Exploring Social Bridging, Sense of Belonging, and Integration Amongst the Syrian Refugee Community

by

Mischa Taylor

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Community Engagement

School of Public Health
University of Alberta

Abstract

The civil war in Syria caused an upheaval to all aspects of life for its citizens, resulting in an unprecedented number of Syrians arriving in Canada as refugees. While government and settlement agencies responded by addressing their immediate needs, other aspects of their integration, specifically their social integration, were much less prioritized and minimally resourced. This study drew on Ager & Strang's (2008) Domains of Integration framework and their description of social bridging to explore this aspect of social integration of refugees in greater detail. A qualitative descriptive methodology was applied to explore how Syrian refugees describe their experiences of building social bridges in Canada, and how these bridges impact their sense of belonging and overall integration. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve adult members of the Syrian refugee community, and thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. This study found that: social bridging is influenced by the conditions that shape if social bridges are formed; friendliness, intentional connections, and neighbourly relations are valued social bridges; and social bridging promotes adaptation and sense of belonging outcomes for refugees. The insights that emerged from this study contribute to a better understanding of the interrelationship of these concepts for Syrian refugees, and establishes an foundation to explore social bridging in greater depth for enhancing theory, as well as to improve social bridging support for refugees in practice.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Mischa Taylor. This research project received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board; project name "Exploring Social Bridging and Integration Amongst the Syrian Refugee Community", Pro00096273, January 7, 2020.

Acknowledgements

Contents

LIST OF TABLES

Table   **Page**

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure   **Page**

Glossary of Terms

For a better understanding of this study, the following terms are operationally defined:

Adaptation- The process of developing the skills, knowledge, and overall well-being needed to function in a new cultural and social environment (Berry & Sam, 1997)

Canadian- Residents or citizens of Canada who are not Syrian or Syrian refugees, including individuals from other refugee or newcomer groups

Country of resettlement- Country that has agreed to admit refugees and ultimately grant them permanent residence within its borders (UNHCR, 2020)

Member(s) of the host society- Resident(s) or citizen(s) of the mainstream society into which refugees are resettled

Newcomer- Landed immigrants who have established residential ties in Canada and who have arrived up to five years prior to a census year, including refugees (Statistics Canada, 2011)

Psychosocial- Relating to the interrelation of social factors and individual thought and behavior (Vizzotto et al., 2013)

Refugee- Involuntary immigrants who are unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of persecution or harm due to race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion (UNHCR, 2011)

Sense of belonging- Feeling accepted, secure, and "at home" in one's local community (outside of their own ethnic group) and/or their country of resettlement (Hou et al., 2018), as well as connected to and invested in this community and/or country (Reitz, 2009)

Social bridges- Interactions or relationships that are and are formed between members of different ethnic groups (Ager & Strang, 2008)

Social bridging- An action or activity where one ethnic group attempts to interact or build a relationship with members of an ethnic group outside of their own

Social connections- Interactions or relationships with family or co-ethnic group, with individuals outside of one's ethnic group, or with social institutions and services (Ager & Strang, 2008)

Social culture- The learned social behaviours and customary ways of interacting amongst individuals within a specific group (Hofstede, 1997)

Social integration- Newcomer participation and inclusion in their community and society equal to its native members (Hyndman & Hynie, 2016)

Social network- Social ties that link individuals together with other people (Khan Academy, 2020)

Syrian refugee- Citizens and permanent residents of Syria who fled the country out of fear of persecution or harm resulting from its civil war

Chapter 1: Introduction

Syria's civil war beginning in 2011 caused far-reaching and long-term disturbances to all aspects of life for Syrians. Considered the worst man-made crisis since World War II (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2017), the breakdown of Syria's political, social, and economic infrastructure meant that Syrians experienced loss of income, physical vulnerability from diminished access to shelter, food and safety, and social isolation as relational ties were strained and broken (Cheung et al., 2020). These circumstances precipitated a mass exodus of Syrians such that by the end of 2015, nearly 45 percent of the population had fled Syria to seek safety and a better quality of life in neighbouring countries and Western nations (Syrian Centre for Policy Research, 2016). Syrians living as refugees around the world had experienced the dismantling of the central foundations of their livelihood in Syria, and now faced the task of having to re-establish these in their new homelands.

Beginning in November 2015, an unprecedented number of Syrians began arriving in Canada as refugees (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2019). By the end of 2016, Canada had accepted more than 39,000 Syrian refugees within its borders (IRCC, 2019). In response, the federal government and local settlement agencies devoted significant financial and human resources towards supporting their resettlement. Institutional and government efforts primarily focused on addressing Syrian newcomers' immediate needs such as access to education, healthcare, and language support (Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies [AAISA], 2017; IRCC, 2016). For example, an immigrant service sector survey of Syrian settlement in the prairies discussed their language, housing, and formal settlement assistance needs, but did not mention resources to support other needs, such as the psychosocial aspects of their integration (Wilkinson et al., 2017). Similarly, a 2016 federal report describing

the government's initiative to resettle Syrian refugees and future recommendations to support their successful integration discussed addressing their immediate needs of income support, housing, language training, health, and education (Wrzesnewskyj, 2016). Their report did not include, as either an existing or proposed initiative, any mental health or social programming or services (Wrzesnewskyj, 2016). The topics included in these reports on Syrian integration such as housing, language training needs, and income support, as well as those omitted, particularly psychosocial supports, suggest that immediate needs tend to be the primary focus of many policy and programming efforts. Although fundamental to resettlement, focusing on immediate needs assumes that these aspects of settlement are of greater value to the integration process, and regards the complexities of refugee settlement and integration in a overly simplistic manner. As government services and settlement agencies devoted resources towards supporting Syrian refugees' immediate needs, their psychological and social needs were overlooked as a consequence (Ghumman et al., 2016; Yohani et al., 2018).

Despite the focus on immediate needs in the settlement sector, research has highlighted the critical importance of a coordinated approach to meeting both immediate and psychosocial needs for the successful integration and long-term positive outcomes of refugees (Ager & Strang, 2008; Yohani et al., 2019). In fact, researchers have argued that achieving immediate settlement outcomes is predicated on a stable psychosocial foundation (Schmitz, 2001). In particular, refugees' need for social connection must be supported in order to re-establish quality of life in their new homeland (Pearce, 2008; Strang & Quinn, 2019). When rebuilding social networks in a new country, social connections include relationships within one's own family and ethnic community (social bonding), their ties with the greater community outside their ethnic group (social bridging), and connections to social institutions and services (social linking) (Ager &

Strang, 2008). These relationships crucially fill the gap between the challenges that refugees face and the stable, meaningful life they aspire to in Canada. Social connections help to establish informal support and information networks that facilitate finding housing and employment, learning Canadian culture, navigating systems, and establishing a sense of belonging (Hyndman et al., 2014, English et al., 2017). Since a number of Syrian refugees have arrived in Canada with experiences of trauma (Ghumman et al., 2016), and all Syrian refugees experienced disruption and loss of their social networks (AAISA 2017; Drolet & Moorthi, 2018), it is even more imperative that factors impacting their psychosocial adaptation, such as social connections, are fully understood and addressed to facilitate their social integration into Canada.

Given that loneliness and dislocation due to disrupted social connections is a common experience amongst refugees (English et al., 2017; Stewart et al., 2008), the need to rebuild connections with the greater community is especially important to the integration process. Literature acknowledges that social bridging impacts refugees' integration experiences (Hyndman et al., 2014; Pearce, 2008; Strang & Quinn, 2019), however, bridging relationships tend to be primarily conceptualized, both in research and in practice, as a means of addressing refugees' immediate needs instead of as an integral integration objective in itself (Elliott & Yusuf, 2014; Hanley et al., 2018; Lamba & Krahn, 2003). Although social bridges can indeed promote positive employment, health, language, and education outcomes (AAISA, 2017; Hyndman et al., 2014), viewing social bridges with members of the host society as valuable only for this purpose minimizes the role and impact of these relationships.

Studies of refugee integration have noted that in addition to supporting the achievement of immediate needs, social bridges meaningfully contribute to forming a sense of belonging (Chow, 2007; Esses, 2008; Modood, 2013). In discussions of integration, a sense of belonging is

included as an indicator of the extent to which refugee groups have successfully adapted to their new environment (Modood, 2013; Wu et al., 2011). For the purposes of this study, sense of belonging is defined as feeling accepted, secure, and "at home" in one's local community (outside of their own ethnic group) and/or their country of resettlement (Hou et al., 2018), as well as connected to and invested in this community and/or country (Reitz, 2009). Although the relationship between social bridging and sense of belonging in the context of integration has been identified by some authors (Hou et al., 2018; Schellenberg, 2004; Wu et al., 2011), it has been much less studied compared to the link between social bridging and meeting refugees' immediate needs. As a result, social bridging and sense of belonging remains underprioritized in integration policy and practice (Huizinga & van Hoven, 2018). As well, social bridging as a singular experience and unique aspect of integration is understudied.

Recent studies of refugee integration often use Ager & Strang's (2008) Domains of Integration Framework to examine the factors that affect integration and how these factors interact. In a world where integration is a complex and contested concept (Robinson, 1998), their framework offers a foundation and guide for conceptualizing integration in research and practice that is relevant and applicable across multiple fields of study such as social work, educational psychology, and social sciences. According to Ager & Strang's framework, ten domains that impact an individual's integration are organized within four categories, called indicators. These indicators and domains include: the indicator Foundation, made up of the domain of Rights and Citizenship; the indicator Facilitators, made up of the domains of Language and Cultural Knowledge, and Safety and Stability; the indicator Social Connection, made up of the domains Social Bonds, Social Bridges, and Social Links; and the indicator Markers and Means, made up of the domains Employment, Housing, Education, and Health. Social Connection makes up one

of the four indicators in their framework, designating considerable weight to the role of relationships in supporting refugee integration and drawing attention to the social component of the integration process. Of particular interest to this study, Ager & Strang highlight social bridges as an important type of social connection. In their seminal article, the authors briefly describe social bridging, identifying types of bridging relationships with members of the host society and how these relationships can influence refugees' overall integration. However, Ager & Strang's description does not discuss sense of belonging as specifically related to social bridging, in spite of other studies that have identified a connection between the two (Hou et al., 2018; Schellenberg, 2004; Wu et al., 2011). As such, the Domains of Integration framework offers context for social bridging as a distinct aspect of overall integration, but also appears underdeveloped. Ager & Strang's framework and description, then, provides a starting point for further exploration of social bridging. For example, if and how social bridging influences sense of belonging to one's local community or country of resettlement can be studied using this framework.

There is a need to better understand social bridging as a distinct aspect of integration, and its impact on sense of belonging. This study aims to address this knowledge gap by studying Syrian refugee adults' experiences building social bridges with individuals outside of their ethnic community. The central question that this study examined was, how do Syrian refugees describe the experience of building social bridges? Further questions include: How do social bridges contribute to establishing a sense of belonging for Syrian refugees? How do social bridges impact Syrian refugees' overall integration? and, What specific resources or supports help or hinder social bridging between Syrian refugees and the greater community?

To address these questions, a qualitative descriptive methodology (Sandelowski, 2000) and an engaged approach to research (Blanchard et al., 2009) was used. A total of 12 Syrian refugee adults participated in semi-structured interviews, which were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Findings were generated from both an inductive and deductive process, where Ager & Strang's Domains of Integration framework (2008) was used to interpret and make sense of patterns that emerged in the first stages of analysis. The results of this study confirmed the description of social bridges according to Ager & Strang's framework, and also identified additional facilitators of social bridges, bridging relationships that were valuable to participants, and outcomes of social bridging.

It should be noted that in this study, the terms, 'refugee' and 'newcomer' will be used interchangeably. In Canada, 'newcomer' refers to landed immigrants who have established residential ties in Canada and who have arrived up to five years prior to a census year, including refugees (Statistics Canada, 2011). As involuntary immigrants fleeing persecution or physical harm (UNHCR, 2011), refugees, then, are considered a type of newcomer. Where literature refers to refugees specifically, the term, 'refugee' will be used in this study. In research that can apply to refugees but was conducted with newcomers as a general group, the term, 'newcomer' will be used. As such, 'newcomer' in this study reflects its use in other research but refers to refugees as a particular group of newcomers in the context of this research. Although Syrians can certainly also be Canadians, for the purpose of distinguishing between ethnic groups in social bridging interactions, 'Canadian' refers to residents or citizens of Canada who are not Syrian, including individuals from other refugee or newcomer groups. While the term, 'Canadian' in this study refers to its constituents as one group with similar traits and culture, it must be noted that Canadians are diverse, representing an array of characteristics (Wu et al., 2011). The same is

also true for the term, 'Syrian'. This study also uses the phrase, 'members of the host society' in reference to Canadian residents or citizens who are outside of the Syrian community, which may again include other newcomers.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the literature surrounding integration and social bridging in more detail, illustrating the current gap in knowledge of social bridging as a distinct aspect of integration. The third chapter will describe the methodologies used, and the step-by-step process of data collection and analysis. Chapter four details the findings from this study using illustrative quotes from participant transcripts. In chapter five, I will discuss some of these findings in more detail, comparing them to other literature and identifying some practice and research implications that could utilize or build on the findings of this study. The fifth chapter will discuss study limitations and areas for further exploration.

Chapter 2: Review of the literature

The concept of immigrant and refugee integration has been extensively studied and discussed in the academic literature. By nature of their forced migration due to well-founded fears of persecution or physical harm (UNHCR, 2011), refugees are distinct from other newcomers (Yu et al., 2007). Consequently, discussions on refugee integration are different than with other immigrants, focusing in particular on their rights, settlement, and adjustment into their country of resettlement (Strang & Ager, 2010). Literature acknowledges that integration is critically important for both refugees and the host society, yet how integration is achieved and what is valuable to the process varies widely depending on the perspective, priority, or context that is being considered (Hynie, 2018b). Integration is a concept discussed across multiple fields, including social work, psychology, and political science, and is relevant from the individual to global levels, yet no universally accepted definition or understanding of integration exists to date (Strang & Ager, 2010). Despite the absence of a singular description, there are generally accepted ideas of how integration can be conceptualized and achieved. Berry's (1997) conceptual framework of acculturation strategies asserts that integration is based on maintaining one's cultural identity and characteristics while also having contact and participation with mainstream society and culture, a description that is commonly referenced in discussions of newcomer social integration. Literature typically agrees that integration involves a two-way exchange of culture and understanding between refugees and the host society, and that it is achieved when refugees attain equality with the majority (Phillimore & Goodson, 2008). This includes parity in the economic, cultural, political, and social arenas (Guo & Guo, 2016). The 'common spaces' approach designates greater influence to new immigrants and cultures in shaping Canadian communities and culture, conceptualizing integration as 'town square', where newcomers and members of the host society "mix in space and time and together produce a new,

shared identity for themselves as a community" (Enns et al., 2013, p. 42). These studies have formed a common foundational understanding of newcomer integration and made it possible to conduct further research based on these conceptions.

Most often, integration is not uniformly achieved across its economic, cultural, political, and social components. In fact, refugees not uncommonly feel economically integrated long before social integration fully occurs (McCoy et al., 2016). Yet, social integration is considered by many authors to be fundamental to their overall integration (Hyndman & Hynie, 2016; Phillimore, 2012; Strang & Quinn, 2019). Social integration refers to newcomer participation and inclusion in their community and society equal to its native members (Hyndman & Hynie, 2016). Pearce (2008) states that when newcomers participate in the regular activities of their communities, they develop feelings of attachment and belonging which moves them closer to becoming socially integrated. Further, experiences of inclusion, where newcomers are invited to participate and welcomed when they do, inspire acceptance, which, in turn, generates feelings of equality (Korac, 2005; Phillimore & Goodson, 2008). Both participation and inclusion, then, involve the host society. As Berry (1997) articulates in his conceptual framework of acculturation strategies, the extent to which social integration occurs relies on relationships with the larger society outside of ones' ethnic group. This suggests that with greater quantity and quality of engagement with Canadians, greater social integration follows. According to Hyndman et al., (2014), "levels of social support and strength of social networks…between resettled refugees and the host community are among the most critical factors in how [they] integrate into Canadian society" (p. 3).

Domains of Integration Framework

As an important contribution to streamlining understandings of all aspects of integration, Ager & Strang (2008) created the Domains of Integration Framework, identifying and describing the key contributors to successful integration for refugees. Made up of four indicators and ten domains, their framework establishes a broad conceptualization of integration that is relevant to a variety of perspectives and contexts. According to their framework, rights and citizenship, safety and stability, cultural knowledge, and social connections are key factors in refugees' integration experience, as well as attaining employment, education, and health needs (referred to as 'Markers and Means' in the framework) (see Figure 1). The framework does not suggest a specific order or trajectory for reaching the indicators; instead, their interdependence is a key aspect of its design. Given its expansive scope and inclusion of multiple aspects that contribute to the integration experience, this framework has been widely applied to examining integration primarily from a policy lens (Phillimore, 2012; Puma et al., 2018), but also in terms of individual and group experiences of integration (Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020; Drolet & Moorthi, 2018; Elliott & Yusuf, 2014). Contemporary studies with refugees now tend to use this framework as the primary lens through which to view integration.

Ager & Strang (2008) allocate one of the four indicators on their framework to social connection, indicating the importance of relationships and networks to overall refugee integration. The authors draw on Putnam's (2000) theory of social capital to define social connection as made up of three domains- social bonds, social bridges, and social links. Putnam states that an individual's social resources can be grouped according to close relationships within their own family and ethnic community (social bonding), ties with the greater community outside their ethnic group (social bridging), and connections to social institutions and services (social links). Conceptualizing social connection according to these categories draws attention to the

relational ties that facilitate social integration. Although Putnam's theory of social capital does not specifically refer to integration or refugee experiences, it is often applied to studies on these topics (Lamba & Krahn, 2003; Yohani et al., 2019; Zetter et al., 2006). Using Putnam's original distinctions of social capital and Ager & Strang's adaptation of this concept in the Domains of Integration framework, research on social integration generally agrees that bonding, bridging, and linking relationships are all essential, and research on these topics is worthwhile to extend knowledge and understanding of the connection between these types of relationships and overall integration.

