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# Identifying Cultural Strengths Of Afghan Refugees As A Source Of Their Resilience

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IDENTIFYING CULTURAL STRENGTHS OF AFGHAN REFUGEES AS A SOURCE  
OF THEIR RESILIENCE

by

Venos Kohistani, BA, Ryerson University 2011

A Major Research Paper  
Presented to Ryerson University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in the Program of  
Immigration and Settlement Studies

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2012  
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Venos Kohistani

# IDENTIFYING CULTURAL STRENGTHS OF AFGHAN REFUGEES AS A SOURCE OF THEIR RESILIENCE

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Master of Arts, 2012  
Immigration and Settlement Studies  
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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the cultural resources of Afghan migrants and their relationship to the experience of resilience. The study explores the integration process of Afghan migrants as a way of gaining insight into their cultural values, beliefs and characteristics that play a role in facilitating their resilience. Participants in the study included six adult newcomer Afghans (1 Male and 5 Females) who have resided in Canada for over one year and under ten years. They were interviewed separately using open-ended in-depth interviews. The analysis of the interviews resulted in two core themes (1) Personal coping strategies and (2) Cultural resources as coping strategies. The results determined that Afghans utilize some aspects of cultural collectivity, as well as positive cultural values and characteristics when dealing with the adversities of settlement and adaptation.

**Keywords:**

Cultural strengths, Afghan refugees, Afghan culture, Resilience and Integration

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## **Introduction**

Canada has come to be known as a multicultural nation (Stevens, Plaut & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). Simply stated, it means that Canadians do not belong to any one cultural background, race, or heritage (Stevens, Plaut & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). Currently, Canadians have diverse cultural heritages and represent many different racial groups. This plurality in culture and race is the consequence of years of immigration (Wood & Gilbert, 2005).

The multicultural or pluralistic reality of Canada gives the country a competitive edge in attracting migrants; however, it is a different experience than migration to relatively homogeneous societies where people share commonalities (Simich, Pickren & Beiser, 2011). Pluralistic societies have the potential to pose challenges related to religion, identity and self-understanding (Chryssochoou, 2000) because they have an identity that is neither definitive nor assertive (Wayland, 1997). Yet, recently arrived Canadians not only overcome such challenges but also have manifested resilience in multicultural contexts--the place of origin and Canada (Simich et al., 2011). However, research on resilience has largely focused on human strengths in dealing with adversity (Grotberg, 2003). Culturally based resources brought by migrants from the country of origin provide them with cultural strengths (Simich et al., 2011). Yet, little has been written about cultural strengths as resources for migrant resilience. There is a need to identify the cultural strengths related to identity, and relational practices that migrants bring with them, in order to understand external contributors of resilience in the Canadian migrant population.

### **Definition and Scope of Resilience in Migrant Population**

The term resilience was derived from the physics of materials and now has been applied to understand human development. "In materials science, resilience referred to the ability of something to return to its original form after having been bent or compressed" (Kirmayer,

Sehdev, Whitley, Dandeneau, & Isaac, 2009, p.63). Within the context of human development, resilience has been defined as positively adapting despite facing adversity (Bleich et al., 2006; Friborg et al., 2003; Greeff, & Human, 2004; Simich et al., 2011; Ungar, 2008). Personality psychologists associated resilience with individualistic human strengths or attributes as opposed to a property of the environment (Kirmayer et al., 2009). Accordingly, Friborg, Hjemdal, Rosenvinge & Martinussen (2003) argue that resilient individuals are more flexible than vulnerable people and deal with adversity by using protective factors that are within themselves. Developmental psychologists have focused on a more interactional view; they identify resilience in the interactions of children with their caretakers or peers (Kirmayer et al., 2009). Similarly, all individual-centered models of resilience have ignored social and cultural aspects of human development and adaptation (Kirmayer et al., 2009) when in fact the experience of resilience is influenced by both the characteristics of the individual and their environment (Ungar, Brown, Liebenberg, Othman et al., 2007). In acknowledging Ungar et al., (2007)'s view, Friborg et al. (2003) identify a number of features that they determine in characterizing resilient people who have overcome difficult life conditions. They explain that resilient individuals are flexible and cope by using protective factors that are within themselves and/or in their environment. Studies have reported that resilient people draw on positive dispositional attitudes and behaviours like control and responsibility of one's own life, pro-social behaviour and empathy (Friborg et al., 2003). Cultural upbringing shapes such values, beliefs, norms and practices (Giger, & Davidhizar, 2002) that Friborg et al., (2003) argue resilient people draw from. Thus depending on the cultural background, personal dispositions and attitudes reciprocate supportive relationships with family and friends. The family, social and external support systems are then used to cope better with stress. Resilience is thus a multilayered construct that includes personal,

