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Résumé de l'article

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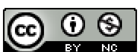

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Refuge

Coping with Stressors by Drawing on Social Supports: The Experiences of Adolescent Syrian Refugees in Canada

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ABSTRACT
This study explores how teenage Syrian refugees use their social networks to cope with stressors. Through interviews with nine youth aged 16 to 18 living in Ontario, Canada, stressors related to pre- and post-migration emerged. Family, peers, school staff, and organizations were identified as social networks, each having unique reasons why they were selected. Coping was categorized as individualistic or collectivistic. Teenage Syrian refugees draw upon social resources to navigate situations they are faced with, and cultural values influence the stress and coping process. Findings have implications for mental health care providers and policy-makers focused on migrant resettlement.

KEYWORDS
refugee; youth; coping

RESUMÉ
Cette étude explore la manière dont les adolescents réfugiés syriens utilisent leurs réseaux sociaux afin de faire face aux facteurs de stress. À partir d'entrevues menées auprès de neuf jeunes âgés de 16 à 18 ans en Ontario, Canada, des facteurs de stress pré- et post-migratoires ont émergé. La famille, les pairs, le personnel scolaire et les organisations ont été identifiés comme des réseaux sociaux, chacun ayant des raisons uniques pour lesquelles ils ont été sélectionnés. L'adaptation a été catégorisée comme individualiste ou collectiviste. Les adolescents réfugiés syriens s'appuient sur des ressources sociales pour traverser les situations auxquelles ils font face, et les valeurs culturelles ont une influence sur le stress et le processus d'adaptation. Les résultats ont des implications pour les prestataires de soins en santé mentale et les décideurs qui se penchent sur la réinstallation des migrants.

KEYWORDS
réfugiés; jeunesse; adaptation

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INTRODUCTION

The 2011 Syrian civil war led to the displacement of 5.6 million people into neighbouring countries and 6.9 million internally; more than half of them were under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2022). For many, experiences of war and migration are fraught with stressors that impact mental health and well-being (Almoshmosh et al., 2020; de Lima Sá et al., 2022; Hassan et al., 2016). This includes pre-migration stressors, such as the war itself, loss of loved ones, and exposure to violence, but also post-migration stressors including language barriers, culture shock, and discrimination (Hassan et al., 2016; Scharpf et al., 2021). Adolescent-specific migration stressors include, for example, learning how to navigate a new school system and fitting into new peer group (Guo et al., 2019; Scharpf et al., 2021; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015; Walker & Zuberi, 2019). Syrian refugee youth are arguably more vulnerable than adults to developing negative mental health outcomes from the effects of stressors occurring during the sensitive development period of adolescence, when many mental health disorders emerge and certain psychosocial milestones are to be met (Hassan et al., 2016; Kessler et al., 2009).

For many Syrian youth, leaving their country has also meant being uprooted from their social networks, including extended family, religious communities, and friends (de Lima Sá et al., 2022; Hanley et al., 2018; Hassan et al., 2016; Scharpf et al., 2021). Social support is important in psychological well-being as it buffers against stress and, in doing so, plays a protective role (Coyne & Downey, 1991; Dubois et al., 1992). Having access to various forms of social support (e.g., familial, peer, community) provides an individual with emotional support in addition to practical and tangible supports, such as financial assistance (Coyne & Downey, 1991; Dubois et al., 1992). The fractured social networks among Syrian refugee youth have had negative implications for their mental health, increasing risks of loneliness and even feelings of survivor's guilt (de Lima Sá et al., 2022; Goveas & Coomarasamy, 2018; Hassan et al., 2016). To mitigate these risks and promote protective factors, an important consideration in resettling refugees is the availability of support networks. Several studies indicate that among Syrian refugee youth, making friends within school settings and being able to rely on family constitute important social support resources in the face of settlement-related stressors (Alfadhli & Drury, 2018; Alfadhli et al., 2019; Scharpf et al., 2021).

Literature on Syrian refugee youth mental health connects resettlement experiences and stressors (Guo et al., 2019; Hanley et al., 2018; Massfeller & Hamm, 2019; Scharpf et al., 2021; Walker & Zuberi, 2019). However, a paucity of research examines coping strategies among this population, and therefore, further exploration may be helpful in understanding how to reduce negative mental health outcomes and promote positive well-being. **Coping** can be described as an individual utilizing specific behaviours to manage demands of their environment that they perceive to be taxing (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). An individual may draw on several coping strategies in response to stressors, as some may be more efficacious than others (Aldwin, 2007). Culture shapes the way an individual views their world, what is regarded as a stressor, and responses to stressors (Aldwin, 2007; Chan et al., 2016; Kuo, 2010; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This study explores some of the coping strategies that teenage Syrian refugees employ in the context of stressors experienced, with a focus on social support systems highlighted as a method of coping.

