward. While dreams of being reunited with family are rooted in the past and project a vision of a family which no longer exists, these dreams help fashion a future which once again contains a range of possibilities.

Although Sara volunteered her time on the research project as part of her commitment to Vinnies, she was well-known to interviewees as a MARH staff member and, in many cases, a friend and confidante. While Sara's manager role implies an imbalance of power, with Sara powerful and participants comparatively less so, the majority of the information explored in the interviews pertained to refugees' experiences of life outside the sphere in which MARH is engaged, so there was limited risk of the data being sanitised to reflect positively upon MARH. The specialist information and understandings that the interviewees shared positioned them as experts, and as co-creators of knowledge.

Recruitment and Methodological Approach

The project researcher (Jaunzems) met potential contributors at MARH when its members gathered for a coffee morning. With Sara's assistance, the researcher invited MARH members to take part in the research project, giving those present the opportunity to ask and have answered any questions they deemed important. Coffee morning attendees were under no obligation to take part, and about half chose not to do so, while the remainder volunteered to participate. Sara scheduled the interviews at times to suit the families participating. A parent and child from each volunteer family was interviewed, separately. In all cases it was the mother who volunteered to take part, and all interviewees chose to be interviewed in their homes. Each set of interviews was digitally recorded and lasted no longer than 90 minutes. This article includes extracts from interviews with three mothers from refugee families who escaped war-torn homelands for a new life in Australia, sometimes via interim refugee camps.

The project researcher conducted the in-depth interviews with Sara's crucial interpreting/translating assistance. The interviews followed a traditional approach, except that the researcher deferred to Sara as being more important in the interview exchange than she was. This reflects the premise that meaning is socially constructed, and that what people do and say makes visible the meanings that underpin their actions and statements within a wider social context (Burr). Conceptualising knowledge as socially constructed privileges the role of the decoder in receiving, understanding and communicating such knowledge (Crotty). Respecting the role of the interpreter/translator signified to the participants that their views, opinions and their overall cultural context were valued.

Once complete, the interviews were sent for translation and transcription by a trusted bi-lingual transcriber, where both the English and Arabic exchanges were transcribed. This was deemed essential by the researchers, to ensure both the authenticity of the data collected and to demonstrate "trust, understanding, respect, and a caring connection" (Valibhoy, Kaplan, and Szwarc, 23) with the participants. Upon completion of the interviews with volunteer members of the MARH community, and at the beginning of the analysis phase, researchers recognised the need for the adoption of an interpretive framework. The interpretive approach seeks to understand an individual's view of the world through the contexts of time, place and culture. The knowledge produced is contextualised and differs from one person to another as a result of individual subjectivities such as age, race and ethnicity, even within a shared social context (Guba and Lincoln). Accordingly, a mother-tongue Arabic speaker, who identifies as a refugee (Al-Hameed), was added to the project. All authors were involved in writing up the article while authors two, three and four took responsibility for transcript coding and analysis. In the transcripts that follow, words originally spoken in Arabic are in italics, with non-italicised words originally spoken in English.

Discrimination and Belonging

Aya initially fled from her home in Syria into neighbouring Jordan. She didn't feel welcomed or supported there.

[00:55:06] Aya: *...in Jordan, refugees didn't have rights, and the Jordanian schools refused to teach them [the children...] We were put aside.*

[00:55:49] Interpreter, Sara (to Researcher): And then she said they push us aside like you're a zero on the left, yeah this is unfortunately the reality of our countries, I want to cry now.

[00:56:10] Aya: *You're not allowed to cry because we'll all cry.*

Some refugees and migrant communities suffer discrimination based on their ethnicity and perceived legitimacy as members of the host society. Although Australian refugees may have had searing experiences prior to their acceptance by Australia, migrant community members in Australia can also feel themselves "constructed in the public and political spheres as less legitimately Australian than others" (Green and Aly). Jackson argues that both refugees and migrants experience

the impossibility of ever bridging the gap between one's natal ties to the place one left because life was insupportable there, and the demands of the nation to which one has travelled, legally or illegally, in search of a better life. And this tension between belonging and not belonging, between a place where one has rights and a place where one does not, implies an unresolved relationship between one's natural identity as a human being and one's social identity as 'undocumented migrant,' a 'resident alien,' an 'ethnic minority,' or 'the wretched of the earth,' whose plight remains a stigma of radical alterity even though it inspires our compassion and moves us to political action. (223)

The tension Jackson refers to, where the migrant is haunted by belonging and not belonging, is an area of much research focus. Moreover, the label of "asylum seeker" can contribute to systemic "exclusion of a marginalised and abject group of people, precisely by employing a term that emphasises the suspended recognition of a community" (Nyers). Unsurprisingly, many refugees in Australia long for the connectedness of the lives they left behind relocated in the safe spaces where they live now.