Figure 1

Ager & Strang's Domains of Integration Framework
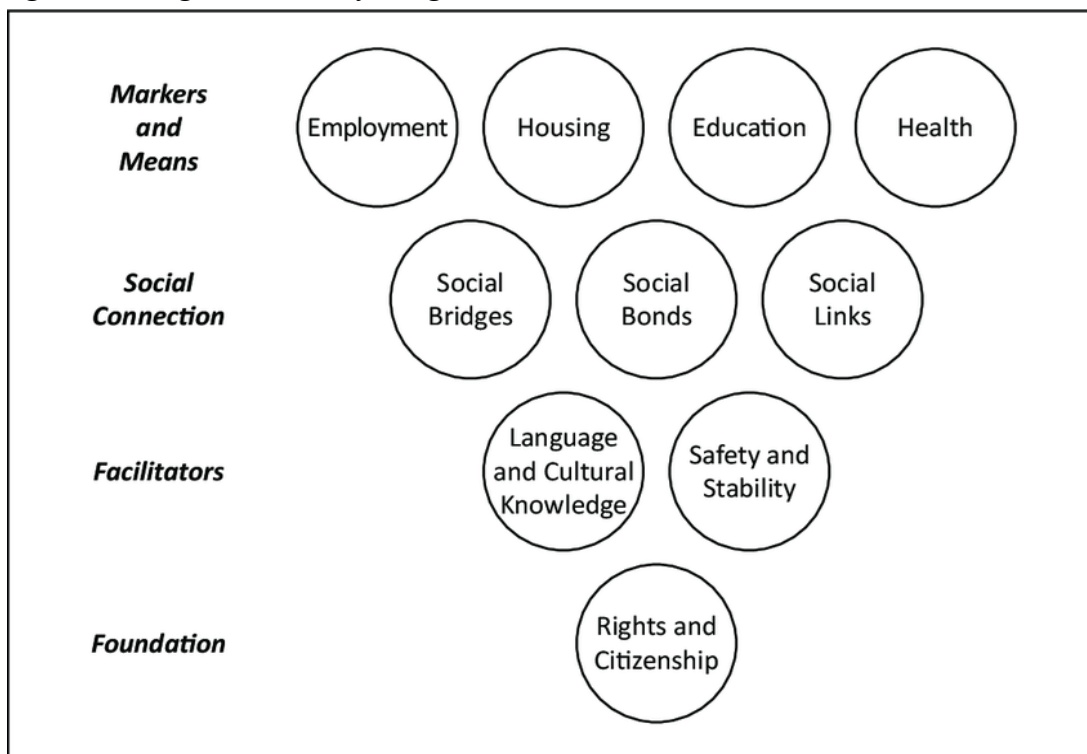
Within the scholarship of social integration, numerous studies examine bonding and bridging in particular detail. Since bonds with others from the same ethnic group are the first type of social connection that refugees typically form, numerous studies explore social bonding

in particular depth (Kenney et al., 2005; Makwarimba et al., 2013; Stewart et al., 2012). A limited number of studies examine social bonding and bridging together, to identify the various ways in which these domains mutually support refugees' adaptation and settlement processes (Enns et al., 2013; Nannestad et al., 2008; Strang & Ager, 2010). While these studies highlight how social bridging and bonding can together influence and modify other elements of integration, they contribute less to understanding the distinct significance and experience of social bridging for refugees.

Social Bridging in the Literature

Social bridging is discussed extensively in refugee integration literature to explore its impact on various outcomes for newcomers and society as a whole. Numerous studies examine how social bridges make it possible to attain domains of the markers and means indicator such as employment (Cheung & Phillimore, 2014; Elliott & Yusuf, 2014; Lamba & Krahn, 2003) and housing (D'Addario et al., 2007; Hanley et al., 2018). These studies have found that relationships and networks with members of the host society often support newcomers to find relevant work and accommodation. Although an important aspect of integration, studies focusing on the link between social bridges and immediate needs overlook the social outcomes of bridging relationships, in particular a sense of belonging for newcomers. Studies on employment or housing view social bridging as being a means to a tangible, measurable end, instead of being an end in itself. Fully understanding the impact and potential of bridging relationships requires also examining them in terms of the relational benefits they provide.

Policy research on social cohesion and multiculturalism often highlights social bridging as a community-level occurrence with societal-level outcomes (Abu-Laban, 1998; Modood, 2013; Spoonley et al., 2005; Zetter et al., 2006). In research on social cohesion, which can

generally be described as the belonging, attachment, and participation of all members of society based on shared values and mutual respect (Esses et al., 2010), bridging is viewed and appreciated in a broader social context. The concept of social bridges is used to describe the ways in which newcomers and members of the host society interact, and policy responses to boost positive bridging between ethnic groups (Sororka et al., 2007; Spoonley et al., 2005; Zetter et al., 2006). In these contexts, bridging examines trust and inclusion between newcomers and the host society, and considers bridging from both groups' perspectives (Daley, 2007; Spoonley et al., 2006). Similarly, many studies describe social bridging as a key input as well as outcome of multiculturalism, especially in Canada (Abu-Laban, 1998; Hyman, 2011). Guo & Guo (2016) state that a primary goal of multicultural policy in Canada is to establish welcoming and inclusive communities, an objective that is largely dependent on the extent to which social bridging activities take place across Canadian communities. By contrast, Hyman et al. (2011) see multiculturalism as driving social bridging, stating that effective multicultural policy in Canada creates an environment of acceptance and inclusion which critically boosts constructive interaction between refugees and the host society. Including social bridging in policy discussions of cohesion and multiculturalism importantly acknowledges the role of social integration in these discourses. However, by examining social bridging at the macro-level, it overlooks the micro-level individual experience and how relationships with the host society impact refugee settlement and integration personally.

Whether examining the impact of bridging relationships on attaining employment or housing or its role in shaping social policy, evaluative measures are often used to determine the degree of impact social bridges have (Agrawal & Zeitouny, 2017; Lamba & Krahn, 2003; Puma et al., 2018; Schellenberg, 2004). Since these studies consider social bridging as an input to

achieve a certain outcome, a quantitative approach to inquiry is often applied to assess increases in refugee employment or improvements in social cohesion (Cheung & Phillimore, 2017; Lamba & Krahn, 2003; Sororka et al., 2007). Measuring how relationships with the host society affects these outcomes is valuable for understanding them in greater breadth and depth and identifying correlations. This approach, however, contributes much less to understanding social bridging as a concept in itself, and how it is enacted and perceived on the individual level. It is more uncommon to examine social bridging, as the focus of research, using a qualitative approach to inquiry. Yet, as Robinson (1998) states, "since integration is individualized, contested and contextual it requires qualitative methodologies which allow the voices of respondents to be heard in an unadulterated form" (p. 122). In particular, a qualitative study has not been conducted to explore the topics of social bridging, sense of belonging, and integration with Syrian refugees together in one study.

Overview studies of Syrian integration often identify social bridges as playing an important role (AAISA, 2017; Agrawal & Zeitouny, 2017). Nevertheless, just as in other studies of social bridging, these relationships are often evaluated in terms of the extent to which they are conduits for achieving immediate needs (Gericke et at., 2018; Lamba, 2008). A mixed methods study by Drolet and Moorthi (2018) is the only study to date which examines the social connections of Syrian refugees based on their personal experiences. Interview data from their research reveals that all three domains of social connection contribute to Syrian refugees' social integration, including their sense of belonging. While Drolet and Moorthi's research is the first to isolate social connections as a distinct experience with Syrian refugees, it focuses on comparing experiences of social bonding, bridging, and linking between immigration categories and

resettlement location. Consequently, the relationship between social bridging and integration for Syrian refugees remains largely unstudied.

Sense of Belonging as an Outcome of Social Bridging

Sense of belonging is a fundamental human motivation, one that transcends cultural boundaries and evokes the desire for social connections (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). For the purposes of this study, sense of belonging is defined as feeling accepted, secure, and "at home" in one's local community (outside of their own ethnic group) and/or their country of resettlement (Hou et al., 2018), as well as connected to and invested in this community and/or country (Reitz, 2009). Sense of belonging is affective, meaning that it is related to how an individual feels, not necessarily actions or behaviours, nor participation (Hagerty et al., 1992). For instance, a newcomer may interact and engage with their neighbours at organized events, yet, if they feel that these neighbours do not accept or welcome their presence, these interactions may not enhance their sense of belonging to their neighbourhood.

Literature on refugee integration commonly describes sense of belonging as a product and marker of social integration, making it a key feature in the process of achieving integration for immigrants and refugees. For this reason, research has extensively explored what contributes to belonging for immigrants and refugees (Pearce, 2008; Schellenberg, 2004; Strang & Quinn, 2019), how it is manifested (Kenny et al., 2005; Wu et al., 2011), and its outcomes (Enns et al., 2013 Sororka et al., 2007). Belonging is studied in relation to newcomers' local community of resettlement (Drolet & Moorthi, 2018; Kenny, 2005) as well as their new country (Chow, 2007; Modood, 2013; Sororka, 2007) and often, a sense of belonging to one environment inspires belonging to the other (Chow, 2007).

A sense of belonging is the result of numerous combined factors that make an individual feel accepted, secure, and at home in their new country. For newcomers, sense of belonging is influenced by social bonds within families and ethnic groups as well as by social bridges with individuals outside of their ethnic group (Ager & Strang, 2008). Since this study endeavours to explore social bridges, this study will examine a sense of belonging that results from relationships outside of one's own ethnic group, and will examine Syrian refugees' sense of belonging to both their local community and/or to Canada. Schellenberg's (2004) study found that positive social interaction between newcomers and Canadians at the community level builds trust and shared values, which can enhance an individuals' feeling of connectedness and personal sense of belonging to their local surroundings, while Enns et al. (2013) found a relationship between bridging activities and a sense of belonging to Canada. Further, Modood (2013) and Chow (2007) iterate that inter-ethnic exchange is especially meaningful to establishing a sense of belonging for newcomers, as it indicates acceptance by the majority.

The breadth of literature that describes the relationship between social bridging and sense of belonging suggests that it is an important aspect of integration that deserves attention and examination. Yet, the connection between refugee social bridging and sense of belonging to their local community or country of resettlement has not been isolated as the specific focus of any study conducted to date, and so the literature offers little more than an acknowledgement of their connection. Very little description and further detail on how social bridging promotes a sense of belonging between refugee groups and the broader community exists in the academic record. From a qualitative perspective, there is even less.

Syrian Refugees as Study Participants

For refugees from any country, the detriments of war are often compounded by the experience of forced migration and resettlement (Denov & Shevell, 2019). The combined impact of violence and loss coupled with post-migration stressors can significantly impact refugees' mental health and overall well-being following their resettlement (Denov & Shevell, 2019; Miller & Rasmussen, 2017). Due to the scale and intensity of Syria's civil conflict and the subsequent upheaval of its social, economic, and political foundations, these realities were especially true for Syrians arriving in Canada as refugees. Post-migration, Syrian refugees faced exceptionally high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (Ghumman et al., 2016). In Canada, 65% of Syrian refugees also encountered a language barrier having no English or French language skills upon arrival, and 80% had less than secondary level education (IRCC, 2019). Their combined psychological and socio-economic circumstances meant that many Syrian refugees in Canada faced significant psychosocial challenges.

The large-scale migration of Syrian refugees to Canada attracted much attention in public discourse around best practice in supporting their integration (Hamilton et al., 2020; Hynie, 2018a; Wrzesnewskyj, 2016). Research has highlighted the importance of addressing the mental and psychosocial needs of Canada's Syrian refugees, and the need to learn more about this aspect of their settlement in order to support their successful integration (Ghumman et al., 2016; Yohani et al., 2019). The bulk of research on these issues has focused on the mental health needs of Syrian refugees in Canada (Ahmed et al., 2017, Ghumman et al., 2016) or addressing psychosocial adaptation needs amongst children and youth in particular (Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020; Filler, 2018; Hadfield et al., 2017). Other than Drolet & Moorthi's (2018) study of Syrians' social connections based on refugee stream and location, no research has specifically examined social bridging with Syrian refugees in Canada. Given that social bridging is considered a key

aspect of successful integration (Ager & Strang, 2008), it is valuable to both research and discourse to examine this further with Canada's Syrian refugee community.

Knowledge Gaps Addressed in this Study

An exploration of previous studies in the field of refugee social integration and social bridging finds that there has been extensive exploration of social bridging as a way of addressing other integration objectives. In their search for policy responses to integration challenges or as a way of achieving markers and means outcomes such as housing or employment, authors have found social bridging a valuable, mediating factor. These types of questions are often examined from a broad, societal perspective using quantitative methods to measure the extent to which bridging improves outcomes. As Korac (2003) points out, this equates to studies that view social integration in terms of its practical or functional qualities. It is much less common, however, to study social bridging as a phenomenon in itself, recognized for its relational, holistic qualities. Studies of social bridging are also less frequently qualitative, examining social relationships and their impact on integration with individual newcomer or refugee groups based on their personal experiences. And, while literature has identified a link between social bridging and sense of belonging for newcomers, very little qualitative research has explored this connection in greater detail, nor contributed to better understanding its impact.

A knowledge gap exists between social bridging as a distinct, individual experience for refugees, sense of belonging, and social integration. While literature explores each of these concepts in relation to overall integration, no studies to date examine all three together. My research aims to explore this gap through a qualitative study with the Syrian refugee community, a newcomer group to Canada where little is known about their social bridging experiences.

Since Ager & Strang's (2008) Domains of Integration framework provides the most in-depth

description of social bridging in the context of refugee integration and is the most common

theoretical lens applied to studies on this topic, my research will similarly draw on this

framework. Specifically, its description of the social bridging domain is used to inform

interview questions and analysis in this study.

Social Bridging in the Domains of Integration Framework

Social bridging is an action or activity where one ethnic group attempts to interact or

build a relationship with members of an ethnic group outside of their own. Social bridges are the

result of these bridging activities and are formed when both ethnic groups willingly engage in the

bridging activity. As such, building social bridges depends on refugees as well as members of the

host society agreeing to interact and form relationships. Contemporary qualitative studies of

refugee integration that refer to social bridges typically reference Ager & Strang's (2008)

Domains of Integration framework and draw on their explanation of bridging relationships,

making theirs the preeminent description in the literature.

In their research, Ager & Strang found that newcomers identify two types of social

bridges- friendliness at the community level and 'intensive involvement'. Ager & Strang found

that "being recognized and greeted by others in the neighbourhood was greatly valued" (p. 180),

and these acts of friendliness had impacts on overall integration. Participants of their study also

mentioned a different type of relationship with members of the host society, where "people can

meet and not be strangers" (p. 180), and "sit down, talk to people, and…understand them better"

(p. 180). Ager & Strang do not specifically label this type of interaction, only referring to it as,

'intensive involvement'. Yet, it can be easily understood that while friendliness describes a

relationship with lower levels of commitment and depth that may be the result of happenstance,

strangers meeting to talk and understand each other reflects intentionality and relational investment. As such, I interpret what Ager & Strang call intensive involvement to be 'intentional connections' characterized by greater commitment and depth than friendliness, fostered over an extended period of time. Importantly, intentional connections require willingness from both refugees and members of the host society to engage in these social bridges. An example of intentional connections, then, would be friendships formed between refugees and members of the host society. Friendships are the product of intentional efforts to build an ongoing relationship with another individual, consisting of greater depths of mutual sharing and support (Bukowski et al., 2009) compared to friendly interactions with strangers. Friendships between refugees and members of the host society represent an intentional connection developed over time, where such depth exists.

In their description of social bridging, Ager & Strang (2008) link friendliness with attaining the domain of safety and stability. Similarly, they state that an outcome of intensive involvement, or, intentional connections, includes achieving domains within the markers and means indicator, such as employment. However, no other products of social bridging are included or described in their article. When Ager & Strang introduce the indicator of social connections in their framework, they state that developing a sense of belonging is the ultimate marker of integration based on "links with family, committed friendships, and a sense of respect and shared values" (2008, p. 178). These authors, then, acknowledge that sense of belonging is associated with social bonding through family ties and bridging via friendships, but do not further explain how relationships can contribute to this outcome or why it is important in relation to their integration. Most significantly for this study, sense of belonging is not discussed in more detail in Ager & Strang's description of social bridging. Since other studies on refugee

integration consistently find sense of belonging to be both connected to inter-ethnic relationships and valuable to integration (Hebbani et al., 2018; Hou et al., 2018; Modood, 2013; Wu et al., 2011), it appears to be a gap in this aspect of the Domains of Integration framework. Further, only identifying safety and employment as outcomes of social bridges perpetuates the academic understanding of bridging as being valuable primarily as a means to achieving another integration objective instead of a critical aspect of integration in its own right. Since sense of belonging means that newcomers feel accepted, secure, and "at home" in their local community (outside of their own ethnic group) and/or their country of resettlement (Hou et al., 2018) as well as connected to and invested in the broader community (Reitz, 2009), then social bridges, as a key facilitator of sense of belonging, should be recognized for enhancing these outcomes and simultaneously promoting integration.

Ager & Strang (2008) state that the ultimate outcome of social bridging, as with all other domains in their framework, is integration. Many studies begin with integration as their focus of study and work backwards to find out what contributes to achieving it (Phillimore, 2012; Puma et al., 2014; Yu et al., 2007). Instead, this study begins with social bridging as its topic and attempts to understand if and how this specific factor contributes to overall integration. As such, this research is interested in better understanding the particular relationship between social bridging and integration, as described by Ager & Strang. This study will also examine the connection between refugee social bridging and sense of belonging to their local community or country of resettlement.

Context of the Study

My research is part of a larger SSHRC funded study, the 'Syrian Community Learning for Empowerment Groups' which explores the psychosocial needs and adaptation processes

amongst Syrian refugees by enhancing community capacity to identify these needs and respond

accordingly (led by Dr. Sophie Yohani, Co-Investigators Drs. Anna Kirova, Rebecca Gokiert, and

Rebecca Georgis). This study, referred to here as the SSHRC project, is guided by two

theoretical frameworks that address pathways to immigrant social integration and psychosocial

adaptation after experiences of conflict- Ager & Strang's (2008) Domains of Integration

Framework and the Adaptation and Development After Persecution and Trauma (ADAPT) model

(Silove, 2013). The ADAPT model uses five core domains (safety, attachment and bonds,

identity and roles, justice, and existential meaning) to illustrate psychosocial challenges and

resources that impact refugees' adaptation. As a community-based study, members of the Syrian

community were trained in both the Domains of Integration Framework and the ADAPT model.

These trained individuals became leaders of discussion groups, known as Community Learning

for Empowerment Groups (CLEGs) with other Syrian community members. Each domain of the

ADAPT model formed a topic of discussion within the CLEGs, intended to build individual

knowledge of each of these psychological and social factors, and to identify community-based

solutions.

In its first year, I joined the SSHRC project as a practicum student. As a student member

of the research team, I was responsible for attending CLEG meetings to provide support to

leaders as needed, completing data collection tasks, and participating in monthly focus group

meetings with CLEG leaders and the research team. The seven-month period where I was

involved in this capacity provided the opportunity to collaborate in a research setting with Syrian

individuals with lived refugee experience, deepening my personal understanding of the

psychological and social components of re-building a meaningful life in a new country following

civil war. As a member of the project's research team involved in data collection activities with

participants, I was also able to build relationships with Syrian CLEG leaders and group members, learning about their personal experiences during the war and in Canada. Consequently, my participation in the project expanded my theoretical learning of how integration is supported and enacted, and my experiential learning of the actual, personal experiences of Syrians who had arrived in Canada as refugees.