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Theoretical Framework

We employed a qualitative research methodology rooted in cultural phenomenology (Csordas, 2015) to explore how teenage Syrian refugees use social support systems to cope with stressors. This approach seeks to examine this phenomenon through the individual's lived experiences with meanings attributed to them by their own cultural values (Csordas, 2015).

The main theoretical framework employed in this study was the socio-cultural model of stress, coping, and adaptation (SMSCA) (Aldwin, 2007). The SMSCA posits that stress and coping make up an interactional process with embedded cultural values. This model has four distinct areas: the stressor that occurs, the appraisal of the stressor, the coping behaviours employed, and the resources available to the individual (Aldwin, 2007). The SMSCA may help us to understand how teenage Syrian refugees use their social support systems to cope with stressors by emphasizing how cultural values play a role in their responses.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was utilized as a guiding framework for the interview guide and also for analyzing the interviews (Smith et al., 2009). The main goal of IPA is to gain an understanding of an individual's lived experiences through making meaning of the shared account (Smith et al., 2009). However, in investigating a research question, IPA also recognizes the significance of participants' perceived differences regarding a phenomenon. IPA is recommended for smaller sample sizes, does not centre on quantifying accounts, and, due to the intersubjective nature and role of the researcher, does not require a secondary coder (Smith et al., 2009). In the context of the study, IPA worked well in helping us understand how teenage Syrian refugees use their social support systems to cope with stressors.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants and Setting

Participants were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling (Smith et al., 2009). Because of government restrictions due to COVID-19, various channels of recruitment were utilized. Recruitment flyers were emailed to community centres in Ontario that provide resettlement support to Canadian newcomers or actively engage with Syrian refugee youth. The primary investigator contacted local religious and cultural community leaders who she had personal ties with. Youth were included in the study if they were between the ages of 13 and 18, were living in Ontario, were currently enrolled in secondary school, and were living with their family. Potential participating youth had to be comfortable speaking English. In addition, potential participants had to have arrived in Canada within the one to three years of their participation in the interview. Participants who expressed verbal interest were provided information about the study, and once they gave consent to participate, they were emailed the consent form. Participants were given opportunities to ask further questions. Once their signature was received, they were asked to schedule a time for the interview. As all participants were 16 years old and older, parental signatures were not required.

This research study was approved by the Hamilton Integrated Research Ethics Board (10596). The interviews were conducted in April 2020, a month after Ontario's public health measures had been implemented due to COVID-19.

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Data Collection

The interview guide was developed by the research team, who had extensive experience with refugees, youth, and individuals with varying levels of English proficiency. The interview was informed by IPA, as the goal was to facilitate an interaction where participants could share experiences in their own words (Smith et al., 2009). Semi-structured interviews leave room for exploration while remaining standardized through the inclusion of core questions. Three areas of interest were explored within the interviews: stressors, social support, and coping.

The interviews were audio-only, conducted through the videoconferencing platform Zoom. Audio was recorded with each participant's permission, and the interviews lasted 40 minutes on average. The interviewer greeted participants, explained their rights as researchers, and reiterated what the interview entailed as a form of informed and ongoing consent. Interviewees were given opportunities to ask questions before once again consenting to participate. Once the interview started, they were asked basic demographic questions and were asked to complete an activity sheet. In this phase, participants were invited to recall and note down three stressful events they experienced in the past. The activity sheet asked the participants to identify who helped them and what they did to cope during the stressful events. After participants completed the activity sheet, the interviewer asked them about each event separately to ensure understanding and gather more detail. Due to the potentially distressing content of the study and to maintain ongoing consent, at several points within the interview, participants were asked if they wished to take a break or continue participating. Participants were compensated with $20 CAD and community service hours, and they were given a resource sheet listing available psychosocial services.

