

Improving Civic Engagement: A Strength-Based Strategy to Address Post-Resettlement

Challenges

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Overview

Considering the benefits of civic engagement for integrating of refugees into new community, attitudes toward, frequency and predictors of civic engagement are examined among 14 Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) refugees.

Goals and Objectives

- To demonstrate the importance of civic engagement in post-resettlement adjustment in overcoming individual challenges and becoming integrated in new community
- To present results of a quantitative study on civic engagement among refugees from the Middle East and North Africa

Abstract

Civic engagement is referred to a collective action to make the community a better place to live (Ehrlich, 2000). Civic engagement has advantages for both individuals and communities. At the individual level, civic engagement provides social support through providing employment opportunities, improving social skills, and increasing English language proficiency. Further, it helps overcome distress and social isolation (Chan, 2011; Handy & Greenspan, 2009). At the community level, civic engagement by increasing the sense of community can increase the quality of community services, social capital and citizenship (Tucker & Santiago, 2013; Weng & Lee, 2015). Therefore, civic engagement can be considered as a strategy to improve integration of refugees in new community. This strategy is consistent with strengths-based approach, because rather than focusing on refugees' challenges, civic engagement focuses on their capacities and contributions in new community (Weng & Lee, 2015). Consequently, studying attitudes to, level and predictors of civic engagement among refugees becomes an important topic. For this purpose, the author conducted a quantitative study.

In this study, ten men and four women refugees from Iran, Iraq, Sudan, State of Palestine, Syria, Morocco and Egypt participated. Convenient and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants from different venues like restaurants and Facebook pages. The survey contains demographic information, and two sub-scales of attitudes toward and frequency of civic engagement.

Participants reported very positive attitudes toward civic engagement (Mean= 31.00, Standard Deviation=3.72). The most popular areas for civic activities were mentioned refugees and immigrants' services, followed by children programs, educational programs and international charity services. Conducting Pearson correlation, the main predictor for attitudes was English proficiency ($r(12)=0.7, p<0.05$). That is, language competency improves communication and understandings regarding community and its activities. In this case, adult ESL programs can be helpful. Not generalizability and small sample size are limitations of this study.

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Overview

Considering the benefits of civic engagement for integrating of refugees into new community, attitudes toward, frequency and predictors of civic engagement are examined among Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) refugees.

Part A. Theoretical Discussion

Part B. Empirical Findings

Civic Engagement

- Civic engagement is referred to a collective action to address public concerns and community challenges (Checkoway, 2009; Ehrlich, 2000).



Study Approach: Strengths-Based

This strategy is consistent with strengths-based approach, because rather than focusing on refugees' challenges, civic engagement focuses on their capacities and contributions in new community (Weng & Lee, 2015).



Importance of Civic Engagement at the Individual Level

- Social support
- Employment opportunities
- Academic development
- Social and leadership skills
- English language proficiency
- To overcome distress and social isolation
- Confidence, compassion and competence
- Feeling valuable
- Healing from trauma



(Chan, 2011; Handy & Greenspan, 2009; Mollica, 2006)

Importance of Civic Engagement at the Community Level

- Increasing the sense of community
- The quality of community services
- Social capital
- Citizenship
- Facilitating integration of newcomers in new community
- Engaging them in policy-making process

(Tucker & Santiago, 2013; Weng & Lee, 2015).

Part B. Empirical Study

- Studying attitudes to, level and the areas of civic engagement
- Target population: Refugees of the Middle East and North Africa

MENA Refugees in the US

- Between 2013-2016: At least around 30% of refugees each year are from MENA countries
- Especially from Iraq, Iran, Syria and Sudan



Gaps in Existing Literature

Most studies regarding our target population focused on their needs

In terms of civic engagement, the target population has not been studied considerably.