My involvement as a practicum student in the SSHRC project facilitated the recruitment process for my thesis research. Having already established a degree of familiarity and trust with leaders and many participants, it was natural to conduct my research with these same individuals. Data collection for my study commenced as the SSHRC project's CLEG groups concluded, and so participating in research was still a fresh experience as well as an activity that many were interested in continuing. Both leaders and participants of the SSHRC project were invited to become participants of my study, and leaders supported recruitment by sharing my study with the members of their group. The SSHRC project and the opportunity to support its work directly complemented and contributed to my thesis research as well.

My study reflects the SSHRC project's objectives to better explore the psychosocial aspects of integration with Syrian refugees. While the SSHRC project examines five key domains of psychosocial integration using the ADAPT model (Silove, 2013) and Domains of Integration framework (Ager & Strang, 2008) together, my research focuses on social bridging in particular following Ager & Strang's description in their framework. As one of the domains of the ADAPT model, social attachment and bonds constituted one of the CLEG discussion topics. Participants of the SSHRC project shared their experiences building social bridges with Canadians within the context of their overall social integration needs, informing findings on this aspect of their psychosocial integration. Building on this inquiry, my study attempts to probe

deeper into social bridging as a single aspect of the psychosocial adaptation experience with Syrian refugees.

This study aims to explore Syrian refugee adults' experiences of building social bridges. Research on this topic addresses the knowledge gap of refugees' experiences building social bridges as a specific aspect of their integration process and with the Syrian refugee community in particular. Instead of examining social bridging as a foundation for meeting refugees' immediate needs or from a social policy approach, this study will explore Syrian refugee adults' experiences of building social bridges and the influence of social bridges on Syrian refugees' sense of belonging and overall integration. My research attempts to both confirm and expand on the influence and role of social bridges as depicted in Ager & Strang's (2008) framework by exploring the extent to which friendliness and intentional connections impact Syrian refugees' sense of belonging to the broader community and overall integration. While contributing to the body of research related to social capital and the Domains of Integration framework, by conducting this study with the Syrian community, it will also fill a gap in knowledge of the settlement and integration experiences of this specific group.

Chapter 3: Methodology

A qualitative descriptive methodology (Sandelowski, 2000) and an engaged approach to research (Blanchard et al., 2009) were used to examine how Syrian refugees describe their experiences of social bridging in Canada, and how these bridges impact their sense of belonging and overall integration. A total of 12 Syrian refugee adults participated in semi-structured interviews, which were conducted either in person, or, due to a change in data collection protocols as a result of COVID-19, over video call using WhatsApp v. 2.20.206.22. All interviews were conducted in English in order to minimize misinterpretation during translation. Using participants' non-native language to conduct interviews, however, limited their ability to fully express themselves and required translation of intended meaning nonetheless. Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) until data saturation was reached (Sandelowski, 1995), and were then brought back to participants for member checking and verification. Findings were generated from both an inductive and deductive process, where Ager & Strang's Domains of Integration framework (2008) was used to interpret and make sense of patterns that emerged in the first stages of analysis.

Engaged scholarship employs principles of shared power and inclusion between researchers and study participants, where there are benefits for both groups (Blanchard et al., 2009). This approach to qualitative research is appropriately applied to studies with vulnerable groups as it both shares their voice and validates their experiences and cultural/personal knowledge as valuable (Strega & Brown, 2015). Engaged scholarship in practice means that participants are consulted during study design and implementation to ensure it is culturally appropriate and relevant, and are included in some decision making (da Cruz, 2015). This study was conducted over a relatively short period of time and with limited resources, however,

wherever possible participants were engaged in determining the lines of inquiry during data collection as well as confirming data accuracy and key themes during data analysis. Further, Syrian participants will be invited to apply the findings of this study in ways that are personally meaningful.

I hold a constructivist epistemological stance, which means that I view knowledge as subjective; it is shaped by history, culture, and society (Mayan, 2016). I chose to use qualitative description as the methodology for this study as it recognizes the knowledge of participants as formed by their experiences. Qualitative description is an approach to inquiry that describes and summarizes an event and communicates an account of it (Sandelowski, 2000). It closely reflects the data collected in the study and is not highly abstracted, so that it is often seen by research participants as an accurate portrayal of their experiences (Sandelowski, 2000). Qualitative description is an appropriate method to address the research question posed in this study as it produces a description of Syrian refugees' experiences building social bridges and the impact of social bridges on their overall integration, and acknowledges these descriptions as knowledge based on participants' lived experiences.

Positionality

Positionality in research refers to the way in which an individual makes meaning and interprets information, based on various distinct and overlapping aspects of their identity (Bourke, 2014). In the context of this research, it is important to state my positionality and how it may shape the way I approached the study, and interpreted and analyzed data.

I apply a constructivist approach to knowledge in that I view reality and knowledge to be multiple and relative based on personal experience (Lee, 2012). Shaped by historical, cultural,

and social influences, knowledge is not fixed but subjective (Mayan, 2016). In a research context, knowledge is co-created by both the researcher and the participant. Charreire-Petit & Huault (2008) state that "it is impossible to separate the researcher from the phenomenon under investigation" (p. 78). In the context of this study, I consider that my experiences, values, biases, and environment shaped the knowledge that was generated. Engaging in reflexive practice such as journaling throughout the research process created the opportunity to consider the lens I applied to this study, constructed from my various experiences and biases, and ensure that the knowledge generated from this study reflected not just my perspective, but participants' as well.

Being a practicum student on the larger SSHRC project with the Syrian refugee community has afforded me insight into their cultural background and personal experiences. The year I spent working with the SSHRC project provided me with first-hand experience in conducting research with Syrian newcomers in a respectful manner, including asking participants for permission before certain actions like shaking hands, and accepting hospitality. This unique opportunity made me more aware of the reality of their circumstances and initiated reflection upon my own experiences. My role as a practicum student had associated power and privilege implications which may have impacted how I was perceived by participants, and the extent of influence of my perceptions and interpretations (Wallerstein & Duran, 2008). However, working with the CLEG leaders and many of the participants on multiple occasions and over an extended period also cultivated familiarity, which is a foundation for trust in research settings (Lucero et al., 2018). Before my study commenced, I had shared meals, joined discussions, and knew the names of ten of my twelve participants. Participating in the SSHRC project as a practicum student therefore impacted my positionality within my own research in multiple ways; while it

may have increased the tilt of power dynamics, it also provided an opportunity to establish a more equitable participant-researcher relationship.

As a white, middle class, Canadian-born woman with a post-secondary education, I acknowledge my position of privilege at both the societal and individual levels. Participants from the Syrian refugee community may share some of the same identities, but likely do not hold identical markers of privilege. Furthermore, as the researcher in this study, a degree of authority is automatically conferred to me; a position of leadership with the backing of a credible institution inherently conveys privilege (Wallerstein & Duran, 2008). As such, there is a gap in degree of privilege between myself as the researcher and the Syrian community who is being researched. Holding a greater degree of privilege as the researcher means that this research project will 'study down'; research will be done with a less privileged, and therefore, more vulnerable demographic (Plesner, 2011).

In addition to my socio-economic positionality, it is critical to reflect on my location to the group being studied. Positionality is negotiated and can fluctuate throughout the course of a study, however, in the context of this research, I primarily remained an outsider in relation to the participants (Herr & Anderson, 2005). I hold some overlapping identities with participants including middle class or female, and share some similar life experiences such as marriage and moving to a foreign country which, at times, may have facilitated a closer position to participants. However, in perhaps the most significant ways, I hold outsider status. The key identities being examined in this study are ones that I do not share- I am not of Syrian nationality, was not raised according to Syrian culture or traditions, and have not ever been a refugee. Consequently, the aspects of participants' identities that are most relevant to this study are ones that I do not personally identify with nor can relate to through similar experience.

Acknowledging my privilege and status as an outsider is a critical step in the research process. Throughout the study, reflecting on my positionality and how it influenced my decision-making or interpretations was a critical step. Positionality is tied to epistemology, and therefore, my identity will influence what I deem to be valuable data and the meaning I attach to it (Avci, 2016). As an individual with privilege, I acknowledge that the lens of my experiences has been woven into this study. Similarly, my experience of being an outsider in this study has likely impacted the meaning and significance I attach to the data. While this is a natural aspect of qualitative research, it is critical nonetheless to be aware of and reflect on my positionality throughout the course of this study, particularly in data analysis.

Participants, Recruitment, and Sampling

This study was conducted with members of the Syrian refugee community in Edmonton, Alberta. Participants were recruited from those that had joined the SSHRC project, either as CLEG leaders or participants. These individuals are of Syrian national origin who left Syria as a result of its civil war, and who arrived in Canada through one of its refugee resettlement streams between 2015 and the first half of 2017. This study received approval from the University of Alberta's Research Ethics Office (REO) Pro00096273.

This study aimed to explore Syrian refugee adults' experiences of building social bridges. Few studies examine social bridging experiences with adults, and so this study attempted to fill this gap in knowledge by focusing on individuals who are the age of consent (18 years old) or older. The research was conducted with both Syrian men and women to explore the possibility of any distinct experiences based on gender. Individuals of all language backgrounds were invited to join this study, but participation was limited to those that have intermediate English speaking and listening ability. Interviews were held in English in order to minimize

misinterpretation due to translation. Additionally, participants included adults that were in a position to give their consent to participate and were able to effectively express themselves verbally.

Participation was limited to individuals who have been in Canada for a minimum of 2.5 years. Those that have arrived more recently than June 2017 were not included in this study because they are adjusting to the immediate circumstances of their arrival in Canada, including building their language skills. Likely, these individuals would have not yet had the communication capacity nor the opportunity to establish extensive social bridges with the greater community, much less reflect on the impact on their overall integration experience. It is also possible that those who arrived more recently than mid-2017 would still be dealing with their pre-migration experiences of war and loss, and coping with the trauma that they incurred as a result. Since participating in this study could act as a reminder of their pre-war lifestyles and possibly re-traumatize or hinder their healing process, these individuals were not included as participants.

Purposeful sampling was used to target specific participants for this research, namely, Syrian refugees who had participated in the larger SSHRC project. Purposeful sampling is appropriate for this study because it is commonly used with qualitative studies and contributes to generating rich information about those with lived experience (Mayan, 2016). Since this study's research question relates specifically to Syrian refugee adults' experiences of building social bridges with the greater community, it follows that adult participants who are refugees of the recent Syrian civil war and who have personal experiences of attempting to build social connections outside of their ethnic group were selected to join this research project. This approach to sampling is cohesive with qualitative description, as participants were able to speak

directly to the research question from their lived experiences and data generated from interviews produced a basic description of social bridging for recent Syrian refugees (Sandelowski, 2000). The sample included twelve participants, seven males and five females. This sample size was large enough to obtain sufficient data to address the research question and describe the experience of social bridging, and achieve data saturation. Data saturation refers to the process of collecting data until new knowledge or findings are no longer emerging (Sandelowski, 1995).

Participants were either Syrian or Syrian-Kurdish, with the exception of one participant who was Jordanian-Syrian. Although all participants had been involved in the SSHRC project, three had held roles as CLEG leaders while the remaining nine had been CLEG members. All participants were adults between the ages of 24 and 65 who had come to Canada through one of its refugee streams due to the Syrian civil war, with the exception of two participants who had lived in Jordan preceding the war. One of these two participants was born in Jordan but had lived in Syria and possessed Syrian citizenship. At the time of Syria's war, this individual was living in Jordan. Another participant was born in Syria but also was living in Jordan leading up to the Syrian conflict. Both participants, however, came to Canada from Jordan as Syrian refugees due to their Syrian citizenship. The majority of participants arrived in Canada as Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs) or Government Assisted Refugees (GARs), and one participant had first arrived in the United States before claiming asylum in Canada via the Safe Third Country Agreement. Participants had been in Canada for a minimum of 2 years and ten months and a maximum of four years and nine months at the time of their interviews. Participants' English levels upon arrival in Canada were self-reported during interviews. Since knowledge of the language spoken in the country of re-settlement impacts refugees' ability to form relationships with members of the host society (Drolet & Morthi, 2018; Hebbani et al., 2018), participants' English ability upon

arrival was recorded to inform the analysis of their social bridging experiences (see Table 1).

While upon arrival in Canada participants had differing English abilities, at the time of

interviews all spoke English at a conversational level.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Data

Age group	Number of participants
18-30 years	4
31-50 years	6
51+ years	2

Time spent in Canada	Number of participants
2-3 years	2
3-4 years	2
4+ years	8
Range:	2 years, 10 months- 4 years, 9 months

Marital status	Number of participants
Single, widowed, separated	5
Married	7

Cultural background	Number of participants
Kurdish	3
Jordanian-Syrian	1
Syrian	8

Refugee Stream	Number of participants
Government Assisted Refugee (GAR)	7
Privately Sponsored Refugee (PSR)	4
Asylum Seeker	1

Language ability upon arrival in Canada	Number of participants
None	6
Basic English skills	3
Advanced English skills	3

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, conducted in English. Semi-structured interviews are an appropriate data collection tool when using a qualitative descriptive approach as a way of identifying broad themes while gathering specific, individual detail related to those themes (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). I chose to do interviews in order to understand participants' unique experiences building social bridges with Canadians and identify similarities or trends across their experiences.

Cultural brokering, where an individual mediates between different cultural groups (Brar-Josan & Yohani, 2014), is a critical aspect of cross-cultural research. Before interviews commenced, the interview guide was reviewed with an individual from the Syrian refugee community who was not connected to either the SSHRC project or my thesis study. This individual acted as a cultural broker by interpreting Syrian culture in the context of the study (Brar-Josan & Yohani, 2014). Collaborating with the cultural broker was critical for integrating cultural sensitivity into the data collection process and building my cultural awareness and competence prior to engaging with study participants (Singh et al., 1999). The cultural broker's familiarity with both Syrian and Canadian culture positioned him to offer valuable feedback on interview questions to ensure they were phrased in culturally appropriate and respectful ways. As a cultural broker, this individual also mediated nuances in language to enhance the clarity of questions for English as a Second Language speakers and extract relevant information from participants through question phrasing and order. Collaborating with the cultural broker yielded the final draft of the interview guide (see Appendix B). The feedback on the interview guide was very valuable, however, the learning that came from the broker's cultural interpretation, and their

insight and affirmation of the data collection process instilled in me more competence and confidence to conduct cross-cultural research.

Data collection began in March of 2020 and continued for six weeks. Initially, interviews were held in-person, and four interviews were conducted at participants' homes or in coffee shops. Following the restriction on in-person data collection at the University of Alberta due to COVID-19 in mid-March, I obtained an amendment from the Research Ethics Office (REO) to conduct the remaining interviews remotely, using video call. Virtual interviews were all conducted using the mobile application WhatsApp, approved by REO due to the security of its network and ability to uphold privacy. Interviews were between 60 to 90 minutes in length and were audio recorded. During one interview, both recording devices failed after 43 minutes, and the remainder of the interview was not recorded. In this instance, I immediately wrote notes of the content of the discussion and shared these with the participant for his approval and additional details. Interviews, both in-person and remote, commenced with an explanation of the research project, review of the participant information letter, and consent to participate in the study. The information letter made clear that the research topic may trigger difficult memories or emotions and that participants had the choice to stop participating at any point. While participants of in-person interviews personally signed the consent form, the ethics amendment permitted verbal consent for interviews conducted using WhatsApp video call. At the conclusion of interviews, all participants were given a $20 grocery store gift card to thank them for their time. I assigned pseudonyms to each participant following their interview.

Transcription

Interviews were transcribed shortly after they had been completed and in the order in which they had been conducted such that all transcription was done concurrently with data

collection. Since data collection and transcription occurred together and within a short time frame, I was very engaged with the content of interviews. Consequently, I was able to identify that no new responses from participants were emerging by the eleventh and twelfth interviews, and that data saturation had been reached.

Data from participant interviews was transcribed verbatim where possible to maintain the accuracy of the data. Since all participants spoke English as a second language, the process of transcription involved some interpretation of their intended meaning. In most cases, this was due to grammatical errors and missing words where context made it relatively easy to interpret participants' meaning. Only a small number of phrases could not be understood based on context, and the meaning could change significantly depending on how it was interpreted. For these cases, the relevant excerpt was sent to the participant via WhatsApp with the key words or phrasing needing clarity highlighted. Participants responded with an explanation of their meaning, which was inserted into the larger transcript. Culture also appeared to influence how some terms were used and required interpretation, such as using the word, 'friend', when context revealed that, in Canadian culture, 'acquaintance' would be the appropriate phrase. In order to track my interpretations, I used an analysis journal to record participants' phrasing and my assumption of their meaning. Interpreting intended meaning based on context, assuming word choice only when it did not significantly alter meaning, and double checking meaning with participants were all intentional strategies to limit misinterpretation of participants' meaning and uphold rigour in the research process.

Once transcription was complete, each participant was sent the full written version of their interview for review and editing. Participants responded with clarification of some details, additional contextual or explanatory information, and/or approval of the transcript. This member

checking activity provided a greater depth of insight and enriched the quality of data. Changes were made to reflect participants' feedback and edited transcripts were re-sent to participants for their approval, which produced the final version of transcripts.

Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the transcripts. Thematic analysis refers to "a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set" (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2). Thematic analysis provides a detailed, rich narrative by coding the data and identifying patterns or themes that make sense of and illustrate it (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017). This form of analysis is commonly used in qualitative research due to its flexibility, since thematic analysis is not theoretically or epistemologically bound (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Since the Domains of Integration framework and a constructivist epistemology are both compatible with thematic analysis, it is reasonable and cohesive to use thematic analysis to create a complex, descriptive interpretation of the data.

First, I employed an inductive approach to analysis and allowed the "frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in [the] raw data" (Thomas, 2006, p. 238) to direct the formation of codes and categories. Nvivo 12's capacity to organize information made it an efficient tool for initial coding of all transcripts, which yielded 119 codes. To familiarize myself with the data, I reviewed the coding summary in detail and made memos on trends, questions, and links to other codes or references. Next, I used manual analysis techniques (printing code lists and cutting them into separate codes) to organize the codes into categories so that I could physically move and place codes and observe connections and correlations through this process. This was an iterative procedure that involved re-examining the meaning in each code and reassigning some codes to other or new categories as I recognized novel patterns in the data. I also regularly referred to the

memoed coding summary to confirm that assigning a code to a given category would reflect the meaning in the transcript. At this stage, categories began to emerge that reflected Ager & Strang's (2008) description of social bridging in the Domains of Integration framework that I used to guide this research. I considered categorization to be complete when all codes had been included and accounted for (even if in a 'miscellaneous' category) and when, after applying multiple lenses of interpretation, the data within categories was meaningful, with discernible distinctions between each category (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The end of this process yielded 26 categories.