cultural and contextual aspects of people's lives (Abarbanel, 2009; Greene et al., 2004; Ungar, 2008).

Among the migrant population, the concept of family resilience has received some attention. For families, the experiences associated with immigration have been most challenging (Greeff & Holtzkamp, 2007; Patterson, 2002). Greeff & Holtzkamp (2007) argue that migration is the most challenging transition a family can experience because there are changes to familiar patterns and ways of relating to other people. They further identify some potential stressors related to migration, which include losing close relationships, changes in children's educational and recreational patterns, pressures of a new occupation, problems with housing, community involvements, a sense of isolation, forming secondary relations (e.g., doctor, church); (Greeff, & Holtzkamp, 2007; Simich et al., 2011), experience of lowered standard of living, loss of personal identity and loss of cultural traditions (Timberlake, Färber, Wall, Taylor & Sabatino, 2003). Berry (1997) acknowledges all the stresses related to migration but argues that clash of cultural family practices of country of origin and that of the host society is perhaps the most important challenge for migrants. In justifying this claim, he argues further that a cultural clash is capable of temporarily disabling migrants in resolving other obstacles they might be facing.

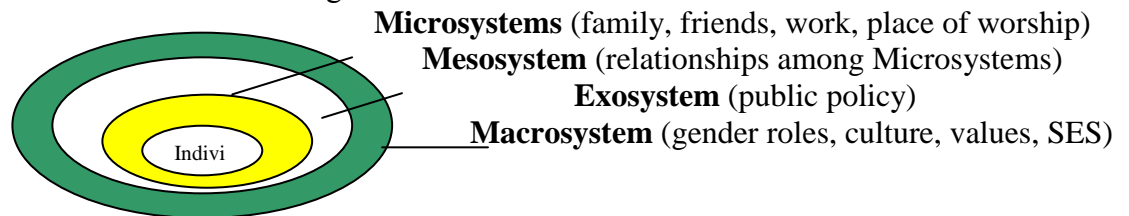
Although these stressors can be overwhelming, immigrants and refugees have selected strategies for coping that helps them adapt (Simich et al., 2011). Some adaptive factors that help migrants in the face of adversity are emotional and social support among family and community members (Carranza, 2007), open and honest communication (Greeff & Human, 2004), exploration of ethnicity, religion and spirituality, and family rituals and belief systems (Friborg et al., 2003; Simich et al., 2011). Stevenson and Renard (1993) argue that a number of such adaptive factors are correlated to migrant's unique cultural values and behavioural expressions. However, host countries have failed to recognize the strengths and resources of cultural

resiliency that migrants bring with them. Instead, migrant cultures are often patronized as they are thought of as a disadvantage and perhaps threatening (Simich et al., 2011). Stevenson & Renard (1993) argue that it is potentially destructive to assume that migrants' natal cultures are deficient and that it should be acknowledged that culture takes precedence in dealing with the challenges of adjustment to the host country.