Eades focuses on an *emic* approach to understanding refugee/migrant distress, or trauma, which seeks to incorporate the worldview of the people in distress: essentially replicating the interpretive perspective taken in the research. This *emic* framing is adopted in place of the *etic* approach that seeks to understand the distress through a Western biomedical lens that is positioned outside the social/cultural system in which the distress is taking place. Eades argues: "developing an *emic* approach is to engage in intercultural dialogue, raise dilemmas, test assumptions, document hopes and beliefs and explore their implications". Furthermore, Eades sees the challenge for service providers working with refugee/migrants in distress as being able to move beyond "harm minimisation" models of care "to recognition of a facilitative, productive community of people who are in a transitional phase between homelands". This opens the door for studies concerning the notions of attachment to place and its links to resilience and a refugee's ability to "settle in" (for example, Myers's ground-breaking place-making work in Plymouth).

Resilient Precariousness

Chaima: *We feel [...] good here, we're safe, but when we sit together, we remember what we went through how my kids screamed when the bombs came, and we went out in the car. My son was 12 and I was pregnant, every time I remember it, I go back.*

Alongside the dreams that migrants have possible futures are the nightmares that threaten to destabilise their daily lives. As per the work of Xavier and Rosaldo, post-migration social life is recreated in two ways: the first through participation and presence in localised events; the second by developing relationships with absent others (family and friends) across the globe through media. These relationships, both distanced and at a distance, are dispersed through time and space. In light of this, Campays and Said suggest that places of past experiences and rituals for meaning are commonly recreated or reproduced as new places of attachment abroad; similarly, other recollections and experience can trigger a sense of fragility when "*we remember what we went through*". Gupta and Ferguson suggest that resilience is defined by the migrant/refugee capacity to "reimagine and re-materialise" their lost heritage in their new home. This involves a sense of connection to the good things in the past, while leaving the bad things behind.

Resilience has also been linked to the migrant's/refugee's capacity "to manage their responses to adverse circumstances in an interpersonal community through the networks of relationships" (Eades). Resilience in this case is seen through an intersubjective lens. Joseph reminds us that there is danger in romanticising community. Local communities may not only be hostile toward different national and ethnic groups, they may actively display a level of hostility toward them (Boswell). However, Gill maintains that "the reciprocal relations found in communities are crucially important to their [migrant/refugee] well-being". This is because inclusion in a given community allows migrants/refugees to shrug off the outsider label, and the feeling of being at risk, and provides the opportunity for them to become known as families and friends. One of MAHR's central aims was to help bridge the cultural divide between MAHR users and the broader Australian community.

Hope

[01:06: 10] Sara (to interviewee, Aya): *What's the key to your success here in Australia?*

[01:06:12] Aya: *The people, and how they treat us.*

[01:06:15] Sara (to Researcher): *People and how they deal with us.*

[01:06:21] Aya: *It's the best thing when you look around, and see people who don't understand your language but they help you.*

[01:06:28] Sara (to Researcher): *She said - this is nice. I want to cry also. She said the best thing when I see people, they don't understand your language, and I don't understand theirs but they still smile in your face.*

[01:06:43] Aya: *It's the best.*

[01:06:45] Sara (to Aya): *yes, yes, people here are angels. This is the best thing about Australia.*

Here, Sara is possibly shown to be taking liberties with the translation offered to the researcher, talking about how Australians "smile in your face", when (according to the translator) Aya talked about how Australians "help". Even so, the capacity for social connection and other aspects of sociality have been linked to a person's ability to turn a negative experience into a positive cultural resource (Wilson). Resilience is understood in these cases as a strength-based practice where families, communities and individuals are viewed in terms of their capabilities and possibilities, instead of their deficiencies or disorders (Graybeal and Saleeby in Eades). According to Fozdar and Torezani, there is an "apparent paradox between high-levels of discrimination experienced by humanitarian migrants to Australia in the labour market and everyday life" (30) on the one hand, and their reporting of positive well-being on the other. That disparity includes accounts such as the one offered by Aya.

As Wilson and Arvanitakis suggest,

the interaction between negative experiences of discrimination and reports of wellbeing suggested a counter-intuitive propensity among refugees to adapt to and make sense of their migration experiences in unique, resourceful and life-affirming ways. Such response patterns among refugees and trauma survivors indicate a similar resilience-related capacity to positively interpret and derive meaning from negative migration experiences and associated emotions. ... However, resilience is not expressed or employed uniformly among individuals or communities. Some respond in a resilient manner, while others collapse. On this point, an argument could be made that collapse and breakdown is a built-in aspect of resilience, and necessary for renewal and ongoing growth.