Data Analysis

The primary investigator transcribed interviews verbatim. The data were analyzed through guidelines established for IPA by the primary investigator alone (Smith et al., 2009). First, the audio of each interview was played to reacquaint the primary investigator with the content. Second, the interview transcript was read over several times, and during this process, similar to a free-textual analysis, notes were made regarding the content and language (Smith et al., 2009). As the principal investigator is from a different migration and ethnocultural background from participants, she exercised bracketing as a reflexivity practice by making notes to acknowledge bias due to one's own positionality and privilege. Third, notes were examined, and preliminary themes were extrapolated, along with related quotes that represented them. In this step, the themes were mapped based on their interconnected relationships and were clustered into hierarchies that were superordinate or subordinate (Smith et al., 2009). The next step involved going through the other transcripts following the same steps. Last, a final table of themes was produced that encompassed items from all interviews. The themes were selected based not only on their frequency but also on their capacity to help further illuminate the participants' understanding of the experiences they shared (Smith et al., 2009).

Limitations

The current study is not without limitations. The participants made up a homogenous group (e.g., migration status, religion, age group, and geographical location) and, as

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such, may not be representative of other Syrian refugee youth experiences in Canada and beyond. While recognizing that the IPA approach relies on smaller sample sizes to focus on depth (Smith et al., 2009), the study's results may still be generalizable to similar contexts. COVID-19 created other limitations as the interviews had to be conducted online; thus, access to the internet and an appropriate device potentially prevented some participants from partaking in the study. As participants took place in the interview from their own homes, their abilities to be forthcoming about certain experiences may have been affected, in case they felt they were being listened to by family members. For a more in-depth account of the ethical and methodological challenges of the broader study, consult Salam, Nouvet, and Schwartz (2022b).

RESULTS

A total of nine participants (six male and three female) were interviewed. All participants were government-assisted refugees between the ages of 16 and 18 and had been in Canada for an average of three years and five months.

From the interviews, a total of 9 main themes and 23 subthemes emerged (**Table 1**). The themes and corresponding subthemes are described in the sections below, alongside related quotes from the participants.

Area 1: Stressors

Participants identified various stressors situated around pre-migration and post-migration challenges. The three main themes or stressors were the events of the war, acculturation in Canada, and navigating the Canadian education system. Among these themes, related subthemes also emerged. Each of these stressors is presented below, in a chronological sequence from pre-migration (the war) to post-migration (acculturation in Canada and navigating the Canadian education system).

The Events of the War

Only two participants elected to share their experiences of living through the Syrian civil war as a stressful event. They discussed their experiences and expressed that the war had severely marked their lives, as exemplified in the following quote:

> So, like, the war I had to go through, like there is a war in Syria right now. I was seven, so, like, I had to leave my country when I was seven and a half, so yeah. And I can't forget the memories, people dead and stuff, that I had to see. I feel bad for them.
>
> *(P9, 16 years old).*

Two subthemes were identified within the major theme of war: constant moving and concern for those left behind. How and through what specific impacts the events of the war came to constitute stressors for the participants becomes more apparent within these subthemes.

Constant Moving

Two participants described how their experience of the war was a stressful event due to having to constantly move. In the following quote, a participant highlighted his safety concerns in this context, which could be succinctly summarized by his use of the phrase "you live today or die here." He described the cumulative effects of constantly moving being mentally and physically stressful:

> And plus, you are escaping because you are trying to survive on your own, that's why it was very stressful because you don't know when you're going to die. It's literally either you live today or die here. That was the one that was very stressful, just like the idea of moving, it is both mentally and physically stressful.
>
> *(P8, 18 years old).*

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Table 1
List of themes

Area explored in interviews	Theme	Subtheme
Stressors	The events of the war	Constant moving
		Concern for those left behind
	Acculturation in Canada	Language
		Discrimination
	Navigating the Canadian education system	First day of school
		Quality of education
		COVID-19's impact
Social support	Family	Wisdom
		Intuition
		Exclusivity
		Personal hesitancy
	Peers	Shared identity
		Experience
		Rejection
	School staff	Duty
		Friendliness
	Organizations	Availability
Coping	Collectivistic coping	Managing impressions
		Turning to God and Islam
		Seeking comfort
	Individualistic coping	Finding opportunities
		Escaping reality
		Letting go

A 16-year-old participant highlighted how constant moving was a stressful experience because of its social implications. He described himself as a social and outgoing person, and therefore his inability to maintain friendships due to having to abruptly move constantly was a particular source of stress:

> Not having many [friends], … like at school, every school that you have to move to, like, after six months you start making friends and then you have to leave and go to a new school. And then try to make new friends, … it started getting annoying, and then I started not making many friends.
>
> *(P9, 16 years old).*

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Concerns for Those Left Behind