### *Theoretical Framework*

Considering that resilience is a multilayered construct that includes personal, cultural and contextual aspects of people's lives (Abarbanel, 2009; Greene et al., 2004; Ungar, 2008), the primary theoretical framework for this study is the socio-ecologic perspective that places the individual in a context of the family, community and society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) illustrated below (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model



Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecologic theory is particularly relevant to the study of resilience, as it provides a way of accounting for variations in the experiences of individuals by considering personal factors in the context of broader social and cultural influences (Harvey & Delfabbro, 2004). Furthermore, through this theory Bronfenbrenner contends that such factors coincide with internal behavioural, cognitive and emotional make-up of an individual and influence how they act, think and feel and function (Harvey & Delfabbro, 2004). Evidently, the socio-ecological theory outlines a correlation between culture and the experience of resilience, making it an adequate framework for analyzing the current study.

## **Migrant Cultural Strengths and Resilience: Making the Connection**

Among the migrants entering Canada today, Stevenson & Renard (1993) identifies a number of key common cultural strengths, including strong kinship bonds, adaptability of family roles and a strong religious orientation. Individually, each of these strengths have been associated with resilience but has not been identified as strength extracted from the migrants' natal culture.

Research on migrant family resilience has consistently identified strong kinship bond as a source of resilience in the face of adversity (Ainsworth, 1989; Stevenson & Renard, 1993). Migrants from culturally collective societies like Asia, Africa, and South America have specifically reported high levels of strong family bond and involvement (Dwairy, 1999). Collective cultures involve role based obligation and fulfillment of group needs. Also, there is an emphasis on prioritizing relationships, familial dynamics and holistic view. These cultural family dynamics serves as precursor for strong kinship bond. Thus, when migration possesses potential stressors, the presence of a support system for migrants from Asia, Africa and South America is a cultural obligation (Dwairy, 1999). Yet, Stevenson and Renard (1993) report that it is not seen as an obligation, rather family involvement is considered a source of strength. Migrants of African descent in particular find it no heavy burden to give back emotional and financial resources to their extended families. For those in the receiving end, this cultural collectivity serves as a significant factor in the prevention and betterment of problems and is considered a significant predictor of successful coping (Greeff & Holtzkamp, 2007). In fact, a significant eighty-five percent of the families in the Greeff and Holtzkamp (2007) study indicated interfamilial support created a safeguard against the aftereffects of migration and facilitated adaptation and adjustment. Among these collective cultures, there appears to be a collective internal strength, an ability to work together and to depend on each other. This is a direct

affirmation of cultural collectivity and strong kinship bond being an enhancing resource in facilitating resilience.

However, Greeff and Holtzkamp (2007) report further that migrant families take a passive approach toward adversities they faced in the process of migration and adaptation. This is perhaps due to the fact that the western countries still views migrants' cultures as disadvantaging and threatening when in fact, culturally based resources brought by migrants from the country of origin provide them with cultural strengths (Simic et al., 2011). Within this framework, it becomes necessary to identify the cultural strengths that migrants bring with them and its benefits in accommodating the new members to the greater Canadian society.

Another cultural strength that migrants bring with them is a strong religious orientation or appreciation of spirituality (Stevenson & Renard, 1993). Recently arrived migrants in Canada are more spiritual than the greater Canadian population. Spirituality or a strong religious orientation is within the framework of cultural strengths because "Culture frames the values and social rules that inform worldview, guide reasoning and conduct, and provide shared meanings and traditions" (Timberlake et al., 2003, pg.77). In guiding reasoning and providing a shared meaning, culture frames the notion of spirituality in humans. In this context, "Spirituality provides the universal and fundamental aspect of what it is to be human-to search for a sense of meaning, purpose, and moral frameworks for relating with self, others, and the ultimate reality" (Timberlake et al., 2003, pg.77 ).