After first using an inductive approach to identify the types and breadth of information in the data, I then used deduction to determine if participants' experiences reflected Ager & Strang's description of social bridging, particularly their breakdown of social bridges to be made up of friendliness and intentional connections, and the outcomes of social bridging. I was interested in determining if the themes that naturally occurred in the data supported this description; I wanted the data to speak for itself first, and then use Ager & Strang's description to further organize and interpret the data into findings. Using this deductive process, the categories were manually organized into three themes and ten sub-themes based on the relationships between categories. Findings were then depicted in an analysis summary table showing the codes and categories within each theme, and examples of descriptive quotes for each code (see Appendix C for condensed analysis summary). I assigned pseudonyms to each participant, and these are attached to the quotes presented in the findings. This process also produced a definitions grouping, where participants defined what community meant for them. This is not so much a theme, but valuable context to frame participants' responses.

At this step, I created a brief document summarizing the study's findings and shared this with participants to confirm their accuracy and validity. Originally, I had intended for member checking to occur face-to-face in two groups where participants could discuss the findings and give their feedback together. Due to COVID-19, however, meeting in person for research purposes was restricted and not all participants had access to technology to meet via online group video discussions. For a number of participants, the pandemic also diverted their priorities to childcare and finding or maintaining employment. As such, it was both more feasible as well as manageable for participants to complete member checking individually. Eleven out of twelve participants shared their feedback. Eight of the eleven participants agreed with and approved the study's findings. Three of the eleven participants shared additional thoughts that gave more detail or context around certain findings. For example, one participant shared that they did not feel mistrust towards Canadians, while another participant shared more details to describe why and how they did feel some mistrust. None of the feedback from the member checking process altered the composition or organization of themes or categories.

Rigour

In this study, the criteria of credibility and dependability were used to ensure rigour (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility comes from conclusions being supported by the data (Mayan, 2016), and was primarily confirmed in this study through member checking. Member checking, which allows participants to access the study's data and give feedback on its accuracy (Birt et al., 2016), created the opportunity for participants to review and approve their interview transcript as well as the study's preliminary findings. Participant feedback after transcription and preliminary analysis confirmed resonance of the findings with participants' experiences and enhanced what I found them to indicate. This method of ensuring validity is also cohesive with

qualitative description methodology, where findings are not highly abstracted and stay close to the data (Sandelowski, 2000).

Dependability, which refers to the stability of the data over the course of the study (Connelly, 2016), is indicated by the comprehensiveness of experiences reflected in the data. Dependability was in part assured through data saturation; repetition and duplication of ideas and experiences from participants provided evidence that saturation had been reached (Sandelowski, 1995). When new information no longer surfaced from interview questions, it indicated that the data gathered accurately and comprehensively represented participants' experiences. Maintaining an audit trail throughout all steps of analysis was integral for tracking my activities and decisions, thereby safeguarding the study's stability (Connelly, 2016). An audit trail is a strategy often used in qualitative inquiry to "document why, when, and how decisions were made throughout the research process" (Mayan, 2016, p. 112) in order to maintain rigour. Keeping a record of each step and decision helped me to critically reflect on my research process and maintain a logical, coherent course of data collection and analysis. I referred back to this record regularly throughout the study and used it as both a justification for past actions and a guide for future decisions. To maintain confidentiality during data analysis, all files and records were kept on a password protected computer which only I had access to.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore Syrian refugee adults' experiences of building social bridges by exploring the questions, how do Syrian refugees describe the experience of building social bridges?; and, how does social bridging impact their sense of belonging to the local community and to Canada, and overall integration? The results of this study yielded three themes and ten sub-themes. Themes and sub-themes were deductively generated based on Ager & Strang's (2008) description of social bridging according to their Domains of Integration Framework. The findings from this study substantiate and build on their social bridging description, and are visually represented in Figure 2. This study found that there are specific *Conditions that influence social bridging* (theme 1), made up of five sub-themes: *Attitudes and actions*, *Personal conditions, External conditions, Language ability,* and *Social culture*. These conditions directly influence the bridging relationships that may form. Cultural knowledge, which is described in this study as social culture, and language are also included in Ager & Strang's framework as 'facilitators' of integration. The second theme, S*ocial bridging interactions*, describes the three types of social bridges with Canadians that participants identified as meaningful to them. These include the sub-themes of *Friendliness* and *Intentional connections,* which Ager & Strang identified in their article, as well as a third sub-theme, *Neighbourly relations*. The theme, *Outcomes of social bridging* represents the products of social bridging relationships according to participants, namely, the sub-themes of *Adaptation* and *Sense of belonging.* As Ager & Strang make clear in their framework, social bridging ultimately facilitates or hinders integration depending on the degree to which its components are present. Integration is not a theme in this thesis, however, it is included in Figure 2 to contextualize social bridging within the greater integration framework, and illustrate integration as the ultimate outcome of social bridging.

Figure 2

Visual Illustration of Findings
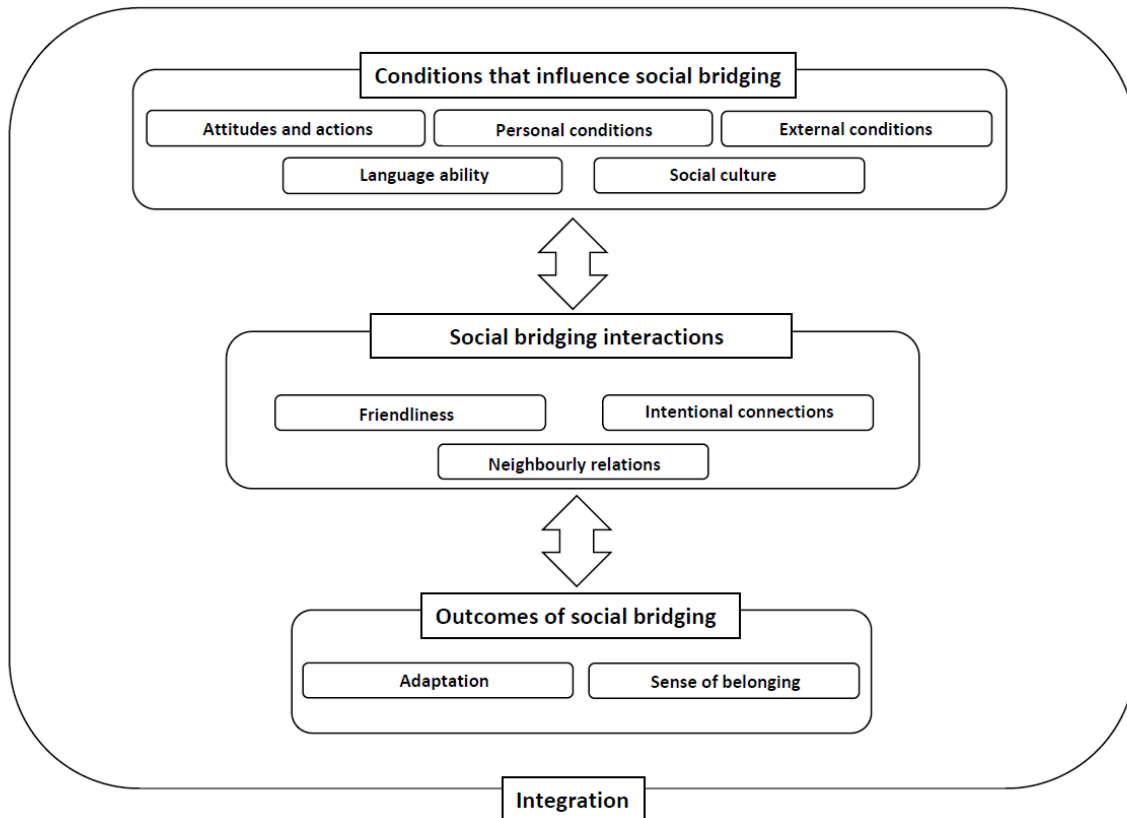
The study findings, both confirm Ager & Strang's description of social bridging and expand on it by identifying influencers of social bridging (i.e., language ability and social culture), additional valuable bridging relationships, and outcomes of social bridging. It should be noted that although the findings from this study suggest that social bridging follows a linear process from its inputs (*Conditions that influence social bridging*) to types of *Social bridging interactions* followed by its impacts *(Outcomes of social bridging)*, and, ultimately, integration, the process of building social bridges may not always follow this pathway. Bi-directional arrows in Figure 2 point out that a reciprocal relationship exists between themes. For instance, belonging or the adaptation process can also help to form social bridges, which can, in turn, also have a reverse impact on the influencing conditions, such as language acquisition or personal attitude.

Additionally, due to the nature of the topic, there is some overlap between themes- neighbourly relations are discussed as a valued relationship and also in terms of sense of belonging, for example. Still, each theme describes the data according to the distinct parameters of that theme. In this chapter, each of this study's themes and sub-themes will be described according to how it contributes to social bridging, using illustrative quotes from participants. Pseudonyms are used for each participant when sharing their quotes below.

Conditions that Influence Social Bridging

The theme, *Conditions that influence social bridging* describes the factors and circumstances that influence if social bridges form. Participants in this research discussed numerous conditions that affected their social bridging interactions. The influence of time cut across this theme and influenced all of the conditions. Participants shared that loneliness lessened with time, their English ability improved with time, and challenges building relationships subsided over time. Participants discussed five primary conditions that influenced their experiences of building social bridges, which can be grouped into the sub-themes of *Attitudes and actions, Personal conditions, External conditions, Language ability*, and *Social culture*.

Attitudes and Actions

The sub-theme of *Attitudes and actions* describes Syrians' attitudes and behaviours that affected their social bridging experiences, as well as Canadians' actions of welcome and support. Relationships may or may not form depending on an individual's worldview and the personal decisions which are informed by their worldview. Participants found that

Canadians' effort and initiative in building social bridges were important. For Ibrahim, a co-worker's intentional bridging attempt had an impact on him:

> I hadn't seen [my co-worker] for a month at that time, and I had a message from her, 'Hello Ibrahim, how are you doing, I'm thinking about you'. Do you know, you are feeling like there is someone who is asking about you, who is supporting you, who is there if you need them… this is enough for me. (Ibrahim)

When Canadians made intentional efforts to welcome Syrians, offer help, or invest in learning about Syrian culture, it established a necessary starting point for future relationship. One participant described his experience:

> My roommate and his sister…had a free ticket [to Snow Valley] and he said, 'come with us'… so, I went with them... You don't have to spend money, but if [Canadians] start doing something like that with newcomers, probably [I am] going to learn something about Canadian culture, and start to find something in common between you and them. (Sharif)

Participants noted that their own attitude and efforts also impacted their social bridges. Many individuals commented that building relationships with Canadians requires being accepting and open: "These neighbours, sometimes they say hi and sometimes no [laughs]… Even though we are a neighbourhood, if I don't say hi, they don't. But I understand that, I am not sad. It is their right, their freedom" (Sanaa). An individual's personality and disposition also affected relationship potential. Although some participants felt that their friendly nature facilitated social bridges, for others, shyness acted as a limitation: "I moved to a new house two years ago, but until now I haven't visited any of my new neighbours. My neighbours are from

different countries and I think I am too shy to start to make new relationships" (Mariam). Participants demonstrated their desire to get to know Canadians when they described their own actions or ideas towards building bridges. Drawing on their own cultural traditions, many participants shared food or drinks with the Canadians around them, or extended invitations: "I think Syrians like to invite people for dinner. This is the best way for us to start to have relationships" (Mariam). Others attempted to reach out by introducing themselves to their neighbours or offering help in their community: "I go to [the church that sponsored me] many times. I help with gifts for poor people and sometimes when they are having a celebration, I go to help them. It makes me nearer to this community" (Laila). Other participants suggested that Syrians should partake in volunteer opportunities to build relationships with Canadians.

Participants generally agreed that instead of one group bearing most of the responsibility, social bridging requires mutual input from Canadians and Syrians. One participant shared,

> It is not only you who chooses that relationship between Canadian families,
> your neighbours… If you find someone who really does want to learn more
> about you, they can just come to you and say hi. It's not only you who goes to
> them to say hi and ask a question and start the conversation. (Sharif)

Engaging in shared cultural understanding and exchange, where Canadians could learn about Syrian norms and ideas and vice versa, was a foundational requirement for social bridging to take place. According to Kareem, "culture is a very important factor. If we can solve that problem, if Canadians can understand our culture and we understand theirs... And how will that happen? If we sit together". Participants felt that intentional opportunities to 'sit together' were essential for cultural exchange, such as programs, presentations, and social events that could be

organized both informally at the community level or initiated by settlement agencies or government to promote cultural sharing. For example, one individual suggested,

> What if you could get funds from the government to introduce Canadian families to newcomer families? For coffee, barbecues,… This way, you can build healthy relationships, can educate. One family of the Syrians will teach ten [other] Syrian families what they learned from the Canadians. (Ibrahim)

When participants had engaged in cultural exchange informally at the community level, they found that building relationships with Canadians became easier: "Some Syrians start to introduce their culture to Canadians, and the Canadians accept it and now they have a good relationship" (Kareem). For individuals in this study, building relationships with Canadians was also predicated on an attitude of mutual cultural respect:

> When I came here to Canada they respected my language, they respected my religion… because I wear a hijab when I am outside. They respect everything that is different to them. So, my rule is I have to respect their culture too. (Kamala)

Personal Conditions

Individual factors and circumstances also influenced relationship formation. Participants found that personal traits including their age, life experiences and refugee stream affected their social bridges with Canadians, both positively and negatively. For example, one participant reflected on the experiences of a younger Syrian refugee: "When he arrived, he was young… People at this age go out, eat, drink, enjoy the weather, events… So, it's easier to know [a] different culture, other people and make friends with them" (Sharif). Some individuals also felt

that marital status limited the scope of Canadians they could build friendships with to those with the same marital status. A participant reflected on her interaction with a Canadian couple:

> Because I didn't have a husband, they tried to follow my culture. Her husband cannot come to my house. Just she and her kids came to visit us, and I think that was hard for her. They preferred to be with a Syrian husband and wife. (Mariam)

Some individuals also felt that their previous life experiences or achievements affected their personal ability to build relationships. One participant commented, "maybe because I studied psychology, I can make friends more easily". (Fatima)

The refugee stream through which an individual arrived in Canada was another personal condition that proved significant in social bridging. Participants who arrived as privately sponsored refugees (PSRs) shared experiences that demonstrated it was easier for them to establish relationships outside of their community group. Sponsors provided an immediate social group for PSRs that also sustained over time: "With all of [our sponsors], we have a good relationship. Especially one, we took her name for my daughter. She has become a grandma to my kids, and we have a wonderful relationship between each other" (Nyla). Participants who arrived as PSRs also reported that the adaptation process was easier, as their sponsors assisted with navigating systems, acquiring needed items, and locating community resources and services. Individuals who had arrived through other refugee streams perceived that PSRs enjoyed greater social bridging than they did: "I know a Syrian family who came through sponsorship… I feel that they are more lucky than me actually. I had no one to support me at all when I came" (Sharif).

External Conditions

Environmental conditions related to location, housing, and opportunities to interact influenced participants' social bridging as well. A participant who had been re-settled in a smaller municipality remarked that living in a smaller urban setting was conducive to social bridging opportunities: "here in [name of town], it's very easy. But in Edmonton, I think it's a little different. Because it's a big city, and so many newcomers" (Khalid). For others, renting instead of owning a home meant moving on a regular basis, which made it difficult to establish meaningful and lasting bridges in their community: "Because you are in a new land you are renting here, you keep moving. I'm sure there's going to be more relationship with your neighbours if you stay in the same place" (Sharif). The location of one's home, such as in a residential or commercial area, as well as the type of home were also important, as some participants felt that living in a house supported bridging with neighbours more than in an apartment.

Opportunities that facilitated mixing and interaction such as work, school, or settlement agency programs played a significant role in promoting social bridges. Although some individuals found that their places of work acted as a barrier to connecting with their co-workers, for others they were relational conduits: "I want to tell you about my work at the daycare. At the daycare, all the teachers are my friends…when I need help, I go to my boss… She is very friendly and it's important for me" (Laila). Similarly, participants who attended Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) classes reported friendships with their classmates as well as their teachers. Participants felt that settlement agencies could play a role in supporting social bridging by hosting initiatives that acted as points of connection. Some individuals stated that settlement agencies did not play this role well; conversely, certain initiatives had been

positive for others: "[The Canada Host Program] is a very attractive program, I like it. It destroyed some limit, some borders between you and them [non-Syrians, Canadians]" (Kareem).

Language Ability

All participants shared that English language ability was an important condition that influenced the formation of social bridges. Ager & Strang's framework also identifies language as a key contributor to achieving its other domains such as social bridges, and ultimately, as a facilitator of integration. For participants who arrived in Canada with conversational or fluent English ability, it was easier to establish relationships with those around them: "the big challenge that the other Syrians faced I didn't, because my English language was very good [upon arrival], so I can communicate with Canadians easily... Contact with others is easier, because I have English" (Sanaa). Similarly, building friendships and adapting to Canadian culture and norms was a smoother process for participants arriving with more advanced language skills. However, since the majority of participants arrived with little to no English language skills, communication posed a significant barrier in getting to know Canadians. According to one participant,

> As you have no English skills, you will take a step back from Canadian society. 'I
> do respect your culture…but I can't communicate with you'. Even with the
> government requirements to have LINC 4 [English language ability to become a
> Canadian citizen], which is not enough to build healthy relationships. (Ibrahim)

Participants overwhelmingly felt that language was the primary challenge or "big wall" that hindered forming all types of social bridges, but believed it was especially a barrier to establishing closer, more meaningful relationships: "The only difficult part is language. If anyone has good language, he can talk about anything, and he can make a friend" (Ali). As

evidence of this reflection, participants commented that as their language ability improved in proportion to their time in Canada, the quantity and quality of their social bridges also grew.

Social Culture

Culture refers to the learned behaviours of a group of people that are accepted as tradition (Hofstede, 1997). Social culture, then, describes the learned social behaviours and customary ways of interacting amongst individuals within a specific group. Ager & Strang identify cultural knowledge as a facilitator of integration, highlighting "the value of broader cultural knowledge in enabling integration processes and outcomes" (p. 182). In this study, cultural knowledge is discussed specifically in terms of social bridges, and therefore, is referred to as 'social culture'. Social culture, then, includes cultural knowledge that influences and is influenced by social bridges. This includes participants' knowledge of Canadian social culture and vice versa. For all participants, social culture deeply impacted their social bridging interactions. Participants shared their reflections on Syrian social norms, attempts to understand and adapt to Canadian social culture, and experiences adjusting to the differences between Syrian and Canadian ways of interacting. Participants also discussed instances where they felt apprehension towards Canadians or perceived that Canadians mistrusted them, based on a lack of knowledge of each other's social culture and corresponding norms.