In detailing his accounts of experiencing the Syrian civil war, one participant reflected on how memories of war remained present in his thoughts because other family members remained behind in Syria. Relatedly, another participant expressed concern regarding "her people" after a classmate said something negative regarding Syrian refugees. This highlights how moving past traumatic memories contributes to stress for Syrian refugee adolescents who have come to Canada:

> Because, you know, all the memories. How could you forget about them? Like, your family is still living there. Right now, in Canada, I don't have anyone else but my parents and siblings, and I only have one uncle in [REMOVED], so he lives far away from here, and all the others live in Syria.
>
> *(P9, 16 years old).*

> I was so emotional, I cried, and so sad. 'Cause it's my people, they're suffering in the country, and people are talking bad about them.
>
> *(P3, 16 years old).*

Acculturation in Canada

The most salient superordinate theme and stressor shared by all participants related to acculturation. Participants discussed how adjusting to a new life in Canada brought challenges for them. Acculturation includes two subthemes: language and discrimination. Such difficulties were not experienced by youth as trivial matters. In the following quote, it is clear how stark a difference life in Canada was to this participant:

> Cause, you know, I didn't feel comfortable, I didn't feel in my own, like, I didn't feel safe. It's not my own country, like, it's a completely different country from my home. A different language, different streets, different culture, community. … Everything is different.
>
> *(P3, 16 years old).*

Youth described how such differences can result in feeling uncomfortable to the point where they do not experience a sense of safety or security despite their arrival in a new country.

Language

For all participants, learning English was a predominant acculturation-related stressor given their unfamiliarity with the language. Many participants stated that this stressor arose upon their entry into the Canadian education system, given that the language spoken by their peers and the staff was English, and English was the curriculum's language as well—a language unfamiliar to participants upon initial arrival to Canada. Such language difficulties were an additional stressor facing youth who had to adapt to a new educational system. The following quote indicates that not knowing English made it difficult for this participant to navigate the already-new environment of the education system:

> It wasn't really an event, but when I first came here, my worst stress was the language. I really didn't know any word in English, and when I went to school, I didn't know nobody there, and when the teacher was talking to me, I didn't understand anything.
>
> *(P3, 16 years old).*

This sentiment was echoed by the other participants, who also shared that they felt like they could not participate in their classes or even make friends because of the language barrier, contributing to a sense of isolation and decreasing engagement in developmentally appropriate activities.

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Discrimination

Three participants shared stressful events that involved experiencing discrimination in Canada. The common thread among them was that these events were described as targeting their Muslim faith and identities as racialized youth. Despite having newly arrived, participants were able to label racist acts and language that they and their families had experienced and describe how this contributed to increased isolation, a decreased sense of safety, and a sense of being "othered" in society. Participants contrasted this experience with their experiences in the Middle East, where they did not experience the same kind of racism and discrimination. One participant shared an instance highlighting a time he was discriminated against in a "racist act," which involved him and his family being singled out as Muslims by his hostile neighbours:

> OK, so event three was a racist act from a neighbour. They—we, like, we are Muslims, and my family is Muslim, and when we first, like, got here, … one of our neighbours, they put a sign in the window that said, "Islam will fall." So, we thought, like, we thought, it was going to be dangerous, and we did not know what to do. So, we stayed at home, we tried not to go out for, like, a week, and tried not to get in touch with them or see them.
>
> *(P7, 18 years old).*

Another participant stated that she was aware of the negative sentiment towards Muslims in Canada before she even arrived:

> I was in Jordan and that kind of thing didn't happen there, but when you come here, you heard about a lot of people having racist, like, other people had racist people dealing with them, and … like, had that treatment for being Muslims.
>
> *(P4, 17 years old).*

Navigating the Canadian Education System

Given the participants' ages and the importance of education in their lives, it is not surprising that specific discussion of participants' experiences in the Canadian education system was a particular area of focus. In addition to the noted language barriers, youth described challenges navigating the education system in Canada. The fact that the education system was different and that participants did not understand how the system in Canada functioned was identified as a source of stress. Three subthemes emerged that helped to clarify specific stressful aspects of navigating an unfamiliar education system: the first day of school, quality of education, and COVID-19's impact on education.