As a source of resilience, spiritual traditions have continuously been identified to protect against stress and uncertainty (Angell, Dennis & Dumain, 1998; Carranza, 2007; Greeff & Holtzkamp, 2007; Greeff & Human, 2004; Punetha, Young & Giles, 1987; Timberlake et al., 2003). According to Timberlake et al. (2003) study, an overall 56% of the participating immigrant women identified their spiritual beliefs and religious practices to be helpful in dealing



with the difficulties of migrating to another country. More importantly, the individuals who experienced elevated levels of difficulties reported greater spirituality confirming the potential role of such protective factor as a source of resilience (Timberlake et al., 2003). Evidently, strong kinship bond and spirituality/strong religious orientations are two most prominent cultural strengths of migrants that are currently present in literature. Considering that a vast majority of migrants entering Canada today have significantly different cultures from the West (Dwairy, 1999), we need more than ever to identify and understand the unique cultural processes that can foster resilience in them. Identifying cultural strengths have significant potential in successfully accommodating migrants into the labour market and the greater Canadian society.

### **Afghans Refugees, Culture and Resilience**

Resilience in adult economic immigrants has been under theorized; however, studying resilience in the refugee population provides intrinsically richer case studies. This is due to the fact that refugees not only encounter the same adaptation and integration challenges to economic immigrants, but also have to overcome greater pre-migration adversity (Simich et al., 2011). Afghans, in particular, represents one of the highest percentages of refugees in Canada (23%) and that number is increasing every year (Stack & Iwasaki, 2009). There were approximately 4000 Afghani migrants before 1991 and over 16,000 between 2001 and 2006 (Stack & Iwasaki, 2009). Afghans began to emigrate in response to the 1978 communist faction of the Afghan government, which was followed by Soviet invasion in 1979 (Lipson, 1991). The pro-Soviet Afghan government maintained control for 10 years before the Mujahedeen took over (Dupree & Dupree, 1987) and then came the Taliban regime (Stack & Iwasaki, 2009). Clearly, the long standing violence was a leading reason for Afghans to flee their country. Since 1979, the population in Afghanistan has diminished to about 8 or 9 million from 15 million. Millions have died and about 6 million have become refugees,

making Afghans the largest refugee populations not only in Canada but around the world (Lipson, 1991).

A large number of the government assisted refugees entering Canada today like the participants in this study have undergone a long journey. Fleeing the violent events in their country has forced them to seek asylum in neighboring countries like Iran and Pakistan and, India as well as in Turkey and Europe (Nourpanah, 2010). Unfortunately, they could not stay in the initial countries of asylum because they were not given the opportunity to regularize their status and they remained unable to go back to Afghanistan as a result of continuing fear of persecution and human rights violations. For those in such positions, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) suggested legal admission into a third country where they can enter as permanent residents and an opportunity to acquire a citizenship (Nourpanah, 2010). The process of refugee settlement into the third countries of asylum has been noted by a substantial body of work. There are many studies devoted to their mental health issues in their new societies (Michalsky, 2001; Witmer & Culver, 2001; Welsh & Brodsky, 2010). For example, Michalsky (2001) argues that there is necessity to provide professional counseling to facilitate successful integration for refugees. In this context, he suggests that the refugees arriving to Canada are traumatized and in need of psychological care. On the other hand, economists have noted their financial situation by identifying them as poverty-stricken individuals (Hiebert, 2008). Thus, refugees through their very powerlessness are constructed as powerful agents crystallized in their lack of both linguistic and legal voices (Nourpanah, 2010). Within this context, their arrival is considered a challenge to economy and society.

Migration is no doubt a stressful experience requiring adaptation and accommodation, placing all migrants amongst the vulnerable population. However, refugees are resilient and as Nourpanah (2010) explains refugees are exemplary cases of human capacity, as they have survived despite the greatest losses and assaults on their identity and dignity. Afghan refugees in particular have further