Research Questions

- Considering that there are a few studies on civic engagement among MENA refugees, research questions are:
 - ✓ What are the MENA refugees' attitudes toward civic engagement?
 - ✓ What types of civic engagement, are the MENA refugees more likely to attend?
 - ✓ And, what factors are affecting the attitudes toward and frequency of civic engagement among the MENA refugees?

Instrument

- The survey questions were developed based on existing scales on civic engagement

(Bobek, Zaff, Li & Lerner, 2009; CIRCLE, 2006; Doolittle & Faul, 2013; Finlay, Flanagan & Wray-Lake, 2011, Gele & Harsløf, 2012, Keeter, Jenkins, Zukin & Andolina, 2003; Zaff, Boyd, Li, Lerner & Lerner, 2010)

- The survey contains demographic information (11 items), and two sub-scales of attitudes toward and frequency of civic engagement.

Instrument: Validity

- Face and content validity
- Some culturally sensitive modifications were incorporated through experts' feedback.

Instrument: Sub-Scale of Attitudes

Alpha Cronbach: 0.84

Attitudes toward Civic Engagement

Items

“It is important to make sure all people are treated fairly” (Zaff et al., 2010, p.742).

“It is important to make the world a better place to live in” (Zaff et al., 2010, p.742).

“It is important to help out at your local community” (Zaff et al., 2010, p.743).

“When I see someone being taken advantage of, I want to help them” (Zaff et al., 2010, p.742).

“I often think about doing things so that people in the future can have things better” (Zaff et al., 2010, p.742).

“I can make a difference in my community” (Bobek et al., 2009, p.620).

“I have a responsibility to help the poor and the hungry” (Doolittle & Faul, 2013, p.4).

Instrument: Sub-Scale of Patterns of Civic Engagement

Alpha Cronbach: 0.84

Frequency and Type of Civic Engagement

Items

“How often have you stayed informed of what is going on in your community?” (Doolittle & Faul, 2013, p.4)

“How often have you helped out your neighbors?” (Zaff et al., 2010, p.743)

“How often have you donated money to groups?” (CIRCLE, 2006, p.2; Keeter et al., 2003, p.19)

“How often have you been a member of any organization?” (CIRCLE, 2006, p.2; Keeter et al., 2003, p.19)

“How often have you participated in events such as meetings, celebrations, or activities in the community?” (Finlay et al., 2011, p.1732)

“How often have you worked together informally with someone or some group to solve a problem in the community where you live?” (Keeter et al., 2003, p.19)

“How often have you volunteered in community services for no pay?” (CIRCLE, 2006, p.2)

Data Collection

- IRB approval was obtained.
- Two types of surveys were used including face-to-face and web-based surveys.
- Snowball and convenient sampling
- Recruitment was happened through Facebook pages, restaurants, acquaintances
- **Being a refugee in the US, and 18 years or older, having ability to read English**

Study Participants

Ten men and four women

Age (Mean= 35.3, SD= 10.1)

Education (12 (85.7%) more than high school)

Length of stay (Mean= 15.3 years)

Country of origin (Valid total N=14)

Country	Egypt	Iran	Iraq	
Valid N (%)	1 (7.1%)	4 (28.6%)	3 (21.4%)	
Country	Morocco	State of Palestine	Sudan	Syria
Valid N (%)	1 (7.1%)	2 (14.3%)	2 (14.3%)	1 (7.1%)

Data Analysis

- Summary scores of attitudes toward civic engagement (possible range: 5-35)
- Summary scores for frequency of civic engagement (possible range: 5-35)
- Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency and percentage) for each item.
- Pearson correlation was conducted to examine the impacts of multiple potential predictors.

Findings

- Participants reported very positive attitudes toward civic engagement (Mean= 31.00, SD=3.72)
- They are involved in community activities (Mean=25.08, SD=6.69)

Statistical information of key variables

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Valid N</i>
Attitudes	21	35	31.00	3.72	13
Frequency	11	35	25.08	6.69	13

Areas of Volunteering

Most Frequent Areas:

- Refugees and immigrants' services
- Children programs
- Educational programs
- International charity services.