First Day of School

Participants recalled their first day of school, either grade school or high school, as being a particularly stressful experience. What contributed most to this becoming a stressful event for all was not having any friends. In the following quote, it was clear that the lack of friends was a "scary" thing for this participant, making her experience of navigating the education system quite difficult:

> So, event two … was my first day in elementary school. That day was so stressful because I didn't know the school. I didn't know what was the dress code at school. I had no idea how to speak anything, I knew couple of words, but that wasn't helpful to interact with other people. And I had no friends, that was the most scariest thing ever, like, you go to a whole new country without, like, knowing any friends, no family, you know what I mean? Like, you feel stranger. That day was so stressful.
>
> *(P4, 17 years old).*

Quality of Education

For some participants, one element that made navigating the Canadian education

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system a stressful experience was the perceived low quality of education itself. Two participants reported being unsatisfied with what was available in terms of academics or extracurricular activities. Both felt they needed to switch schools to reach their future academic goals. In the following quotes, participants describe important elements that were missing in their current school:

> For my other event, it was my guidance counsellor, he didn't let me join the academic math course, which I wanted. Yeah, he claimed that there was not enough space in the class. That wasn't true.
>
> *(P6, 16 years old).*

> I didn't want to stay in other schools because we moved to a new house and it was too far from my new house. So, as I told you I moved to [REMOVED] a couple of months, yeah, but I didn't like it there, there were a lot of fights, and you know, the school was too old, they didn't have, I was trying to get into the robotics team, and they didn't have a robotics team there. So, as I heard [REMOVED] had a robotics program, … that's why I went there.
>
> *(P1, 17 years old).*

COVID-19's Impact

Given that these interviews occurred during the early months of the pandemic, it was not surprising that two participants explicitly mentioned how COVID-19 made their educational experiences stressful. These participants' source of stress stemmed primarily from difficulties navigating the shift to a fully online learning environment and the way in which they perceived this to limit their academic success at a crucial time in their academic careers. The shift to online learning created challenges in terms of both submitting their assignments and getting the help they needed from their guidance counsellors to prepare post-secondary applications. These students explained that they were in their final semester of high school—a time when a drop in performance could impact post-secondary scholarships. The following quotes indicate how online learning made it difficult for these participants to fulfill their goals to get certain scholarships:

> So, he basically gave me a zero in the end. This was crucial for my average because I had a 97 and that brought me down to, like, a 94. And, like, yeah, I'm aiming to keep up my average so I can get the scholarship I want in university. Yeah, that's what made me stressed.
>
> *(P5, 18 years old).*

> One of the things that also made me mad is that I actually missed the deadline for applying to [REMOVED] scholarship, because applying to [REMOVED] scholarship helps a lot, like, with your application to med school, because I want to apply to become a doctor later on.
>
> *(P8, 18 years old).*

Area 2: Social Support

During the interviews, participants were asked to identify an individual they sought support from regarding a stressor they had experienced. Four groups of social supports emerged: family, friends, school staff, and organizations. Participants indicated reasons why they sought the selected individual's help and also described how that person helped them navigate the stressful event. The importance of the perceived availability of social supports cannot be understated, as many participants indicated that the selected helpful individuals played important roles, such as providing guidance or resources. In the following quote, it becomes apparent that having someone to rely on during stressful events provided this participant the support they needed:

> I felt, like, relieved, when you talk to someone about your problems, just like when you're stressed out, and you know that they're there for you, and they

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> support you. So, like, I felt better because I know they care about me and support me.
>
> *(P2, 16 years old).*

Family

Family was identified as a key source of social support for many participants. It is important to note that "family" did not encompass one's immediate family only but included extended family members, such as uncles, cousins, and grandparents. Participants attributed their close relationship with their family member as a primary reason for why it was easy for them to seek out support from that person. When describing their experiences with their family, four subthemes emerged: wisdom, intuition, exclusivity, and potential hesitancy.

Wisdom

When discussing the reason they had selected a family member for support, participants often used the word "wise." The following quote was a sentiment shared by two other participants in reference to wisdom, as they believed that because of their family member's past experiences, that person could provide appropriate and valuable guidance: "'Cause they're older than me and they're much more wiser. They can help me through this stuff" (P6, 16 years old).

Intuition

In a similar but distinct subtheme, participants frequently mentioned that their family member often "knew what was good for them" in relation to why they decided to seek out support from them. This indicates that participants often deferred to the guidance and instructions of their parents mainly, specifically valuing their insight. One participant stated this in the context of why he decided to ask his father for help: "Like, I haven't really had any problems, to talk to anyone about, but if any kind of problem I just tell them because they know what's best for me" (P5, 18 years old).