endured the burden of resettlement from other countries of asylum into Canada. Despite having had experienced harsh and unforgiving life-circumstances in the previous countries of asylum, they are by and large able to establish some level of stability and normalcy in Canada (Kanji & Cameron, 2010; Kanji, Drummond & Cameron, 2007; Lemmon, 2012). In measuring their level of resilience in accordance to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological perspective that has placed refugees in a context of Microsystems (family, friends, work, place of worship), Mesosystem (relationships among Microsystems) and Macrosystem (gender roles, culture, values, SES), it is evident that culture plays an integral role. The Afghan culture determines their level of relationships with family, friends and the general public. Culture also determines the role of gender among Afghans and outlines their approach to education and work. Ultimately, their culture is highly influenced by their religion (Islam). Thus, in measuring the role of their culture in their experience of resilience, there is an opportunity to measure all levels of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological perspective and the relationship between those levels that has placed refugees in a context of the family, community and society.

The scholarly literature devoted to the Afghan culture has generally portrayed the culture in a negative manner and as the direct cause of the turmoil in Afghanistan (i.e Brodsky, 2009; Eggerman and Panter-Brick, 2010). Dupree (2002) provides an alternative view. She identifies her conception of what are the essential defining elements of Afghan identity in the following quote.

Honour is the rock upon which social status rests and the family is the single most important institution in Afghan society. Individual honour, a positive pride in independence that comes from self-reliance, fulfillment of family obligations, respect for the elderly, respect for women, loyalty to colleagues and friends, tolerance for others, forthrightness, an abhorrence of fanaticism, and a dislike for ostentation, is a cultural quality most Afghans share. (Dupree, 2002, p. 978).

This quote has included a significant amount about the Afghan culture but just as much has been left out. Eggerman and Panter-Brick (2010) have identified six key cultural values in

responses to the question about how “life could be better” for people in Afghanistan. Similar to Dupree (2002), the participants in Eggerman and Panter-Brick (2010) study identified faith, family unity, service, effort, morals and honour as coping mechanisms in dealing with the challenges of living in a war torn nation. Evidently, there are many cultural values that shape and guide how Afghans cope. However, there are very few scholarly notes of those cultural values or their strengths. There is even less research on how those cultural values are utilized during the process of settlement and adaptation. Considering that Afghans compose one of the largest groups of refugees in Canada and around the world, they have received minimal attention in migration and policy based literature in Canada (Lipson, 1991; Simich et al., 2011; Stack & Iwasaki, 2009). The paucity of research on Afghan refugees makes this group of people an interesting case study. In addition, Afghans are seen as racially different from mainstream Canadian society, as are their distinctive religious (Islam) affiliation, practices and the holistic and collective orientation to life. As a result, Afghans experience significant cultural differences from the host society (Stack & Iwasaki, 2009; Waxman, 2001). The multidimensional and interrelated nature of their adjustment experiences provides an interesting opportunity to examine their cultural strengths and its relationship to their experience of resilience.

Ultimately, given the scarcity of research on refugees, specifically Afghan refugees, their culture and sources of resilience, the research questions that emerge in this literature review are: What are the cultural strengths that Afghans bring with them? Do they contribute to their experience of resilience in Canada? If so, what aspects of their culture facilitate adjustment and maintenance of resilience? Does it contribute to both internal/psychological and external/environmental experience of resilience? Does strong kinship bonds and strong religious orientations/spirituality play a role as it has with other migrants? And finally, how does Canada fall short in accommodating their cultural strengths? These are all questions that are integral to

understanding the role that culture plays in facilitating resilience among the Afghan refugees in Canada. Evidently, these questions inquire into the values and meanings that Afghan refugees ascribe to their specific experiences, actions, and interactions. Thus, conducting qualitative interviews holds the power of understanding the participant's personal and social realities, as well as patterns of actions and behaviours (Stelter, 2010).