In Syria, relationships were seen as a cultural cornerstone. One individual shared that relationships "are a priority, because in our country, we are interested in relationships" (Sanaa). Instead of social bridges, participants' relationships with close friends and neighbours within their ethnic group in Syria constituted social bonds, meaning that these relationships shared a similar degree of closeness to that of family members. Daily activities such as cooking or shopping were done with friends or neighbours, help was exchanged freely, and personal joys

and sorrows were shared openly in these circles. Most interviewees described having had

particularly close relationships with their neighbours in Syria, which were considered an

important social bond: "[In Syria], if you have a friend from the neighbourhood it's your brother,

your family. The whole neighbourhood is one family." Similarly, friendships in Syria were

defined by emotional closeness and frequent interaction:

> I used to have many people…but you always have some friends who are very best
>
> friends to you, like very close. So I used to see them every day, at their house or
>
> they would come to my house til one, two, three a.m. or sometimes til morning.
>
> (Sharif)

The closeness of relationships with neighbours and friends in particular represents the

importance and value of relationships in Syrian culture.

Given the value of social bridges in Syria, participants had mixed experiences adjusting

to a different social culture and its corresponding norms in Canada. Some adopted Canada's

social customs more easily than others, and had generally positive adjustment experiences. One

participant expressed that he found it easy to adapt to the comparative formality of social

interactions in Canada, while another said that he was not bothered by more distant relationships

with his Canadian neighbours: "I'm not waiting for anyone to come and say hi because I don't

feel that they have to come" (Sharif). Some participants recognized that they had, by choice or

necessity due to competing demands on their time, begun to adopt Canadian social norms and

ways of interacting. For example, working as well as caring for children meant that some

individuals felt too busy to see their friends every day, as they would have in Syria. One

participant observed, "Do you know, now I live as a Canadian. I have to go to school every day

and look after my kids… I'm too busy as a Canadian, I don't have time to make meetings [with

friends] everyday" (Mariam). Participants also felt that Canadians' emotional openness

contributed to navigating its social culture more easily. Some participants noted that Canadians

tend to "express their feelings when they're upset. That's a good thing, to express your feelings

outwardly" (Omar).

The differences between Syria's social culture and that of Canada were more difficult for

many participants to adjust to. Some Canadian social customs and accepted behaviours were

unfamiliar, and therefore, difficult to understand and accommodate. For example,

> If I want to visit you [in Canada], I have to contact you a week before, two
>
> weeks before… [In Syria], no, I'm coming. He or she just informs me, 'I am
>
> coming'. It's totally different. I know other Syrians are struggling with this
>
> issue. (Ibrahim)

Unfulfilled expectations of Canada's social cultural norms being similar to that of Syria was a

challenge for some individuals. One participant shared that he was disappointed to find

relationships in Canada did not mirror Syrian social norms. In his perspective, "I thought it was

going to be all good friends, neighbours. Canadian neighbours were going to talk to each other,

visit each other, learn English fast… but suddenly I came, and I didn't see anything like that"

(Rashad). One participant felt that the reason why it was difficult to make relationships with

Canadians was that Syrians and Canadians did not have much in common to generate

conversation. For another participant, different values presented as a barrier: "I have mostly

found from my friends who have Canadian friends that most of them like to drink, like to smoke

cannabis and I'm totally away from those things" (Rashad).

Adjusting to more distant social bridges in Canada was one of the most significant ways participants described social culture and its corresponding norms impacting their relationships. Participants agreed that Syrian culture is more socially-oriented than Canadian culture, and so accepting weaker social ties in Canada was difficult. For example, for one participant, "we could know everything about our neighbours [in Syria]- about their health, about something special in their personal life… And [we] supported each other. Here in Canada if you get sick, sometimes no one will visit you" (Mariam). Since friends and neighbours visited each other more regularly in Syria, often dropping in uninvited, the absence of regular and frequent interaction was unexpected. Offering and accepting help was also different. Some participants struggled to understand and adapt to greater restraint in offering and accepting assistance in Canadian culture:

> I spent 45 minutes or so helping [my neighbour], because this is my culture.
> Canadians, I know they have a lot of warm feelings and support, but according
> to your culture, maybe it will not be good to ask you, 'Can I help you?' Maybe
> it will be understood that it is bothering them [laughs]. (Ibrahim)

Adjusting to different expectations of closeness and support in relationships situated in Canadian social culture was a challenge that nearly all participants experienced.

In contrast, participants felt that work was a higher order priority than relationships in Canadian culture. One participant commented that in Syria, "we don't have anything that is called, 'the weekend'. Anytime you want to see your friends you can- it's not about work, work, work [referring to Canada]" (Sharif). Time restrictions due to work was commonly cited as the reason why it was, at times, difficult to build social bridges: "No time, no time… [It is] not easy to make Canadian friends because everyone is busy, all the time busy" (Laila). One participant felt that the cost of living in Canada is high, precipitating the need to work extensively and

displacing relationships. Four of the five female participants commented on the impact of both men and women participating in the workforce. Whereas in Syria women commonly held part-time positions or did not work at all, nearly all female participants felt that a culture where women typically held full-time positions interrupted the social aspect of daily life. According to one female participant, "In Syria, some women are not working. They stay at home and send their kids to school…so, they can make an interesting time with their neighbours, their friends. But here, you know, even women have a busy life" (Sanaa). Work as a priority instead of relationships was a surprise that required psychological and practical adjustments for participants.

Lack of social cultural knowledge, amongst both participants and Canadians, destabilized the foundation of social bridging for participants by creating apprehension and uncertainty. Participants shared numerous culturally-rooted concerns about how they felt Canadians viewed them, and how they perceived Canadians in turn, which made them hesitant to build social bridges. Common apprehensions included offending Canadians, being misunderstood, and experiencing rejection:

> Sometimes we feel that maybe the others [non-Syrians, Canadians] will not
> understand me. Maybe they will stop me, maybe they will not accept me. [We are]
> scared about the others, that they will not accept my culture. That stops me.
> (Kareem)

Some participants expressed worry about how Canadians perceived them due to a partial understanding of the context of Syria's civil war, or their Islamic customs. Kareem observed that "Canadians were worried about Syrians" having an "outside agenda" to cause harm in Canada, based on media coverage of the Syrian conflict. Another individual worried about Canadians'

response to the hijab: "most of my friends say that Canadians are worried about women who wear the hijab. This is a big problem… Will Canadians understand? Not everyone puts on a hijab" (Fatima). At the same time, participants shared that they also were hesitant to trust Canadians in some instances: "Some [Syrian] people said that they don't want to start a relationship with Canadians because maybe they will affect our children, affect our culture, affect our religion, something…" (Kareem). Conversely, one participant made it clear that she did not think mistrust existed between Syrians and Canadians. For many participants, however, multiculturalism was seen as a complicating factor in understanding Canadian social norms and adapting to these:

> Habits and culture are different from country to country. When they [other Syrians] came to Canada they met a lot of different people from all countries…How can I speak with this man, with this woman? Will he take my jokes well or no? Shake hands or not shake hands?... This is very hard at the beginning because it changes from person to person, so they will face these problems. (Khalid)

Most participants felt that mistrust and apprehension were the products of gaps in mutual understanding and cultural awareness, which hindered both interest and ability to form relationships with Canadians.

Social Bridging Interactions

The theme, *Social bridging interactions* refers to the types of interactions with Canadians that were especially valuable to participants. These interactions ranged from superficial encounters, represented by the sub-theme *Friendliness*, to deeper, more meaningful interactions in the form of relationships. These are discussed in the sub-theme *Intentional connections* which

discusses these deeper interactions, most commonly as friendships. As previously discussed, Ager & Strang (2008) describe social bridges as made up of friendliness and intensive involvement, understood for the purposes of this study as intentional connections, and so the sub-themes of *Friendliness* and *Intentional Connections* are based on how these authors describe social bridging. According to the participants of this study, the third sub-theme, *Neighbourly relations* was another key connection with the host society. *Neighbourly relations* are described as unique from *Friendliness* and *Intentional connections* in terms of participants' expectations of especially close and supportive relationships with the Canadians living nearest to them.

As stated earlier, there is a degree of overlap in the findings of this study. There are, however, differentiations between the data of each theme. In the previous section, participants' experiences of friendliness, intentional connections, and neighbourly relations were presented in context of the conditions that influenced if these bridges formed, such as the influence of social culture. As such, the focus is primarily on the conditions that influenced the bridging interaction. Under the theme *Social bridging interactions*, participants' positive and negative experiences of friendliness, intentional connections, and neighbourly relations are the primary focus, and data within this theme does not refer to conditions that influence social bridging.

Friendliness

Friendliness, expressed through superficial interactions with members of the local community, is a type of social bridge identified by Ager & Strang (2008) in their description of social bridging, and was a valued interaction that participants commonly referred to in this study. Participants described friendliness in terms of the general sense of welcome or acceptance they felt in their interactions with strangers or distant contacts in the community. Notably, no participant felt that Canadians were not friendly; indeed, all participants agreed that in the

community, Canadians were generally pleasant and welcoming. One individual, for example, described his experience with his landlord after arrival in Canada: "He told me this is the neighbourhood, this is my name, this is the parking… he showed me some things. He said, if you need help, you can come ask me, no problem, I will help you. He was friendly but just a little bit, not too much" (Ali). For one participant, friendliness was characterized by Canadians' patience with her English capabilities, while others highlighted kindness and helpfulness in professional settings: "In all formal offices, on the phone even, when I phone any place they are very helpful. Really, very helpful. I am proud that I'm living in this kindly community" (Sanaa). Although other participants had not yet established close relationships in their community, they felt that the friendliness and openness of Canadians made it possible to do so: "When you get closer to the people, it will be very nice and like a family" (Omar). The individuals in this study commented that expressions of friendliness from Canadians made them feel happy, encouraged, and proud to be in these communities.

Other participants felt that Canadians were not just distantly friendly, but exceptionally welcoming and open. According to Ibrahim, "despite the cold weather here in Edmonton and Canada, I get warmth from the warm hearts here." Similarly, another participant stated that Canadians "like to speak with Syrians, with any refugee, and Canadians like to know everything about different cultures. It's open, they are open people" (Mariam). Canada's multicultural make-up was seen as a conduit to openness through cultural sharing: "My classmates, most of them were Eritrean culture, Christian. They were nice people to talk to, they have a new culture, new language, new food. I thought, 'I like Canada, every day we can talk about a new thing!'" (Ali). In the context of promoting inter-ethnic friendliness, multiculturalism was viewed positively by many participants.

Intentional Connections

The sub-theme *Intentional connections* describes closer social interactions, referred to as 'intensive involvement' by Ager & Strang (2008) in their description of social bridging, and most commonly taking the form of friendships in this study. Intentional connections were also valuable social bridges that participants discussed. Some individuals described the close Canadian friendships they had formed since arriving: "I have many friends in Canada… Everyone is like my sister or my brother" (Laila). Others shared the activities they engaged in with their Canadian friends: "Sometimes we watch WWE or watch a movie together" (Ali). One individual reflected that the strength of her friendships had not changed in Canada "because I'm still the same person. People are different but I still have great relationships with people, I'm still nice with them. So, it's not really different between Syria, Turkey or here" (Nyla).

Most participants expressed, however, that they would like to have stronger relationships with Canadians. While some individuals had established acquaintances but not friends, others struggled to build close, personal connections with Canadians: "Until now, I miss having relationships with Canadians. I would like to have Canadian friends, I think that would support me more" (Mariam). Many participants shared that it was difficult to build intentional connections because they felt a gap in closeness, or distance in their relationships with Canadians. One individual shared that "you can make friendships quickly here, but always it will be distant… Canadian people always, we have noticed, want distance, more distance between. No relationship [is] strong- 'Please, you are my friend, but stay far'" (Khalid). Participants felt that one of the reasons why distance existed was that Canadians were apprehensive or hesitant to form close connections. For instance, one individual mentioned that his neighbour was initially

"very careful" in her interactions with his family; while his neighbour was friendly, she demonstrated hesitation in establishing a closer relationship.

Participants especially noticed this distance around the importance of help in relationships. Canadians would typically offer to help a neighbour or community member only if it was requested or necessary, and less likely to volunteer to assist someone in need. For example, Kareem felt that,

> If Canadians see that you need their help, they will come to help you, give you a
> hand, give you a shoulder. And if they see that maybe you can deal with that
> situation, they just stay until you open the window [of opportunity to help] for
> them. (Kareem)

Others agreed that outside of responding to immediate needs, receiving help from Canadians required Syrians to 'open the window' by requesting assistance:

> Newcomers have to put in the effort to reach out to Canadians. If you want
> anything here in Canada, you have to ask for it. It's the opposite in Syrian culture-
> people will offer to help. In Canada, you have to learn to ask for help, then
> Canadians will help. (Omar)

Participants felt that Canadians' response to help exemplified their preference for a degree of distance in their relationships.

Neighbourly Relations

A third type of social bridging interaction emerged from the research that was not identified by Ager & Strang (2008). Participants described *Neighbourly relations* as a distinct

type of valued relationship based on their close and supportive nature. Participants' close

relationships with their co-ethnic neighbours in Syria constituted social bonds, and they desired

the same quality of neighbourly relations with the Canadians living closest to them. However,

participants reported mixed experiences in establishing neighbourly relations. Some individuals

had little to no relationship with their neighbours and felt very separated from those living

around them:

> I used to live in the basement and I only knew the people who lived with me in the
>
> same house, downstairs. But the people who lived upstairs, I didn't know
>
> anything about them, even the people around me. I had no idea who they were,
>
> what work they were doing, what their name was, at all. (Sharif)

Participants generally felt that distant relationships with neighbours were not circumstantial but

reflected Canadians' preferences. According to one participant, "Canadians don't like to keep in

touch with their neighbours" (Mariam). Furthermore, numerous participants noted that

neighbours did not attempt to be helpful or welcoming upon their arrival: "To be honest, when

we came here to this place, I don't think I had any neighbours come to my house… I didn't have

any contact with my neighbours, especially in this area" (Kareem).

By contrast, some participants had positive bridging experiences with their neighbours.

Many participants had been welcomed by their neighbours when they arrived in Canada or

formed a friendly connection with those living nearby. For example, a participant noted that

when he first moved into his neighbourhood, "the first day three or four neighbours came to my

house. One Canadian lady brought a lot of stuff for us. They are very good people and welcomed

us when we came" (Kareem). For most participants, however, the support they initially received

upon moving into the neighbourhood was not sustained with time. When Canadian neighbours

took the initiative to visit, these actions were received very positively: "My neighbours… come for ten, fifteen minutes and go. And another day, the next day, they come visit us… This is good, this is very good for us" (Laila). One participant stated that close relationships with neighbours were not important to him; given his limited free time while studying English and working, he preferred to prioritize spending time with his friends instead of getting to know his neighbours.

Outcomes of Social Bridging

Friendliness, intentional connections, and neighbourly relations generated benefits for participants, or hoped-for benefits that they wished to attain from bridging relationships. In this study, participants shared how their social bridging experiences contributed to developing a *Sense of belonging* at either the local or national levels. Another outcome of social bridging was its impact on participants' *Adaptation*, where these relationships either supported or hindered their settlement process and securing their immediate needs.

Sense of Belonging

The sub-theme, *Sense of belonging* describes how social bridging did or did not facilitate developing a sense of belonging for participants, either to their community or to Canada. In all interviews, participants either talked about belonging directly, or alluded to it while discussing their social bridges with Canadians. Nearly all participants agreed that they did feel like they belonged to both their community and to Canada in general, in spite of any difficulty forming some types of social bridges. Participants referred to all social bridging interactions to justify their sense of belonging. When asked if he felt as if he belonged at the local level, one participant responded, "I feel like we have each other. It's not like… [I am] not one finger, [I am] part of a whole hand" (Ali). Some participants noted that belonging grew with time, and

distinguished different contexts where they felt included. For example, Omar noted that shortly after his arrival in Canada, he felt that he "not really belonged to Canada, but belonged to the [local, non-Syrian] community I was living in. But now, of course I feel that I belong in Canada."

Feeling part of the local community and greater society outside of their ethnic group was important for participants. Some individuals identified factors outside of social bridges that contributed to their sense of belonging, such as safety: "Of course, after four years this is my home country… I have a rule in my life, 'My country is what gives me safety'. Because in Syria, I'm not safe to live there, but here I'm safe" (Omar). Yet, interactions or relationships with Canadians was most commonly referenced as impacting the extent to which participants felt that they belonged. In reflecting on his own contribution to his sense of belonging, one participant felt that it was associated with social participation and engagement with others: "To be part of the community means to change, contribute to it positively. For me, I consider myself as a positive person who likes to help others" (Kareem). Intentional connections with Canadians were considered important to build or enhance a sense of community belonging. One individual felt that with Canadian friends, "you could feel closer to the community, not just with the formal things. You can feel that you are really in this community" (Sanaa). Upon arrival in Canada, a participant moved in with a Canadian roommate who introduced him to his family, invited him to events with his friends, and showed him local activities and pastimes. This relationship significantly contributed to this participant's early experiences of belonging, and made him "feel more positive" (Sharif). Another individual's relationship with an elderly neighbour had a similar impact: "Of course I feel that I belong in Canada. At that time when I came and met [my neighbour], she helped me to stay comfortable [in the] atmosphere around me" (Omar).

Adaptation

The sub-theme, *Adaptation* describes the ways in which social bridges directly support participants' adaptation process. For the purposes of this study, adaptation refers to the process of developing the skills, knowledge, and overall well-being needed to function in a new cultural and social environment (Berry & Sam, 1997). Although all themes and sub-themes in this study contribute to adaptation in some way, this sub-theme describes how bridging relationships directly helped participants develop their cultural/social skills and knowledge, or how participants hoped to enhance their overall well-being through social bridges. For participants of this study, relationships with Canadians eased participants' adaptation to Canadian laws and educational and labour market systems. Many participants had received some degree of guidance in finding employment or learning about Canada's taxation system through support from co-workers, neighbours, or friends. One participant shared that "when I did my citizenship exam, I studied just a little bit. You know why? Because 90% of the information in the [citizenship study] book, I learned it from the people" (Omar). In addition to influencing the practical aspects of participants' integration, social bridges also offered emotional support in the adaptation process: "Now I know some people…they are so nice, so wonderful, and if I say I'm not good, I have stress, he says, 'Okay, you can call me and come to our house'…This is good, they encourage me" (Fatima).