Exclusivity

The subtheme of exclusivity emerged when participants were asked about going to others for help in the stressful event they were describing. Participants said that some issues were only reserved for their family members, such as ones that were more sensitive, such as "family problems." One participant made apparent that some problems that can only be shared with family members:

> Yeah, so whenever there's school problems, I'd always go talk to that counsellor for the office, guidance counsellor, or if I have problems with my friends or with my family, I would just go talk to them.
>
> *(P8, 18 years old).*

Potential Hesitancy

Though participants discussed their family's important role as a source of support, they also discussed how this was affected by their family members' experiences of war and migration. Participants shared that they felt that this could make it difficult to reach out to family members. The subtheme of potential hesitancy emerged, as participants described that they did not wish to overburden their parents with their own problems. Rather than being seen as a shared experience that would facilitate support, the impacts of having experienced the Syrian civil war led to a participant being more reluctant to confide in his parents: "Probably not, because they were going through the same thing" (P9, 16 years old).

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Peers

For many participants, peers were an important source of social support in helping them navigate various stressful events related to the school setting. Classmates, best friends, and other friends fell under the umbrella of peers. Subthemes of shared identity, experience, and rejection emerged in the experiences participants described in seeking support from their peers. This group of peers provided guidance in the form of advice.

Shared Identity

Participants implied that their peers were selected because they also had Arab backgrounds. Many indicated that this made it easier for them to get along, especially in terms of the language barrier, since these peers could speak Arabic. One participant was explicit in connecting a shared language to a shared identity, which created an ease of relating and made it easier for him to seek support from these peers: "Yeah, you could relate to them and speak Arabic if I was not feeling comfortable speaking English" (P1, 17 years old).

Experience

Participants suggested that a key reason why they selected their peers as sources of support was a perception that these peers had more experience than them regarding a certain situation:

> Mostly friends because they were there with me in the classrooms and everything. So like, also my best friend, so I went to her for help because she's been here for years, she's been doing it for years, she knows everything. So, I went to for her help, and she helped me a lot.
>
> *(P2, 16 years old).*

Rejection

When participants were asked if they ever worried about how their peers would react when asking them for help, some indicated that, yes, they were concerned. One participant described this in the context of having a limited grasp of English:

> Yes. This time yes, because, so, I thought that they would be like, 'Oh you don't know English, oh blah blah,' or be, like, 'Oh she doesn't know anything.
>
> *(P4, 17 years old).*

School Staff

The school staff category of social support consisted of teachers, principals, and guidance counsellors, who were approached in relation to stressors stemming from school. School staff provided support by sharing resources and information. The two subthemes of duty and friendliness emerged.

Duty

When asked if it was difficult in seeking support from school staff, participants often said, "It's their job," indicating that it was not difficult because they knew it was part of their duties. This was mentioned in context of a participant who asked for resources and guidance:

> You know, she gave me a couple of opportunities. Yeah, and I chose the one I liked the most. She was pretty happy with it. Like, it's her job. So yeah, she didn't have any problems, you know?
>
> *(P1, 17 years old).*

Friendliness

Many participants noted that it was easy for them to seek out support from school staff since they were friendly and approachable. One participant shared how these qualities were important to her in making her comfortable enough to engage with her teacher:

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"Some teachers are very open and you feel very comfortable talking to them, but other teachers are very strict, and you just want to get out of their class" (P4, 17 years old).

Organizations

Two participants indicated that they sought out support from organizations involved in helping newcomers settle into Canada. These participants only accessed support through these organizations during their first few months in Canada.

Availability

A subtheme of availability emerged as part of their experiences with these organizations. When asked if it was difficult to seek help from these resettlement service organizations, both participants mentioned that it was not difficult because they were always available to provide help: "Because, like, they're there to help. They know everything, so like, if we ask them about everything, they would know. So I thought that was the best way to get help" (P2, 16 years old).

Area 3: Coping

Participants described different ways they had coped when dealing with stressful experiences. Two themes of collectivistic and individualistic coping strategies emerged. Collectivistic coping often entailed emphasizing the "other," society or family, as a point of reference. On the other hand, individualistic coping strategies centred on focusing on oneself to overcome the problem.

Collectivistic Coping

When participants shared coping strategies they used, they sometimes alluded to others' responses as a reference point in consideration of their selected approach to coping. Some methods of collective coping were embedded within socio-cultural values, which participants found meaningful when coping as they felt connected to a broader group they belonged to. Subthemes of managing impressions, turning to God and Islam, and seeking comfort from family emerged. Participants were also asked if the method of coping they selected was also used by their family or community, and many of them said "yes," a response that indicates that they referenced a collective when deciding on how to engage with a stressor:

> I guess … the community and my family really do have a really good impact on the way I deal with situations. And they certainly taught me correct and right ways to deal with them, in the best way that benefits me and leaves me with the best results.
>
> *(P5, 18 years old).*

Managing Impressions

Participants detailed experiences in which they coped by maintaining social harmony, not drawing attention to themselves. The common thread among this form of coping was that it was employed in situations in which participants were actively being discriminated against. Many mentioned that by retaliating, they would be further ostracized, and therefore they decided to tolerate vexatious behaviours: "I didn't like to start troubles. If he was a bad person, I don't want to be a bad person and start troubles" (P3, 16 years old).