## **Methodology**

### **Rationale for methodology selected**

Qualitative research focuses on interviews where participants are not required to merely select from predetermined categories of responses, but instead answer questions verbally (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). In using such a methodology, there is some attempt to capture the words of the participants (using notes, recordings and transcriptions). Such interviews are meant to be conversational, active and open-ended (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). Stelter (2010) argues that qualitative interviews “form the basis for the creation of meaning, and meaning expresses the relationship of the individual to specific material, social, and cultural contexts” (p. 861). They argue further that since lived experiences are individualistic, it cannot be characterized objectively by a third party (i.e. researcher) in the form of categorically selected set of response from which a participant is to merely choose. In this context, in-depth qualitative research methods are appropriate for investigations that seek to examine perceptions and experiences of various groups in social context. Experience-based qualitative interviewing is pivotal in the “participant's experiential, embodied involvement in the issues of research interview” (Stelter, 2010, p. 859). In this sense, the open-ended question of a qualitative interview has the potential to strengthen the participation of the participant in the interview process by allowing them to attain an in-depth inside into their experiences (Stelter, 2010). This way, the “participants gain access to themselves and their world in a way that goes beyond representational and reflective knowledge” (Stelter, 2010, p. 861).

Consequently, participants are generating personal meaning, which is the main purpose of using qualitative research interviews (Stelter, 2010).

In creating meaning, the participant creates a personal reality that arises from previous experiences and history. In the context of studying resilience, qualitative research in the form of interviews is essential because in allowing participants to gain access to themselves and generate personal meaning, they are given an opportunity to ascribe specific values and purpose to their experiences, actions, and interactions (Stelter, 2010). Thus, identify their sources of resilience in the face of adversity while integrating their past, present, and future.

This investigative approach provides an insider perspective to the topic of study by identifying personal values, beliefs, norms and practices that Giger and Davidhizar (2002) argue is shaped by culture. Furthermore, this method of research has the potential to identify the meaning participants extract from those cultural values and how they apply that to adjust to their current social reality in Canada. For these reasons, the qualitative method of interviewing is perhaps the most reasonable form of collecting data that highlights contextual elements that shape risk and protective factors.

### **Sampling and Recruitment Strategy**

The study of resilience requires an in-depth qualitative research method that seeks to examine perception and experiences of the participants in a social context. Qualitative studies generally involve numerous methods of purposeful sampling that allows investigators to seek information rich cases that will help answer the questions under study (Patton, 2002). For this reason, the current study on identifying cultural strengths of Afghan refugees as a source of their resilience included in-depth interviews with community members and qualitative analysis of interview transcripts.

The specific sampling strategy used for this study was criterion and maximum variation. The diversity of sample in terms of age, gender and number of years of residency in Canada is

attended to. The sampling procedure included snowball sampling. A number of known potential participants were contacted by e-mail requesting their participation and/or recommendation for other eligible participants. The e-mail included an explanation of the purpose of the study, eligibility criteria, potential risks and benefits, as well as the confidential and voluntary nature of participation. The e-mail was send along with a recruitment flyer (see Appendix B). Those individuals recruited through recommendations were also e-mailed information about the study, who decided independently if they are interested in participating and e-mail back the researcher.

The criteria for participants approached was that they have to be residing in Canada for over one year and under ten years to ensure familiarity with the Canadian social environment with enough time to reflect on migration and settlement experiences. Since the study revolved around adult refugees, all participants had to be over the age of 18 and under the age of 65.

The interviews were conducted in an interactive manner to acquire narrative text of the participants' personal experiences (Stelter, 2010). The proposed interview topics were adopted from the work of Simich et al., (2011) (See Appendix C), who were one of the first to find the primary building blocks of resiliency among Afghan refugees in Canada, which are indicated to be work altruism, spirituality, strong kinship bond, the very qualities that are grounded in cultural values. The coding and analysis for the study combined content analysis based on interview topics.

### **Sample size**

The participants for this study are from one of the top source countries for refugees in Canada: Afghanistan. 11 open-ended questions were asked of 6 participants (18years +), 1 male and 5 females.