Still, most participants expressed that more support from Canadians would have expedited and ameliorated their adaptation experience: "If I had a Canadian friend, everything I learned through four years would be easy for me to learn in two years or less. It takes a long time for me to learn everything through school" (Mariam). Individuals in this study expressed a desire to learn about Canadian culture through engagement with its citizens, just as Ibrahim

stated: "This is my dream right now, to be among Canadians, [speaking] in English, getting to know more about Canadian culture". Participants also felt that having more, or stronger, relationships with Canadians would have made it easier to learn English. Participants discussed this from the perspective of not having a Canadian friend to practice with and learn from, but acknowledging the benefits this would have had for their language acquisition: "If I had good friends, like neighbours who talked to me every day, I'm going to have good English" (Rashad). Whether participants shared actual or aspirational experiences of support from Canadians in their adaptation process, for some individuals, this outcome of bridging relationships was important.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The objective of this study was to explore Syrian refugee adults' experiences of building

social bridges, and how these bridges impact their sense of belonging and overall integration.

This research utilized Ager & Strang's (2008) Domains of Integration Framework, specifically

focusing on how they describe social bridges. This study's final themes reflected Ager &

Strang's description and identified additional components that enrich the description of social

bridges, as illustrated in Figure 2. It is worthwhile, then, to discuss aspects of this research that

align with Ager & Strang's description and the findings that also deepen academic

understandings of social bridging. This section will discuss four key findings: (1) conditions that

influence social bridging interactions; (2) participants' experiences of friendliness compared to

intentional connections; (3) the significance of neighbourly relations as a valued type of social

bridging; and (4) sense of belonging as a crucial outcome of social bridges. Drawing on other

research in the field of social bridges, each of these findings will be described in more detail, and

the implications considered.

Conditions that Influence Social Bridging

Although Ager & Strang's (2008) description of social bridging provided an appropriate

starting point to organize and interpret the findings of this study, conditions that influence social

bridging were not included in their description. Participants spoke extensively about factors that

affected if friendliness occurred, or intentional connections or neighbourly relations formed. As

such, it is relevant to this study to examine the conditions and circumstances that facilitate or

hinder positive social encounters between participants and Canadians. For the participants of this

study, social bridges were primarily influenced by their own and Canadians' attitudes and

actions, personal conditions, external conditions, language ability, and understanding of social

culture. It is notable that although Ager & Strang do not specifically discuss conditions that influence social bridging, this study, as well as many others, identify numerous domains of their framework that have an impact on social bridging formation (Daley, 2007; Hebbani et al., 2018; Korac, 2005). In this study, these include employment, housing, safety, language, and cultural knowledge. The findings from this study, then, support Ager & Strang's assertion that the framework's domains are interconnected in how they influence and interact with each other.

Attitudes and Actions

In this study, attitudes and actions of both Syrians and Canadians affected social bridging interactions. Many participants shared how their own worldview drove their attempts to build bridges or be accepting of, and open to, Canadians and their social culture. It was also significant when Canadians adopted an attitude of openness or made intentional efforts to extend welcome or help, or build friendships. These attitudes and actions established a foundation that made deeper, more meaningful relationships possible and consequently, were a factor influencing if social bridges formed.

Although an important finding in this study, the roles of personal attitude and actions are not extensively discussed in social bridging literature. Studies on integration acknowledge the impact of intentional efforts by both refugees and members of the host society as part of the 'two-way street' concept of integration (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 1998; McCoy et al., 2016; Puma et al., 2018; Strang & Ager, 2010) where both groups' active participation in building social bridges is seen as a critical aspect of establishing trust, thereby promoting social cohesion and newcomer integration. Actions taken at the personal level, however, are mostly highlighted as a strategic response to discussions of integration in general and not considered in the examination of social bridges in particular, nor acknowledged for the

impact that efforts to be friendly, get to know members of the other group, or offer help can have on establishing bridging relationships. Similarly, one's attitude towards newcomers or refugees forms part of the discussion around integration, represented as the host society's openness and acceptance of newcomers in promoting integration (AAISA, 2017; Hebbani et al., 2018) or as the degree of trust that refugees' have in their neighbours and fellow community members (Pearce, 2008; Schellenberg, 2004; Strang & Quinn, 2019). As such, although personal attitudes and actions are discussed in relation to integration, they are largely overlooked in research on social bridges specifically. As participants' experiences in this study indicate, understanding the impact of attitude and behaviour is important not just on the macro-societal scale of integration, but on the personal level as well, where the 'two-way street' encounters occur and interconnection takes root.

Personal and External Conditions

Participants in this study highlighted numerous personal and external conditions and circumstances that affected their social bridging interactions. Research on refugee integration that discusses social bridging highlights similar conditions such as refugee stream and points of interaction, which overlap with this thesis. In their studies of Syrian refugee integration in Canada, AAISA (2017) and Drolet & Moorthi (2018) found that the stream through which refugees arrive can influence their social bridging potential. Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs) typically formed more social bridges compared to those who arrived via other streams due to inherent relationships with their sponsors (Drolet & Moorthi, 2018). This directly aligns with findings from this study as well. Having designated individuals from the host society to connect with on an ongoing basis immediately placed participants who were PSRs at a social bridging advantage, compared to participants who were not sponsored. It seems that by having a

sponsor, the challenge of finding a Canadian to connect with is automatically removed. Participants who were PSRs also tended to have deeper connections with their sponsors than other participants had with their Canadian friends, and greater social networks developed from their relationships with their sponsors. Better bridging experiences for PSRs reinforces the earlier point that intentionality from members of the host society crucially forms part of the foundation upon which social bridges are formed.

Just as having a sponsor answers the bridging question of 'Who?' for PSRs, points of interaction can eliminate the question of, 'How?' for all refugees. This study found that places where interaction naturally occurs, primarily at work or English training via the LINC program, can increase social bridging potential by providing opportunities to meet and mix with Canadians. In the same way, Stewart et al. (2008) and Korac (2005) noted that places of employment can foster relationship building with host society members. Stewart et al. (2008) found that places of worship, schools, and volunteer placements provide a similar connection point, catalyzing relationship building by providing the opportunity for interaction. Although the primary purpose of work or school is not inter-ethnic mixing, the natural interaction that occurs in these spaces provides a key input of social bridging that is both necessary and can be difficult to otherwise attain.

Language Ability

As one of the domains of Ager & Strang's (2008) Domains of Integration framework, language is considered a facilitator and one of the most significant factors influencing refugee integration. As this study demonstrates, language ability impacts other domains of integration as well, including social bridging. Previous studies have also found that language plays a critical role in social bridging (AAISA, 2017; Drolet & Moorthi, 2018; Hebbani et al., 2018).

Participants of this study unanimously felt that language was a primary constraint or facilitator in getting to know Canadians. Participants that spoke English well upon arrival in Canada observed that this was a significant advantage in building bridging relationships, while those that could not communicate in English felt this was the main reason why relationships with Canadians were difficult to form. Drolet & Moorthi (2018) point out that since social bridges are embedded in language, inadequate English skills can cause exclusion from mainstream society. While the large majority of Syrians participated in language classes to remove this barrier (IRCC, 2019), the circumstance of language ability remained a significant initial and ongoing factor affecting their social bridging potential.

Social Culture

Ager & Strang (2008) identify cultural knowledge as a facilitator of integration, where knowledge of the broader host culture enables integration processes. The term, 'social culture' is used in this study to refer to cultural knowledge that influences and is influenced by social bridges in particular. Cultural knowledge can refer to both refugees' knowledge of the host society's social culture as well as the reverse. In this thesis study, discussions went beyond participants' knowledge of Canadian social culture as they compared and contrasted their own social culture with their understanding and experiences of that of Canada and their local community.

Challenges in building social bridges can be the result of actual cultural differences as well as cultural expectations. According to Simich et al. (2005), misalignment between expectations of similar types of social relationships as the country of origin and the reality of greater social distance and self-reliance in the country of resettlement "takes a toll on immigrants' potential for social integration" (p. 265). Participants of this study had different

expectations around their relationships with their Canadian neighbours in particular; some individuals expressed disappointment that neighbours did not visit or help each other as much as participants had anticipated. Research by Hebbani et al. (2018) similarly found that unmet expectations about neighbourly relations further "restricted" (p. 82) the progress of these bridging connections. The impact of culture on social bridges, then, is not limited to lived experiences of social differences, but also includes the absence of other, hoped for experiences as well.

Lack of mutual awareness and understanding of Syrian and Canadian culture posed a barrier to forming social bridging by inspiring feelings of apprehension and mistrust amongst participants. Participants expressed some concerns around possible consequences of getting to know Canadians as well as how they were perceived by members of the host society, which were rooted in cultural differences. For example, some individuals felt that interacting with Canadians would lead to unconsciously adopting their values and way of life, diminishing the importance of their Syrian culture and norms. Others felt that Canadians viewed them as potentially dangerous or judged them by their hijabs. Many participants also expressed fear of rejection by Canadians for being different, or for violating a Canadian cultural norm. These experiences support Ager & Strang's (2008) assertion that the presence or absence of cultural knowledge critically impacts integration. For example, research by Daley (2007) found that for refugees, lack of awareness and understanding of the host culture, which are borne of lived experience, can be replaced with fear, suspicion and mistrust of members of the host society. These experiences and feelings can negatively impact integration outcomes as a result.

Although participants of this study did not explicitly state that they experienced discrimination, feeling that Canadians judged their hijabs or viewed them as potentially

dangerous suggests that participants perceived discrimination in their encounters with Canadians. Discrimination, as the manifestation of attitudes of non-acceptance of differences (Drolet & Moorthi, 2018; McCoy et al., 2016), has been found in other studies to decrease feelings of inclusion for immigrants and refugees and become a barrier to social bridging (Daley, 2007; Drolet & Moorthi, 2018; McCoy et al., 2016). In the same way, perceptions of discrimination based on religious or national identity appeared to inspire feelings of apprehension and mistrust for participants, which became a barrier to social bridges with Canadians.

Research acknowledges the role of inter-ethnic trust in promoting social integration at the community level. Mata & Pendakur (2014) state that social bridging relies on trust, and Pearce (2008) found it acts as the mandatory cohesive force in establishing meaningful and long-lasting relationships. This study found that the absence of trust due to lack of cultural knowledge diminishes the opportunity and potential for such relationships. In a study by Cook et al. (2011), everyday encounters between newcomers and members of the host society did not lead to meaningful engagement with each other, causing mutual mistrust and resentment to instead fill the relationship void. This suggests that the opposite is also possible - opportunities to meaningfully interact with the other group can foster trust. Such interpersonal interactions create opportunities for cultural and personal exchange, building shared understanding while simultaneously decreasing suspicions or feeling threatened for both newcomers and members of the host society (Korac, 2005). This research, alongside the findings from this thesis, indicate that if mistrust due to lack of cultural knowledge is a barrier to social bridges, then establishing trust between refugees and members of the host society is a necessary condition for social bridges to form.

Although responsibility was considered mutual, participants of this study felt that when members of the host society took initiative to welcome, greet, or help them, it was especially valuable for building mutual cultural understanding and dissolving feelings of mistrust. Initiative from the host society in building trust is not explicitly discussed in the literature, stating only that interaction is a necessary pre-requisite of trust (Kenny et al., 2005; Schellenberg et al., 2004). Based on participants' feedback in this thesis, however, it seems that establishing a foundation for social bridging can be supported through the efforts of Canadians to create opportunities for meaningful engagement and shared understanding. Exploring the impact of initiative from members of the host society in establishing trust could be a possible topic for further research.

Syrian social culture places greater priority on relationships than is the norm in Canada, which impacted Syrian refugees' expectations, relational needs, and sense of belonging. Although some participants did not find Canada's social culture or its corresponding norms difficult to adjust to, all participants agreed that the norms that govern social interaction in Canada were different than those in Syria. Many participants struggled with understanding or adopting some aspect of Canada's social cultural norms, which impacted if social bridges formed. Adjusting to Canadians' preference for distance, or, weaker social ties in intentional connections and neighbourly relations was especially challenging for participants, an outcome of the individualism-collectivism divide between Canadian and Syrian cultures (Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2015; Hou et al., 2018). Compared to Syria's collective social culture where social networks are close-knit and supportive, both the nature of social relationships and the norms that shape these relationships in Canada reflect less interdependence and emotional closeness. If "the compatibility of cultures and lifestyles in the receiving and sending societies play a role in

establishing closer social ties between refugees and the native population" (Korac, 2005, p. 104), then significant differences in culture and lifestyle can also widen the social gap between ethnic communies. Research by Hebbani et al. (2018) supports the finding from this thesis that the cultural differences in relationships with neighbours are especially acute for refugees. The significance and meaning of these differences may be just as important for social bridging than the actual cultural incompatibilies (Daley, 2007). Such a cultural gap can contribute to feeling unwelcomed and unsupported by host society members (AAISA, 2017; Drolet & Moorthi, 2018) and cause misunderstanding of their intentions, inspiring mistrust. As a result, social bridging opportunities can be further limited.

Participants in this study felt that relationships were less of a priority to Canadians than employment, which particularly represented the distinction between Canadian and Syrian social cultural norms. Participants commented that they had begun to accept and embrace aspects of Canadian social culture and although in many cases this led to positive cultural adjustment and integration, where participants adopted the norm of prioritizing work over relationships, social bridging outcomes suffered. Drolet & Moorthi's (2018) study found that economic need forced Syrian refugees to begin to prioritize work over relationships. Similarly, participants of this thesis study shared that the shift in priority from relationships to employment was an unavoidable outcome of the need to work longer hours in Canada, and suggests that social culture is shaped by other aspects of society as well. Although borne out of necessity, the shift towards prioritizing work over relationships also demonstrates that participants were adapting to Canadian social norms.

Social Bridging Interactions: Friendliness and Intentional Connections

As previously discussed, Ager & Strang (2008) describe social bridges as made up of friendliness and intensive involvement, understood for the purposes of this study as intentional connections in the form of friendship. Results of this study confirmed the importance of both of these types of bridges. When asked about their experiences building social connections with Canadians, participants shared examples of both friendly encounters with Canadians in their community as well as friendships or the desire for friendships. Unanimously, participants agreed that community members were friendly and welcoming when they interacted in brief, superficial encounters. This finding supports other research that cite the general friendliness of refugee-receiving Western countries (Alberta Association for Immigrant Serving Agencies [AAISA], 2017; Drolet & Moorthi, 2018; Korac, 2005). In a study by Hebbani et al. (2018), being welcomed into the neighbourhood or greeted with friendliness had a remarkably positive impact on newcomers' perceptions of both their community and the host society which, in turn, increased their personal identity and connection within these spaces. Similarly, participants in this research expressed that friendly or welcoming encounters made them feel happy, proud, and encouraged. Given participants' short timespan in Canada, friendly, welcoming encounters can be closely tied to their sense of belonging (AAISA, 2017).

While all participants in this study agreed that Canadians were friendly, the majority also felt that this warmth at the community level did not transfer to closeness at the personal level. Participants acknowledged that they wanted Canadian friends but described a 'distance' amongst Canadians that made these connections both harder to form and depleted of the meaning and support that characterized friendships in Syria. Studies of refugee groups in England (Cook et al., 2011; Daley, 2007) and the Netherlands (Korac, 2005) described similar findings, where migrants experienced friendliness at the "informal, individual and superficial level without

leading to meaningful relationships" (Daley, 2007, p. 163). These studies associate distance in intentional connections with differences in social culture between refugees' country of origin and country of resettlement. Indeed, the collective social culture of Syria exists in stark contrast to the individualistic nature of Canada's social fabric, where relationships typically demonstrate less interdependence (AAISA, 2017). Since the intensity and quality of close relationships on the personal level can contribute to feeling part of the community for newcomers (Korac 2005), the absence of these could also undermine their sense of belonging. Participants of this study however, generally did describe a sense of belonging to both their community and to Canada, although they also expressed an overall desire for more bridges that were deeper and more meaningful. It is possible, then, that participants' positive experiences of friendliness support a sense of belonging, but distance in friendships limits the extent of this belonging, and leaves more to be desired from social bridges between Syrian refugees and Canadians.

The dissonance between the friendliness participants experienced in the community and the distance they felt Canadians preferred in their friendships is exemplified in the role of helping in relationships. Many participants felt that Canadians will give help when it is necessary, but generally will not offer help in order to build or maintain relationships. A number of participants shared stories about a neighbour that helped with a broken-down car or LINC teachers and other community members who assisted in navigating Canadian systems and accessing resources. Although appreciated, some participants felt that the Canadian approach to help was limited to only when it was asked for or deemed necessary. In Syria, by contrast, help was regularly extended to neighbours and friends without the need for request- meals were shared, children were supervised, sick individuals were visited in stride with other daily tasks. The approach to help in Syrian culture is proactive, while in Canadian culture, help tends to be

more passive. A study by Stewart et al. (2008) of Somali refugees similarly found that the role

of help in Canada was typically perfunctory in response to an obvious and short-term need. This

was difficult to adjust to, since help in Somalia was a foundational characteristic of friendships

and neighbour relations that was exchanged regularly. The fact that help is present in social

bridges with Canadians but tends to be moderated by limited commitment or investment can be

seen to reflect Canadians' approach to social bridging overall. For instance, this study's

participants feel that Canadians will extend friendliness where there is little further obligation,

but exercise distance in relationships that require greater involvement, such as friendships. If the

growth of social bridging relies in part on the presence and value of helping (Mata & Pendakur,

2014), then results of this study suggest that a greater exchange of help at the individual level

may boost intentional connections between Syrians and Canadians.

Social Bridging Interactions: Neighbourly Relations

While findings from this research confirmed that friendliness and intentional connections

are valuable types of social bridges for Syrian refugees, relationships with neighbours emerged

as equally vital. All participants discussed what neighbourly relations signified to them, and their

past and current states of engagement with their neighbours both in Syria and in Canada. Forrest

& Kearns (2001) state that the neighbourhood can "become an extension of the home for social

purposes" (p. 2130), which was true of participants' neighbourly relations in Syria. For

participants, ideal neighbourly relations involve more commitment and investment than found in

instances of friendliness and different from friendships by nature of their 'family' qualities. By

nature of sharing the same ethnicity and living in the same community, neighbourly relations in

Syria would be similar to what Ager and Strang (2008) describe as social bonds. Social bonds

with family members and co-ethnic individuals are characterized by close, supportive

relationships (Strang & Quinn, 2019). As a type of social bond in Syrian culture, close neighbourly relations were generally assumed and expected. By extension, neighbourly relations were a significant type of interaction for participants in Canada as well, distinct from friendliness and intentional connections, but equally as valued and impactful upon their sense of belonging and overall integration.