Turning to God and Islam

Two participants described that they found meaning in coping by relying on their religious beliefs, teachings, and God. It was evident that their religion was important to them. The common theme among both participants who used religion to cope was that

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it occurred in instances of perceived adversity. For example, one participant described how believing in God gave him hope that he and his family would survive the war: "One of the ways … was we came to Canada and just left all the war there, so that's actually hope and made us survive, like, believing in God. He would help us" (P8, 18 years old).

Seeking Comfort from Family

Participants shared their experiences of coping with certain stressors by seeking out emotional support from family members. The involvement of family highlights collectivist values based on a cultural emphasis:

> They helped me like mentally and like everything, they supported me, they gave me support. … I didn't actually have anyone else to go for except my parents.
>
> *(P2, 16 years old).*

Individualistic Coping

Other participants mentioned exclusively relying on themselves to cope. Within certain events, participants also framed their own innate abilities to overcome the stressors in which they employed these specific behaviours. Subthemes of finding opportunities, escaping reality, and letting go emerged as dimensions of individualistic coping behaviours.

Finding Opportunities

Participants discussed that they coped by seeking out opportunities themselves to overcome the stressor. This was the strategy selected specifically in the context of learning English. For this coping method, many participants indicated that they relied on themselves and felt that they were in control of overcoming the problem. The following quote shows one of the many methods participants used to overcome their language barrier by actively seeking opportunities:

> I ended up encouraging myself. I ended up fighting the language and learning more English and interacted with other people so I can be taking from them whatever it was, advantage or disadvantage, … like, taking the language from other people and did help myself by watching English movies, English music, read English books.
>
> *(P4, 17 years old).*

Escaping Reality

For some participants, disconnecting with reality or using distraction were coping methods that felt the most appropriate. This was mentioned by two participants in the context of discussing their experiences of the war and how they managed to cope through entertainment. A participant described why watching anime was a meaningful coping method for him as it helped him escape reality:

> I got stuck with anime, … like, you're actually escaping life, which helped me a lot, too. So, living in a fake world, and most of the anime thing, it's a hero that's actually helping people, which [is] not actually real life, … it's just, like, making you live [in] your own world, it's … not our world now.
>
> *(P8, 18 years old).*

Letting Go

Participants described "letting go" of worrying about stressors as a form of coping. This occurred in situations that they described having no control over. Two participants indicated that it was beneficial not to involve themselves emotionally any further by worrying too much about a stressor. One participant shared that stress brought on by worrying could potentially have an impact on one's health and is not helpful: "It's better than stressing. Stressing leads to, uh, no solutions.

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It's just, it's harmful for your health, and … it doesn't give you any fruit, … like, solutions" (P5, 18 years old). Both participants highlighted that they understood that they had a decision about whether to worry or not, thus indicating their awareness of their control in the situation.

DISCUSSION

Through these interviews, a wide variety of stressors, social supports, and coping strategies were identified. Importantly, stressors were not confined to the pre-migration period alone but included post-migration stressors that refugee youth face when arriving in a new country. Many stressors were connected to the participants' age, such as stressors of adjusting to a new school environment, facing the first day of grade school or high school, and making new friends. The stressors participants mentioned within the present study are aligned with those documented in the literature for adolescent Syrian refugees, specifically, but also generally for migrant youth who are settling into another country (de Lima Sá et al., 2022; Hassan et al., 2016; Scharpf et al., 2021). One novel finding from this study is how COVID-19, as a stressor, has impacted teenage Syrian refugees, specifically in jeopardizing their educational futures because of the technical challenges due to online learning and reduced access to school staff.

The participants identified a plethora of social support systems. Some were selected due to socio-cultural values and norms. For many participants, their family was a fundamental support system influenced by their cultural upbringing (de Lima Sá et al., 2022; Hassan et al., 2016; Kuo, 2010). Some indicated that they relied on their family for more "personal" issues, suggesting that certain topics may be off limits to friends (Ajami et al., 2015). This contrasts with individualistic cultures, where the peer group is the primary social support source and the family is secondary among adolescents (Brannan et al., 2013).