### **Ethical Consideration**

An ethics protocols was submitted and approved by the Research Ethics Review Board of Ryerson University. The interviews were conducted following strict guidelines in informing consent

and confidentiality protocols. The consent form clearly explained risks, benefits and confidentiality of the data. It was stressed that participation is voluntary and that the participant can withdraw at any time either temporarily or permanently (See Appendix A).

The participants and transcripts are protected by password-protected codes and the consent forms are kept separate from transcripts. Considering that the interviews could have drawn upon emotional material (adversities faced) that might cause discomfort, the interaction with the participants was constructed based on trust and understanding because as refugees, the individuals may have had experienced with violence/war and maybe vulnerable (Omidian, 2000). Although, none of the participants expressed any form of discomfort, they were all provided with a list of settlement services in their communities where they could access assistance if need be.

### **Description of data collection method**

Stelter (2010) argues that qualitative interviewing gives the participants an opportunity for self-expression and people experience a level of satisfaction from having had the chance to express an opinion in an area of interest on their own terms. Thus, the qualitative interviewing creates a framework of narratives from subjective perspective, as well as making the interviews interactive (Corbin & Morse, 2003).

The interview topics revolve around migration and adaptation challenges, as well as how individuals respond to the challenges and an exploration of resiliency factors (such as: ways of overcoming difficulties). Probes guided the questions into many aspects of resiliency (ex: sense of identity, values, social relations or cultural practices perceived to help or provide strength). Lastly, the participants were given an opportunity to reflect on the lessons and prospects that were learned and what they think is needed from society to achieve better health and equity.



*Interviews:* Participants were informed that the interviews would last for about an hour and were to be conducted in a setting where the participants felt most comfortable. The 11 open-ended questions asked of each participant were digitally recorded with the consent of the participants.

Each interview began with the researchers introducing themselves and explaining that the objective of the study was to learn about the Afghan culture and their experiences after migrating to Canada. The interviewing process was facilitative, thus permitting the participants to share anything while being respectful of the emotional and deeply personal nature of the experiences being shared.

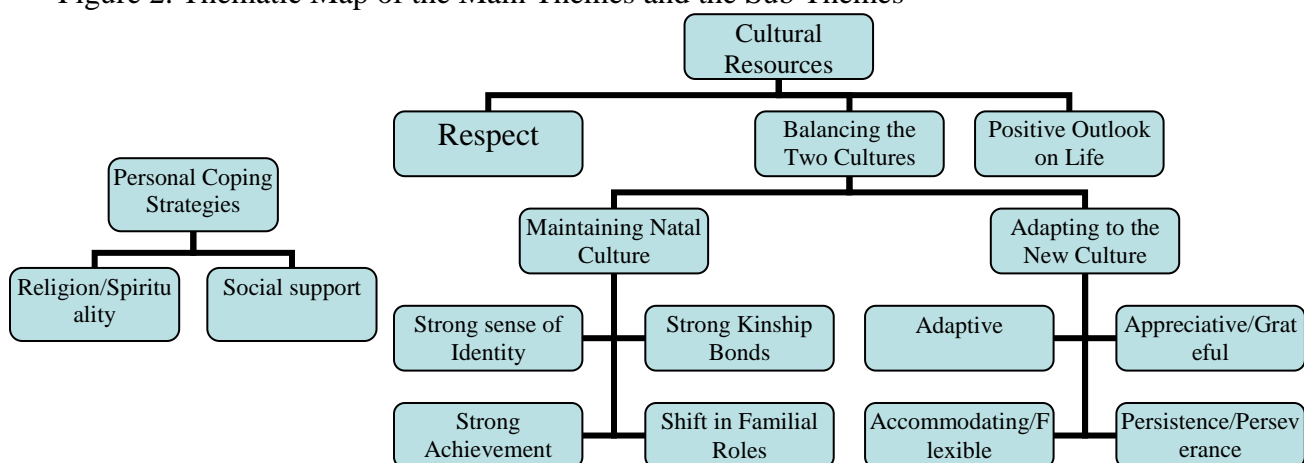
### **Description of Analytical Strategy and Methods of Analyzing Data**

In identifying cultural strengths as a source of resilience, the role of identity, social support, strong religious orientations and opportunities for social inclusion in family, work and community contexts and how individuals function, enact and express strength in the face of adversity was explored. For this reason, the method for analyzing the data was through a multilevel interpretive analysis. Generally, this form of analysis begins with qualitative description (Sandelowski, 2000) and uses that description to discover patterns, themes and contradictions in the data (Simich et al., 2011).