Participants described relationships with their neighbours in terms of what they had been like in Syria and their unfulfilled expectation and desire for neighbourly relations to take on the same level of depth and support in Canada. Many individuals stated that their Syrian neighbours were like brothers or sisters and were a regular part of daily routines through the exchange of goods, giving or receiving help or support, and spending time together. According to participants, this represents a cultural norm, and is not necessarily dependent on time spent living in the same community. Neighbourly relations in Canada, then, were accompanied by the expectation of being a similarly close social relationship. In the absence of fully established social networks in Canada, relationships with neighbours can be especially relevant for replicating the meaningful and supportive social connections that they experienced in their homeland (Cook et al., 2011; Hebbani et al., 2018).

Although nearly all participants desired close, supportive neighbourly relations, they often found it difficult to build these deeper connections with the Canadians living around them. For participants, building relationships with their Canadian neighbours meant establishing a relationship outside of their ethnic group. As a social bridge in this context, neighbourly relations in Canada do not carry the same degree of closeness that neighbourly social bonds in Syria did. Moreover, in sharp contrast to Syrian culture, neighbourly relations are not assumed or automatic relationships in Canadian culture (Ray & Preston, 2009). Representing on a smaller scale

participants' overall bridging experiences, Syrians in this study generally found their Canadian neighbours to be friendly but distant, and not willing to engage in more supportive and interconnected neighbourly bridges. Similarly, while some individuals were greeted by their neighbours upon moving in or given food or household items, these acts of welcome typically remained within the realm of friendliness and did not often transform into the close neighbourly relations that participants valued and desired.

Extensive research has discovered that cultural differences between refugees' country of origin and Western receiving nations are exemplified in social relationships with neighbours (Cook et al., 2011; Hebbani et al., 2018; Huizinga & Van Hoven, 2018; Stewart et al., 2008). Neighbourly relations in the west tend to be less valued from a cultural standpoint, and so receive less attention and investment compared to in the country of origin of many refugees (Forrest & Kearns, 2001). According to Huizinga & van Hoven (2018), typical western neighbourhoods exist "as 'a series of parallel lives' in which residents co-exist, but where social contact is not or barely made" (p. 313). Consequently, disparate culturally informed concepts of neighbourly relations can interfere with forming ties with neighbours, and cloud perceptions of this experience. For example, in a study by Hebbani et al. (2018), nearly half of immigrant participants were not able to establish social bridges with their neighbours. Equally as notable, while the absence of neighbourly relations registered as problematic for immigrants, it did not amongst native-born residents in their research (Hebbani et al., 2018). Another study by Forrest & Kearns (2001) found that in the general population, close neighbourly relations were more important for elderly groups and individuals with low socio-economic status; based on the research with Syrian refugee adults that is described here, it is possible that newcomers from collective cultural backgrounds could be included in this category as well.

The following section focuses on sense of belonging and discusses it in more detail, however, it is important to discuss sense of belonging in the context of neighbourly relations and social bridging interactions as well. Since relationships with neighbours were valuable to participants but difficult to establish, when Canadians made intentional efforts to build neighbourly bridges, this action significantly impacted participants' sense of belonging. When neighbours came to participants' homes to introduce themselves or extend welcome, invited participants to attend events, or offered unsolicited assistance, participants described how such deliberate actions made them feel happy, settled, or more positive about their circumstances. Neighbours have been found to play a crucial role in developing a sense of belonging for newcomers and feeling part of the greater society (Elliot & Yusuf, 2014; Li et al., 2005; Ray & Preston, 2009; Wu et al., 2011). Environments that are rich in cooperation and social interaction, where the routines of everyday life are enacted, are likely to promote a sense of belonging for newcomers (Wu et al., 2011). For newcomers who are adjusting to the social culture and its corresponding norms, it is especially impacting when members of the host society initiate these neighbourly interactions (Hebbani et al., 2018). Esses et al. (2010) describe the concept of a 'welcoming community' as a collective, intentional effort by native-born community members to create an inclusive environment that facilitates newcomers' integration at the neighbourhood level. Creating a welcoming community acknowledges the agency that members of the host society have, and places initial responsibility on these individuals to recognize immigrants' value, remove barriers and promote their inclusion, and offer adaptation support (Guo & Guo, 2016). This study's findings suggest that for Syrian refugee newcomers, intentional actions and efforts from neighbours to establish social bridges, such as those characterized by the welcoming community concept, can crucially impact their sense of belonging.

Outcomes of Social Bridging: Sense of Belonging

This study found that positive social bridging interactions contributed to participants'

adaptation process and sense of belonging to their local community or Canada. The connection

between social bridges and adaptation outcomes such as employment or housing is frequently

discussed in literature (Cheung & Phillimore, 2014; D'Addario et al., 2007; Elliott & Yusuf,

2014; Hanley et al., 2018), and so this outcome is not discussed in more detail in this thesis.

Since sense of belonging is much less studied as an outcome of social bridges and is also a focus

of this study, it is discussed more extensively in this section. The previous sections have

mentioned that a sense of belonging can be a product of experiences of friendliness, intentional

connections, and neighbourly relations, emphasizing the link between sense of belonging and

social bridging. This section will explore the interaction of these two concepts in more depth. For

the purposes of this study, sense of belonging is defined as feeling accepted, secure, and "at

home" in one's local community (outside of their own ethnic group) and/or their country of

resettlement (Hou et al., 2018), as well as connected to and invested in this community and/or

country (Reitz, 2009). In studies that explore refugee integration, a sense of belonging is

consistently identified as a crucial aspect at both the community and national levels (Drolet &

Moorthi, 2018; Enns et al., 2013; Esses et al., 2010; Modood, 2013). Successful adaptation and

integration are linked to the extent to which newcomers feel accepted and choose to be part of

their new community and country (Enns et al., 2013). Participants' responses in this thesis

study, for example, indicate that sense of belonging is both important and tied to their social

bridging experiences. All participants stated that they belonged or wanted to belong to Canada,

or implied the value of belonging in the stories they shared of relationship-building with

Canadians. While newcomers generally want to belong to the host society and often report that

they do (Drolet & Moorthi, 2018; Hou et al, 2018; Schellenberg, 2004), whether or not refugees can confirm "that 'I find my place' or 'here I am' is intricately linked to their lived experiences" (Modood, 2007, p. 513), particularly their experiences of acceptance and connection amongst members of the host society.

Participants shared that friendships and connections with their neighbours made them feel accepted and at home in their community, which are components of how sense of belonging is defined in this study. Other studies have similarly identified sense of belonging as being relationally rooted- it is closely tied to the frequency and warmth of social encounters with members of the host society (Huizinga & van Hoven, 2018; Kenny et al., 2006). In studies where newcomers had more established bridges with the receiving society and felt greater acceptance, their sense of belonging tended to be greater as well (Hou et al., 2018; Pearce, 2018). Aligning with this research, social bridges were the most commonly cited factor influencing participants' sense of belonging in this thesis study, suggesting that the relationship between these factors is important.

Although the majority of participants in this study explicitly stated that they felt like they belonged, they also described a gap between their desired and actual social bridges, particularly in terms of intentional connections and neighbourly relations. Participants generally felt that Canadians were friendly, and shared that kindness and acts of welcome at the community level made them feel happy and proud to be part of these communities. Further, participants indicated that where they did experience more meaningful relationships with Canadians, these social bridges positively impacted their sense of belonging. Therefore, it is possible that for participants of this study, sense of belonging is tenuous, built primarily on a foundation of friendliness at the community level and strengthened when deeper, more meaningful social bridges form. The

findings from this study suggest that belonging is felt along a spectrum, and greater belonging

may result from more meaningful bridges with members of the host society. It is necessary,

then, to create opportunities for building meaningful relationships with members of the host

society so that sense of belonging can grow as well. With a greater sense of belonging, refugees'

integration experiences also improve (Enns et al., 2013, Modood et al, 2013).

Chapter 6: Implications, Limitations, and Conclusion

Implications

Practice and Programming Responses to Support Social Bridging

Findings from this research emphasize the importance of social bridges in the integration process, and also highlight that relationships with Canadians can be difficult to build. Supporting and enhancing social bridging for Syrian refugees is therefore a necessary step in supporting their integration. Participants felt that mutual cultural exchange was crucially important in building relationships with Canadians, and so fostering opportunities for interaction and cultural sharing is one possible response. According to the individuals in this study, the process of learning about each other's culture and norms would generate understanding and acceptance, conditions that are necessary for social bridging to take place (Huizinga & van Hoven, 2018). For example, programs or social events that bring together Canadian and Syrian families or neighbours would be ideal opportunities for engagement and sharing. Participants felt that if initiatives to promote cultural understanding were organized by government or settlement agencies, these intentional inter-ethnic engagement opportunities could enhance their personal bridging experiences. Participants agreed that improving social bridging was dependent on learning about and understanding Canadian culture from Canadians and vice versa, which could best be achieved through intentional engagement with Canadians.

Recent research on integration echoes these sentiments, stating that it is a 'two-way street' which requires effort and commitment from both newcomers and the host society. If social connection is a key aspect of integration, then it is incumbent on both newcomers and members of the host society to facilitate inter-ethnic ties (Daley, 2007; Phillimore, 2012; Puma et al., 2018). Just as participants of this study expressed, Strang & Ager's (2010) research revealed

that in order for bridges to form, there must be opportunities for meeting and exchange. This can

occur at the community level, where newcomers are invited to participate in local activities and

accept these opportunities (Esses et al., 2010). For example, coming together as neighbourhoods

to address local issues provides an ideal opportunity to learn about each other's culture and build

trust (Daley, 2007). Institutions can play a role as well, where government or settlement agency

initiatives actively promote interaction between members of the host society and newcomers.

This can be achieved through policy intended to facilitate inter-ethnic engagement and cultural

sharing (Hou et al., 2018) or 'bridging activities' such as targeted programs and presentations

(Phillimore, 2012). According to Esses et al. (2010), "meaningful contact…can lead to increased

intercultural understanding and respect. It can also increase a sense of inclusion and common

identity for both immigrants and members of the established community" (p. 70). These

outcomes are only possible when both groups participate in cultural exchange through social

bridging. In turn, these relationships and their by-products integrally nurture overall refugee

integration (Ager & Strang, 2008).

Achieving integration through a two-way process assumes that both newcomers and

members of the host society are active participants in forming bridges. Berry's (1997) conceptual

framework of acculturation strategies points out that achieving integration as the ideal

acculturation outcome requires 'mutual accommodation' on the part of both newcomers and

members of the host society. Some authors state, however, that newcomers tend to exert

disproportionately greater effort towards connecting with members of the host society out of

their desire to adapt to their new homeland, and so responsibility for advancing social integration

rests more heavily with the host society (Daley, 2007; McCoy et al., 2016). Building social

bridges ultimately requires interest and effort from both groups, yet locally held misconceptions,

negative stereotypes, or attitudes of indifference can instead result in a one-way street (Daley, 2007). In these cases, refugees' attempts to get to know their neighbours, co-workers, or other community members are not acknowledged or reciprocated, arresting the bridging process (Cook et al., 2011; Korac, 2005). While historically, the participation and responsibilities of newcomers have been the sole focus of integration policy, programming, and discourse in accordance with the "assumption that refugees have to change in order to…become 'acceptable' to the receiving society" (Korac, 2005, p. 90), addressing the host society's role in refugee integration is crucial. Studies suggest that education is a key step to countering misconceptions of refugees in the community and creating awareness around the refugee experience (Hebbani et al., 2018; Phillimore, 2012). It is incumbent on government and settlement agencies, then, to prioritize shifting perspectives within the host society and initiate their active engagement in social bridging. If meaningful, intentional social bridging with refugees were to become a norm of Canadian social culture, it has the potential to "transform all community members, reaping shared benefits and creating a new whole that is greater than the sum of its parts" (Puma et al., 2018, p. 622).

Participants shared that in general, it was difficult to form close relationships with Canadians at the personal level, particularly friendships and supportive neighbourly relations, which significantly affected their perspective of social bridging in Canada and their overall social integration. Research suggests participants' challenges are in part due to culturally rooted norms and attitudes (Forrest & Kearns, 2001, Simich et al., 2005), which are difficult to substantially shift. However, if there are more opportunities for interaction and cultural sharing, organized and supported at the institutional level, then there is the potential to transform misconceptions or attitudes of indifference towards newcomers at the personal level. According

to Daley (2007), positive cohesion across ethnic differences is difficult to achieve at the local level without initial governmental and organizational intervention. If social bridging is addressed through an organized and formal response, similar to how refugees' immediate needs such as employment and housing are supported, it can also transform the personal attitudes and perspectives of the participants in these initiatives, both Canadians and newcomers alike (Daley, 2007). Altering personal attitudes towards another ethnic group could then possibly alter actions, including towards fostering more meaningful social connections. Supporting deeper friendships and neighbourly relations to develop between individuals of different ethnic groups is difficult to directly address since relational ties are embedded in culture. However, prioritizing social bridging and cultural exchange through formal programs can have a ripple effect that penetrates personal relationships as well (Phillimore, 2012; Simich et al., 2005).

Research and Academic Responses to Support Social Bridging

The findings of this study indicate that social bridges are a valuable aspect of integration. They also suggest that there are multiple inputs, relationships with the host community, and potential outcomes which make bridging complex. As an influential guide for studying integration, it follows that Ager & Strang's (2008) description of social bridging in their Domains of Integration framework should include the various components of social bridges and reflect its complexity. Participants of this study discussed numerous conditions that influence if positive social bridging interactions take place, conveying the significance of this aspect of the bridging experience. Yet, Ager & Strang do not discuss the attitudes, conditions, or cultural contexts that can support or hinder bridging relationships. Further, although Ager & Strang identify friendliness and 'intensive involvement' (discussed in this study as intentional connections such as friendships) as important social bridges, it became clear in this study that

valued bridging interactions can extend outside of these categories for different refugee groups. For the Syrian participants of this study, another meaningful bridging relationship was neighbourly relations, which are absent from Ager & Strang's description. The findings of this study reveal that social bridging is nuanced and complex, yet Ager & Strang do not capture this.

When describing possible benefits of social bridging, Ager & Strang (2008) identify safety and security as the primary outcome of friendliness and posit that intentional connections yield domains of the markers and means indicator, such as housing or employment opportunities. In some cases, participants' bridging experiences did confirm these outcomes; however, a sense of belonging much more frequently emerged as a desired outcome of relationships with Canadians. Although Ager & Strang mention the value of belonging in achieving integration, they do not specifically connect belonging with bridging relationships. If a sense of belonging is important to refugees, supports their integration, and is derived from bridges with the host community, then belonging is another primary outcome of all types of social bridges, and a vital one. As such, discussions on integration should be inseparable from considerations of sense of belonging derived from social bridges. It is appropriate, then, to include sense of belonging as a primary outcome of social bridging in Ager & Strang's description and in other integration literature. By doing so, the link between these two concepts could become a greater focus of future study, generating deeper academic understanding on this topic.

Excluding these aspects of social bridging limits how it is conceptualized and supported. By viewing social bridging more holistically and considering its value in terms of fostering acceptance and 'home' for refugees (Hou et al., 2018), bridging relationships can begin to be prioritized in discourse and practice as well. It is necessary, then, to expand the academic lens used to understand social bridging so that it adequately represents the experiences of refugees

and encompasses the components that critically influence, constitute, or result from bridging relationships. Under these circumstances, it becomes possible to address social bridging needs more effectively, and support refugees' sense of belonging and integration.

Future Research and Limitations

Additional Questions and Topics of Study

This study provides insight on the social bridging experiences of Syrian refugees and how these encounters impact their sense of belonging and overall integration. Its findings contribute to the qualitative body of literature on social bridging for refugee groups in Canada and provide additional context to understanding this aspect of Ager & Strang's (2008) Domains of Integration Framework. There are numerous areas where further research could build on the findings of this thesis study, in terms of new questions that emerged as well as questions that it did not address.

Findings from this study provided insight on existing questions around social bridging experiences of refugees and simultaneously identified new gaps in academic understanding. This study found that neighbours were a valuable type of social bridge for refugees from a country with a collective culture in particular, in addition to friendliness and intentional connections as identified by Ager & Strang (2008). Participants' feedback also indicated that a sense of belonging is a key outcome that should be included in discussions on social bridging. It is necessary, then, to further explore both neighbourly relations and sense of belonging in connection with social bridging to better understand their interaction. Further, Ager & Strang's description of social bridging should be examined in more detail to identify additional influencing conditions, types of social bridging relationships, outcomes, or new contributing

aspects of refugees' bridging experience that should be included in discussions and conceptions of social bridging.

At the root of this study's findings is the impact of culture on social bridges, particularly the cultural differences that can inhibit if bridges form. This study briefly touches on a possible response based on the experiences of its participants, but does not explore other possibilities in depth. Further research is needed, then, to examine both formal and informal responses to narrowing the cultural gap that makes social bridging difficult, and subsequently impedes integration. A deeper examination of policy and programming responses within government as well as the settlement sector could identify how to address the cultural barriers to social bridging presented in this study. In the same way, research is needed to understand how members of the host society can be part of supporting social bridging at the individual and community levels, and what conditions are required for this to take place.

This study used a small sample size to address its research questions, and so it was not possible to compare participants' responses across demographic categories. Its findings were therefore limited to all participants as a single group, and commonalities based on particular participant characteristics were not included. It would be useful to conduct the same study with a larger group of participants in order to identify similarities and differences in experience based on language ability, age group, gender, etc. In the same way, exploring the same research questions with Syrian refugee groups in other regions of Canada or other countries would provide another layer of context to the findings from this study by comparing the influence of different local cultures and refugee integration policies on Syrians' experiences. Applying these research questions to studies with refugees from another country of origin would also provide valuable insight on how experiences of building social bridges compare across ethnicities,

potentially identifying common experiences that could then provide greater impetus for a strategic policy response.

The objective of this study was to examine social bridging from the perspective of refugees. As such, participants' experiences represent their singular viewpoint of interactions that involve two parties, refugees and Canadians. There was also an assumption, shared by both myself as the researcher as well as participants, that 'Canadians' referred to a collective Canadian culture and a group of people with uniform beliefs and behaviours. It is possible, then, that the experiences discussed in this study encompass assumptions or misunderstandings whereby Canadians' perspectives could provide needed clarity and context. Given that integration is considered to be a 'two-way street' requiring the active engagement of members of the host society, understanding their experiences deepens the collective understanding of the two-way approach to integration. With this in mind, it is critically important as well as relevant to discussions on social bridging to explore Canadians' bridging experience as well. Further research on this topic could add insight on refugees' bridging experiences, and contribute to developing and implementing effective approaches to their integration in Canada.