Regarding peers, participants often sought out individuals who belonged to the same ethnocultural group as them. This is understandable, as language is not a barrier with peers from such a group. Participants also highlighted that their selected peers also were newcomers themselves; therefore, they could guide them more appropriately. This indicates that a shared identity was an important factor for participants in seeking support. Within the acculturation research, newcomer youth often make friends with those who are similar to them in terms of identity (Alfadhli & Drury, 2018; Berry et al., 2006).

An important gender distinction emerged, as male participants relied on their family members, school staff, and organizations only. Male participants did not mention friends as part of their identified social support systems. This is aligned with the literature that mentions that women cross-culturally have larger social support networks (Dwyer & Cummings, 2001).

Last, school staff and organizations played important roles in helping teenage Syrian refugees navigate their new lives in Canada by providing resources. The support of school staff, which included teachers and guidance counsellors, is important for helping refugee youth resettle and flourish academically (Massfeller & Hamm, 2019; Salam et al., 2022a). For many newcomers in Canada, resettlement organizations play an important role in helping provide vocational and language training (Shields et al., 2016). As indicated, participants understood that it was the duty of social support networks to provide them with necessary resources (e.g.,

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language support, finding a job, setting up a bank account, etc.). This highlights how their perceived availability became a facilitator in seeking help (Simich et al., 2003).

The coping strategies that participants mentioned were influenced by their socio-cultural values, such as relying on faith or acting in ways aligned with how they had seen their family and community members approach similar stressors (Kuo, 2010; Yeh et al., 2006). Some coping strategies might be contextually dependent, as some participants indicated that they did not retaliate when they were being discriminated against. Within the cross-cultural stress and coping literature, this is described as **forbearance coping**, which is employed to maintain harmony and not to draw attention to oneself (Yeh et al., 2006). However, this may not be efficacious, as studies have found mixed results on the outcomes among ethnic minority groups experiencing discrimination (Noh & Kaspar, 2003; Noh et al., 1999).

Gender emerged as a factor that influenced choice of coping strategy. Male participants in the study stated that they used avoidance-based coping strategies, while female participants did not describe using this strategy. This is consistent with existing literature regarding coping in male Syrian refugee youth and is hypothesized to be due to gender-based socio-cultural norms, in which men are encouraged to suppress their emotions (International Medical Corps, 2017). Avoidance-based coping strategies have the potential to exacerbate stress and thus lead to worse mental health outcomes (Pineles et al., 2011). As such, attention to understanding gender-specific coping strategies are important to support Syrian refugee adolescents' mental health.

Problem-focused coping, or active problem-solving, was common among participants. This often occurred in situations in which participants felt that they had control. This coping strategy is associated with mastery of and overall positive outcomes in psychological well-being (Aldwin, 2007). Last, participants indicated that they relied on family and friends for seeking emotional comfort. This is an indicator of emotion-focused coping, or regulating one's emotional response (Austenfeld & Stanton, 2004; Dwyer & Cummings, 2001; Stanton et al., 2000).

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study provides information for mental health care providers (MHPs) in understanding the lived experience of Syrian refugee youth. The findings provide contextual information for MHPs in ensuring they are providing culturally safe care by attending to how cultural can contextualize experiences of stressors and coping approaches (Moore & Constantine, 2005). MHPs may consider how to engage nonformal supports in delivering care, including the (extended) family, school staff, faith organizations, and language- or culturally specific supports. In addition, MHPs may need to consider Syrian refugee youths' mental health needs but also appreciate how identity-based factors (e.g., gender) shape these needs.

The findings from this study also yield relevant information for educators who work with Syrian refugee youth. School environments have the capacity to become risk factors if appropriate supports are not put in place, such as training in facilitating settlement and resources for language acquisition. Specific attention must be given to how school climates can foster inclusivity by encouraging peer supports and strategize to minimize racism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia (Guo et al., 2019; Walker & Zuberi, 2019).

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CONCLUSIONS

Teenage Syrian refugees are resourceful. They are able to draw on social support networks that are appropriate and relevant to the stressors they are encountering. The role of culture should be highlighted, as socio-cultural values play a salient role in shaping their experiences within certain contexts. To better support the mental health of Syrian refugee youth and, more broadly, cultural minority migrant youth, the nuance that their socio-cultural backgrounds bring must be highlighted and understood to help them flourish and lead meaningful lives.

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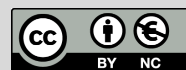

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