Volunteering by areas (Total N=14)

Volunteering Area	N (%)	Volunteering Area	N (%)
Refugees and immigrants services	6(42.9%)	Homeless and the poor services	3(21.4%)
Educational programs	4(28.6%)	Programs for the elderly	3(21.4%)
Children programs	4(28.6%)	Environmental programs	2(14.3%)
International charity services	4(28.6%)	Labor unions	2(14.3%)
Youth programs	3(21.4%)	Religious groups	2(14.3%)
Health programs	3(21.4%)		

Table 7

Pearson correlation matrix

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1.Age	1	0	0.1	.7*	.6*	0	-.4	.1	0	.1	-.1	-.2
2.Gender ¹		1	-.1	.4	.3	0	-.2	-.6*	.1	.2	.1	.1
3.Marital status ²			1	.5	.1	.6*	.6*	.1	0	-.1	.3	0
4.Having children ³				1	.6*	0	.3	.1	-.1	-.2	.3	.1
5.Length of stay					1	.2	.3**	.2*	-.1	-.2	0	.1
6.Education						1	.4**	.2	-.3**	-.4	.2	0
7.Family income							1	.3*	-.2*	.7**	.3	.1
8.Weekly hours working for pay								1	-.1	-.1	-.1	-.1
9.Health									1	.7**	-.2	-.1
10.English language										1	<u>.7*</u>	-.1
11.Attitude											1	.3
12.Frequency												1

** p<0.01; * p<0.05; 1.Gender (1= Male; 2=Female); 2.Marital status (0=Not married; 1=Married); 3.Having child (0=No child; 1=Have child).

Predictors of Civic Engagement

- Conducting Pearson correlation, the main predictor for attitudes toward civic engagement was English proficiency ($r(12)=0.7, p<0.05$).
- Adult ESL programs can be helpful.
- Contrary to previous research, gender, age, education, economic status, marital status, having child, health, weekly time spent on work, and length of stay are not associated with civic engagement in this sample.

(Chan, 2011; Finlay et al., 2011; Gele & Harsløf, 2012; Handy & Greenspan, 2009, Sundeen, Garcia & Raskoff, 2009 ; Tucker & Santiago, 2013; Weng & Lee, 2015)

Conclusion

- Participants are civically engaged especially in **staying informed** about community (Mean=4, SD=1.1) and **helping neighbors** (Mean=3.8, SD=1.2).
- The overall positive attitudes and the level of active civic engagement indicate MENA refugees' integration and contribution to the community.
- Positive attitudes can be improved through raising awareness using media, and newsletters, including them in the community events, and informing them about benefits of civic engagement.

Conclusion (Cont)

- Among different kinds of programs, refugees and immigrants' services, followed by children programs, educational programs and international charity services are more popular ones.
- In contrast, programs related to environment and labor need more attention and work. Less popularity for these kind of programs might be because of less perceived direct effects on their life. Raising awareness regarding the importance of these kinds of civic activities are recommended.

Conclusion (cont)

- To conduct studies for needs assessment to explore in which areas they are more likely to become engaged and how they prefer to be engaged in community activities
- To examine how to improve attitude and level of civic engagement
- To provide opportunity for kinds of civic engagement programs related to immigrants and refugees' needs and benefits
- To have questionnaire in Arabic and Farsi languages may increase participation

Limitations

- The sample size was small.
- The study is not generalizable, because the recruitment largely happened through Facebook.
- Including more diverse population in study

Limitations (Cont)

- Social desirability bias
- People who were more likely to attend the study are more likely to engage in civic activities.
- Almost 85.7% have high level of education of bachelor and more
- Majority has good English proficiency level

Methodological Suggestions

- Consent form
- Including the less educated groups
- Including those with lower level of English proficiency
- Having pilot study to make questions as understandable as possible

Thanks for Your Attention!

Questions and Answers

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