Study Limitations

Methodological limitations of this research are chiefly related to characteristics of participants that were recruited for the study, the process of conducting interviews, and sample size. In addition, the findings of this study may be influenced by the fact that participants had been part of the SSHRC project, an intervention that likely expanded their personal awareness of their social integration, just before this thesis study commenced. Participants may have been more optimistic about their social bridging experiences than other members of the Syrian refugee community who did not participate in the SSHRC project. However, recruitment of participants

from this project is also a strength of this thesis study. Compared to Syrian refugees who had not participated in the SSHRC project, it is probable that participants of this study were better equipped to reflect on and articulate their social bridging experiences, leading to richer data.

Inclusion requirements for participating in this study included being of Syrian ethnicity and arriving in Canada as a refugee of Syria's civil war. One participant was born in Jordan but had lived in Syria and possessed Syrian citizenship. At the time of Syria's war, this individual was living in Jordan. Another participant was born in Syria but also was living in Jordan leading up to the Syrian conflict. Nonetheless, both participants came to Canada from Jordan as Syrian refugees due to their Syrian citizenship. Consequently, these individuals did not entirely fit the inclusion criteria- one individual lacked Syrian ethnicity, and both individuals were not living in Syria leading up to or during the war. These participants' experiences and perspectives, then, portray a different lens than other participants. However, social culture is very similar between Syria and Jordan, and while in Jordan, these individuals lived in communities inhabited by other Syrian families. These factors, then, may have minimized the difference for these two participants.

The difference in native language between myself as the researcher and participants was a limitation. However, only individuals with a minimum of intermediate English-speaking skills were included as participants of this study so that all participants had sufficient ability to clearly express themselves in English. To further minimize the impacts of language difference, I asked follow-up questions during interviews to gather more detailed responses from participants. When transcribing interviews, I used an analysis journal to document any assumptions I made and consulted with participants when it was difficult to assume their meaning based on context within the transcript. Participants were also given their transcript to review and approve.

However, it remains possible that misinterpretation did occur nonetheless, which may have affected the validity of the findings.

The changes to permitted data collection activities due to COVID-19 presented a limitation to this research. Interviews had just begun when the University of Alberta mandated that in-person meetings with study participants must move to online or phone. As a result, the first four interviews were conducted face-to-face, and the remaining eight interviews were held virtually via WhatsApp video calling. While seeing each other was still possible using the WhatsApp platform, the way that interviews were conducted was nevertheless altered and inconsistent across all participants. Given that the interviews remained the same in every other aspect, it is not expected that this difference had a significant impact on the richness of the interviews.

The sample size of this study was small, which made it difficult to compare findings between demographic groups. With more participants, it may have been possible to identify distinctions based on gender or age. The findings of this study were therefore limited to all participants as a single group, and commonalities based on particular participant characteristics were not included. However, the objectives of this study were to examine social bridging from the perspective of adults in general, and the sample size was sufficient to accomplish this. Since this study examined the social bridging experiences of Syrian refugees as a specific group, these findings also cannot be associated with other refugee or ethnic groups, whose experiences may yield different results.

The scope of this study was limited to social bridging as it relates to refugee integration on an individual scale. Therefore, it was not possible to examine the impacts of inter-ethnic relationships on whole communities or society. Given that this study endeavoured to understand

refugees' personal experiences of social bridging, it did not examine in great detail government responses or policies that influence social bridging in Canada. Extensive research exists around social bridging as a policy outcome aimed towards promoting social cohesion or multiculturalism (Abu-Laban, 1998; Modood, 2013; Spoonley et al., 2005; Zetter et al., 2006). These studies provide a macro-level perspective on social bridging and integration as components of the larger landscape of Canada's social fabric, which this thesis cannot directly contribute to. Instead, by focusing on the personal experiences of refugees, this study provides insight on the individual impact of social bridges and can contribute effectively to a micro-level understanding of inter-ethnic relationship building for refugee individuals and groups, which is also relevant to the discussion on integration.

Conclusion

The civil war in Syria caused an upheaval to all aspects of life for its citizens, exacerbated by their forced migration and resettlement in foreign countries around the world. In Canada, the arrival of more than 39,000 Syrian refugees within thirteen months (IRCC, 2019) catalyzed extraordinary policy and programming efforts from levels of government and settlement agencies to address their immediate needs such as employment, housing, and language support. However, this left other aspects of their settlement and integration, notably their social integration, under-prioritized and minimally resourced. Ager & Strang's (2008) Domains of Integration framework provides the most in-depth description of social bridging in the context of refugee integration and is the most common theoretical lens applied to studies on this topic, streamlining how integration is conceived and defined in academic circles as well as addressed by policies and programs. Their description of social bridging, one of the ten domains of their framework, identifies friendliness and intentional connections as important types of

bridging relationships that can support refugees' sense of safety and ability to meet their immediate needs. However, Ager & Strang offer little additional context or detail of social bridging. In particular, these authors' research does not associate social bridging with developing a sense of belonging, although other studies suggest that relationships with members of the host society contribute to refugees feeling included, accepted, and 'at home'. Yet, the relationship between social bridging and sense of belonging in qualitative research is much less studied.

A qualitative descriptive methodology and an engaged approach to research were applied in this study to explore Syrian refugee adults' experiences of building social bridges in Canada, and how these bridges impact their sense of belonging and overall integration. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in English with twelve adult members of the Syrian refugee community who were also participants of the SSHRC project, and thematic analysis was used to interpret and organize the data into findings. This study found that: social bridging is integrally influenced by the conditions that shape if social bridges form; neighbourly relations are another valued social bridge in addition to friendliness and intentional connections; and social bridging promotes both adaptation and sense of belonging outcomes for refugees. These findings, and this study overall, address a knowledge gap around what social bridging means to Syrian refugees and the ways it can support their successful integration. The insights that emerged from this study contribute to a better academic understanding of Syrian refugee integration, social bridging, and the connection between social bridging and sense of belonging. A more comprehensive understanding of these concepts from a qualitative lens can also, in turn, influence programming and practice outcomes at the institutional level, particularly within settlement agencies. Building on other studies in the field of refugee social integration and social

bridging, this study establishes an impetus to explore social bridging in greater depth, offering

new questions and avenues for further examination and application.

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FACULTY OF EXTENSION

MASTER'S OF ARTS IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

10230 Jasper Avenue

Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T5J 4P6

Tel: 780.492.3116

Fax: 780.492.2000

extnregistration@ualberta.ca

Appendix A: Study Information Letter and Consent Forms

Study Information Letter

Study Title: Exploring Social Bridging and Integration Amongst the Syrian Refugee Community

Research Investigator:
Mischa Taylor
Faculty of Extension
10230 Jasper Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta T5J 4P6
mischa@ualberta.ca
(780) 716-5761

Supervisor:
Rebecca Gokiert
Faculty of Extension
10230 Jasper Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta T5J 4P6
rgokiert@ualberta.ca
(780) 492-6297

What is the study?

You are invited to take part in discussions about your experiences building relationships with Canadian-born individuals. You have been asked to participate in this research because of your participation in the ADAPT Community Learning for Empowerment Groups (CLEG) project. The purpose of this research is to: understand how relationships between Syrian newcomers and Canadian-born individuals contribute to a sense of belonging; understand if relationships with Canadians affects Syrian newcomers' integration into life in Canada; and identify resources that help or prevent building relationships with Canadians.
The results of this study will be used in support of my thesis research. Before you make a decision, I will review this form with you. You are encouraged to ask questions if you feel anything needs to be made clearer. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Why am I doing this study?

More than 5,000 newcomers have arrived in Edmonton from Syria since 2015. Although research has been done about Syrians' experiences finding housing or employment and learning English, less is known about how Syrian newcomers have built relationships with non-Syrians living in Canada such as their neighbours, co-workers, and others. This research will explore relationships between Syrians and Canadian-born individuals to learn about how these contribute to feelings of belonging, and integration into Canadian society.

Who and what is involved?

Syrian newcomer adults (age 21 and over) will participate in 1-2 individual interviews that are approximately 60 minutes long. All interview participants will then be invited to participate in one of two discussion groups where the findings from the interviews will be shared with participants for their feedback and for more explanation if needed. No new data will be collected during the discussion groups. Each discussion group will be approximately 1-2 hours in length.

The study will benefit you by giving you the opportunity to share your experiences, as well as the opportunity to teach and inform the academic, government, and policy communities about how to better meet the needs of refugees and newcomers in general. It is also possible that there will not be any benefits to participants. The interviews or discussion groups may possibly bring up memories of experiences in Syria, transition countries, or Canada that are painful or traumatic. There will be resources for counselling services and other supports available at the interviews and discussion groups which can be used if needed. It is also possible that participating in the discussion group will lead to loss of privacy around personal opinions and experiences. Although no new data will be collected in the discussion groups, participants will be sharing their feedback on the findings from the study, which could reveal their personal opinions on the research topic. As such, discussion group participants are not obligated to share any feedback that they are not comfortable disclosing in a group setting. Participants may also choose to share their feedback privately with the researcher if they are not comfortable sharing in a group setting. All discussion group participants will be reminded and encouraged to maintain confidentiality outside of the discussion groups as well.

Your participation in the interviews and discussion group is completely voluntary. Even if you agree to be in the study, you can change your mind and withdraw at any time with no consequences to you. For one-on-one interviews, if you wish to have your individual interview removed from the data you are welcome to do this at any time until two days after the discussion group. Since no new data will be collected during the discussion groups, there will not be data to withdraw. However, discussion group participants may withdraw their participation by not to sharing their feedback or by leaving the discussion at any time.

Costs and Compensation

There will not be any cost for participating in this study. A $20 gift card to Safeway will be given to all participants after each interview is completed. If you choose to withdraw from the study, you will still receive this compensation*.* Light refreshments will also be offered to participants at the discussion groups.

Confidentiality & Anonymity

The information that you provide will be kept private. No names or other identifying details will be attached to the information or in any reports from the study. During the interviews, participants are not obligated to answer any of the questions. The interviews and discussion groups will be audio-recorded and/or type-recorded to ensure accuracy of the information and will remain anonymous and confidential at all times. The data from the interviews will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my office and will only be available to myself and my supervisor.

The results of this study will be used in support of my thesis research. We may publish the overall results from this study in scholarly journals and present results at conferences, however, individual participant comments will not be identifiable. We will keep the data for a minimum of 5 years and then the data will be destroyed in a way that ensures privacy and confidentiality. If the data are used for other studies in the future, ethics approval will be obtained.

Version: March 9, 2020   Pro00096273

The results from this study will be summarized and shared with all participants as well as settlement and refugee serving agencies in Edmonton.

Contact Information

Thank-you very much for considering this request. If you have any questions or would like more information about the study please contact Mischa Taylor at (780) 716-5761 or mischa@ualberta.ca

The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researchers.

10230 Jasper Avenue

Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T5J 4P6

Tel: 780.492.3116

Fax: 780.492.2000

extnregistration@ualberta.ca

Interview Consent Form

Study Title: Exploring Social Bridging and Integration Amongst the Syrian Refugee Community

Research Investigator:	Supervisor:
Mischa Taylor	Rebecca Gokiert
Faculty of Extension	Faculty of Extension
10230 Jasper Avenue	10230 Jasper Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta T5J 4P6	Edmonton, Alberta T5J 4P6
mischa@ualberta.ca	rgokiert@ualberta.ca
(780) 716-5761	(780) 492-6297

Consent Statement:
I have read the information letter and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form. I will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

Are you willing to participate in an interview?

If yes, please print and sign your name:

I_____ consent to join in the above study.
          (First, Last)

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please provide a phone number or email address where you may be reached.

Phone Number: _____

Email: _____

Best Time to Reach You: _____ Mornings _____ Afternoon _____ Evening

FACULTY OF EXTENSION

MASTER'S OF ARTS IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

10230 Jasper Avenue

Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T5J 4P6

Tel: 780.492.3116

Fax: 780.492.2000

extnregistration@ualberta.ca

Verbal Interview Consent Form

Study Title: Exploring Social Bridging and Integration Amongst the Syrian Refugee Community

Research Investigator: Supervisor:
Mischa Taylor   Rebecca Gokiert
Faculty of Extension   Faculty of Extension
10230 Jasper Avenue   10230 Jasper Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta T5J 4P6   Edmonton, Alberta T5J 4P6
mischa@ualberta.ca   rgokiert@ualberta.ca
(780) 716-5761   (780) 492-6297

Consent Statement:
I have read the information letter and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form. I will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

Are you willing to participate in an interview?

By choosing to continue with the interview, you are granting consent to participate in this study. The Research Investigator will print your name and the date on your behalf.

I_____ consent to join in the above study.
        (First, Last)

Date: _____

Please provide a phone number or email address where you may be reached.

Phone Number: _____

Email: _____

Best Time to Reach You: _____ Mornings _____ Afternoon _____ Evening

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Individual Interview Questions

Exploring Social Bridging and Integration Amongst the Syrian Refugee Community

Information about these interview questions: These questions give you an idea what I would like to learn about your experiences building relationships with Canadians or others outside of the Syrian community. Interviews will be one-to-one and will be open-ended (not just "yes or no" answers). Because of this, the exact wording may change a little. Sometimes I will use other short questions to make sure I understand what you told me or if I need more information when we are talking, such as: ("*So, you are saying that …?*"), to get more information ("*Please tell me more?"),* or to learn what you think or feel about something ("*Why do you think that is…?").*

You do not have to answer any questions that you don't want to respond to for any reason.

1. Information about you:
    - Your age range: 18-30; 31-50; 51 or over
    - Tell me about your family: Married? Children? How many children? How many of your immediate family members (spouse, parents, children) are here with you in Canada?
    - What is your cultural background? (Kurdish, Palestinian-Syrian, Druze, etc.)
    - How long have you been in Canada?
    - Through which resettlement stream did you come to Canada (GAR, PSR, etc.)?
    - In which city or region did you live in Syria?
    - What was your route to settle in Edmonton- Which transit countries did you go through, and which other places did you live in Canada before settling in Edmonton?

2. I am interested to understand more about your experiences getting to know Canadians and building relationships with them. This could mean people that you are friendly with but aren't friends, such as your neighbours, the bus driver, the clerk at your grocery store, your co-workers, etc. This could also mean people that you would consider friends- those that you would invite to your house or go to theirs, share important experiences or information with, etc. Do you have any questions or thoughts about this?

3. What does the word, 'community' mean to you?

4. What were your relationships with acquaintances like in Syria? For example, your neighbours, co-workers, or the bus driver?

5. What were your relationships with your friends like in Syria?

6. Can you tell me about your relationships with acquaintances here in Edmonton?
      a) Which people in your community or daily routine are you friendly with?
      b) What are some examples of how you interact with them?
      c) Has this relationship changed with time? How?

7. Can you tell me about your relationships with Canadian friends (non-Syrian) here in Edmonton?
      a) Which non-Syrian people in your life would you consider to be friends?
      b) What are some examples of how you interact with them?
      c) Has this relationship changed with time? How?

8. What have been some of the challenges of building relationships with Canadians, both acquaintances and friends?

9. When you think about your relationships with Canadians, how do they make you feel?
a) Do you think that having or not having relationships with Canadians affects how you feel about your life in Canada?
b) Do you feel that you belong in Canada?
      b) Do you think having relationships with Canadians is important? Why or why not?

10. How have your relationships with Canadians helped you in your life here in Canada?

11. What might be some ways that it could become easier to build relationship with Canadians?
      a) What could Syrians do to make it easier?
      b) What could Canadians do to make it easier?
      c) What could settlement agencies do to make it easier?

12. Is there anything else that you would like to add about your experience building relationships with Canadians? Is there anything else that you think I need to know about this topic?

Appendix C: Condensed Analysis Summary

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Definition	Illustrative Quote
Conditions that influence social bridging	Attitudes and actions	The perspectives and subsequent actions of Syrians and Canadians that influence if social bridges form.	"I hadn't seen [my co-worker] for a month at that time, and I had a message from her, 'Hello Ibrahim, how are you doing, I'm thinking about you'. Do you know, you are feeling like there is someone who is asking about you, who is supporting you, who is there if you need them… this is enough for me." "I think Syrians like to invite people for dinner. This is the best way for us to start to have relationships."
	Personal conditions	Circumstances and conditions at the individual level that affect if social bridges form.	"I know a Syrian family who came through sponsorship from maybe a group of five or some family. I feel that they are more lucky than me actually. I had no one to support me at all when I came."
	External conditions	Circumstances and conditions external to the individual that affect if social bridges form.	"Here in [name of town], it's very easy. But in Edmonton, I think it's a little different. Because it's a big city, and so many newcomers." "My classmates are my friends. Every day when we finished class, we talk to each other online."
	Language ability	The influence of English language skills on social bridges.	"As you have no English skills, you will take a step back from Canadian society. 'I do respect your culture…but I can't communicate with you'. Even with the government requirements to have LINC 4 [English language ability to become a Canadian

			citizen], which is not enough to build healthy relationships."
	Social culture	The influence of differences in Syrian and Canadian social cultural norms and lack of cultural knowledge on social bridging.	"For us, when we came here, it was, you know, a strange culture. But now, we are used to living with it, you know? I'm good with everything." "If I want to visit you, I have to contact you a week before, two weeks before… [In Syria], no, I'm coming. He or she just informs me or I inform him, 'I am coming'. It's totally different. And I know other Syrians here are struggling with this issue. Maybe it will be an obstacle for integration into Canadian society. Yeah, it's important because the culture is different."
Social bridging interactions	Friendliness	Syrians' experiences of friendly encounters with Canadians in the community. These social bridges are characterized by low levels of commitment and closeness, and include experiences of welcome from the community.	"Whenever you call, whenever you speak, whenever you go to any office, you see that everyone is helpful with you. In the insurance company, in the school, in the supermarket, in the hospital, in the clinic, all people working are kind."
	Intentional connections	Syrians' experiences of building intentional connections such as friendships with Canadians. These social bridges are characterized by higher levels of	"I met a friend here in Canada, he was born here… Sometimes we watch WWE or watch a movie together." "Maybe in [Canadian] culture, their priorities are maybe not making relationships. Their

		commitment and closeness.	priorities are maybe just to be good people with others, without making relationships."
	Neighbourly relations	Syrians' experiences establishing neighbourly relations.	"Canadians don't like to keep in touch with their neighbours." "When we arrived in [city], we found our neighbours and very important people at the door of our home. They were waiting for us. They welcomed us, and we felt it was a very, very warm welcome."
Outcomes of social bridging	Sense of belonging	Participants' feelings of belonging to their community and Canada, and the impact of social bridges on their sense of belonging.	"[My relationship with my neighbour made me feel] not really [that I] belonged to Canada, but belonged to the community that I was living in. But now, of course I feel that I belong in Canada. At that time when I came and I met [neighbour], she helped me to stay comfortable in the atmosphere around me."
	Adaptation	Impacts of social bridging on participants' adaptation experience and process.	"I think if I had a Canadian friend since I came to Canada, everything I learned through four years it would be easy for me to learn in just two years or less. It takes a long time for me to learn everything just through school."