Using this approach, Wilson and Arvanitakis have linked resilience to hope, as a "present- and future-oriented mode of situated defence against adversity". They argue that the term "hope" is often utilised in a tokenistic way "as a strategic instrument in increasingly empty domestic and international political vocabularies". Nonetheless, Wilson and Arvanitakis believe hope to be of vital academic interest due to the prevalence of war and suffering throughout the world.

In the research reported here, the authors found that participants' hopes were interwoven with dreams of being reunited with their families in a place of safety. This is a common longing. As Jackson states,

so it is that migrants travel abroad in pursuit of utopia, but having found that place, which is also no-place (*ou-topos*), they are haunted by the thought that utopia actually lies in the past. It is the family they left behind. That is where they properly belong. Though the family broke up long ago and is now scattered to the four winds, they imagine a reunion in which they are together again. (223)

There is a sense here that with their hopes and dreams lying in the past, refugees/migrants are living forward while looking backwards (a Kierkegaardian concept). If hope is thought to be key to resilience (Wilson and Arvanitakis), and key to an individual's ability to live with a sense of well-being, then perhaps a refugee's past

relations (familial) impact both their present relations (social/community), and their ability to transform negative experiences into positive experiences. And yet, there is no readily accessible way in which migrants and refugees can recreate the connections that sustained them in the past. As Jackson suggests,

the irreversibility of time is intimately connected with the irreversibility of one's place of origin, and this entwined movement *through time* and *across space* proves perplexing to many migrants, who, in imagining themselves one day returning to the place from where they started out, forget that there is no transport which will convey them back into the past. ... Often it is only by going home that it becomes starkly and disconcertingly clear that one's natal village is no longer the same and *that one has also* changed. (221)

The dream of home and family, therefore and the hope that this might somehow be recreated in the safety of the here and now, becomes a paradoxical loss and longing even as it is a constant companion for many on their refugee journey.

Esma's Dream

According to author three, personal dreams are not generally discussed in Arab culture, even though dreams themselves may form part of the rich tradition of Arabic folklore and storytelling. Alongside issues of mental wellbeing, dreams are constructed as something private, and it generally breaks social taboos to describe them publicly. However, in personal discussions with other refugee women and men, and echoing Jackson's finding, a recurring dream is "to meet my family in a safe place and not be worried about my safety or theirs". As a refugee, the third author shares this dream. This is also the perspective articulated by Esma, who had recently had a fifth child and was very much missing her extended family who had died, been scattered as refugees, or were still living in a conflict zone. The researcher asked Sara to ask Esma about the best aspect of her current life:

[01:17:03] Esma: *The thing that comforts me here is nature, it's beautiful.*

[01:17:15] Sara (to the Researcher): The nature.

[01:17:16] Esma: *And feeling safe.*

[01:17:19] Sara (to the Researcher): The safety. ...

[01:17:45] Esma: *Life's beautiful here.*

[01:17:47] Sara (to the Researcher): Life is beautiful here.

[01:17:49] Esma: *But I want to know people, speak the language, have friends, life is beautiful here even if I don't have my family here.*

[01:17:56] Sara (to the Researcher): Life is so pretty you only need to improve the language and have friends, she said I love my life here even though I don't have any family or community here. (To Esma:) *I am your family.*

[01:18:12] Esma: *Bring me my siblings here.*

[01:18:14] Sara (to Esma): *I just want my brothers here and my sisters.*

[01:18:17] Esma: *It's a dream.*

[01:18:18] Sara (to Esma): *it's a dream, one day it will become true.*

Here Esma uses the term dream metaphorically, to describe an imagined utopia: a dream world. In supporting Esma, who is mourning the absence of her family, Sara finds herself reacting and emoting around their shared experience of leaving siblings behind. In doing so, she affirms the younger woman, but also offers a hope for the future. Esma had previously made a suggestion, absorbed into her larger dream, but more achievable in the short term, "to know people, speak the language, have friends". The implication here is that Esma is keen to find a way to connect with Australians. She sees this as a means of compensating for the loss of family, a realistic hope rather than an impossible dream.

Conclusion

Interviews with refugee families in a Perth-based migrant support centre reveals both the nightmare pasts and the dreamed-of futures of people whose lives have experienced a radical disruption due to war, conflict and other life-threatening events. Jackson's work with migrants provides a context for understanding the power of the dream in helping to resolve issues around the irreversibility of time and circumstance, while Wilson and Arvanitakis point to the importance of hope and resilience in supporting the building of a positive future. Within this mix of the longed for and the impossible, both the refugee informants and the academic literature suggest that participation in local events, and authentic engagement with the broader community, help make a difference in supporting a migrant's transition from dreaming to reality.

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