A thematic analysis requires a prolonged period of engagement with the data (Sandelowski, 2000). Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed into a written form for the purpose of analysis. They were further coded using a number system in keeping the confidentiality of the participants. Each participant was identified with a letter from the alphabet and a number. The males were identified with the letter *M* and females were identified with the letter *F*. For example, if the first participant is a female (*F*); they were identified as F1. Each transcript was then read closely for the purpose of facilitating a meaningful understanding of the topics explored within each of the interviews. Once the familiarization process was completed and the textual data was thoroughly understood, the next step involved identifying the initial set

of significant issues in the text. This state also includes applying codes so as to organize the textual data into meaningful and manageable parts. The codes explored pathways, context and mechanisms of resiliency and the role of culture. In particular, the codes noted the role of identity, cultural resources and opportunities for social inclusion in family, work and community contexts and how individuals function, enact and express strength in the face of adversity. In addition, the codes referred to any meaningful semantic factors enforced by the Afghan culture that affects the experience of resiliency in Afghan refugees. These codes were then sorted in an attempt to generate potential themes. While analyzing the codes and themes, it was also important to think about the relationship between the codes and between the themes. For this reason a qualitative thematic coding appeared more appropriate in an attempt to prioritize resiliency factors. A thematic map was generated to examine if they fit the entire data set. The dominant themes were then organized into subthemes. These different levels of themes were important in examining the hierarchy of meaning within the text. For instance, Personal coping strategies and Cultural resources as coping strategies were identified as main themes that represented the subthemes and codes within the data (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Thematic Map of the Main Themes and the Sub Themes



## Results

The analysis of the transcripts resulted in 13 themes relating to culture and resilience. These themes were organized within 2 higher order themes and 5 subthemes. The dominant themes were prioritized for a deeper analysis in demonstrating any correlation between aspects of the Afghan culture and the experience of resilience. Table 1 lists the themes formed. The codes are listed in Appendix D.

Table 1. Higher Order Themes and Subthemes

Personal Coping Strategy	Religion/spirituality
	Social Support
Cultural Resources	Respect
	Balancing the Two Cultures
	Positive outlook to life experiences

### Personal Coping Strategies: Key findings

*Religion/spirituality:* In dealing with the challenges of being a newly arrived migrant, some of the participants embraced religion as a source of coping. Some participants indicated turning to God before anyone else for help. Others indicated that they don't always have the opportunity to participate in religious activities but they associate positively with religion. Religion was also associated with shaping cultural values that hold important prominence for Afghans.

F5: I turn to god first whenever I come cross any difficulty in life. I pray 5 times a day as it is mandatory in Islam and I read the Quran. The Quran is our guide to the right path. I pray to ask for help from god, I ask for guidance and eventually in consult my husband and children for a common solution to our problem. We work on finding a solution together as a family.

F3: Yeah, I go to the mosque. We are supposed to be going to the mosque every Friday but that's not always possible but when I have time I do go. It doesn't have to be an Afghan mosque. Also on Saturdays and Sundays when there are specials prayers or funerals I go to the Afghan mosque. It is a bit

far so it is not always possible to go to the Afghan mosque, otherwise I would love to go to the Afghan mosque.

F4: I don't really rely on a community but I follow my Islamic beliefs because it brings peace to my mind. You don't have to go to a mosque to be able to practice so it is not really necessary. My religion is being a good human.

F2: I don't rely on it as much as I used to before but every now and then when I do have to go to the mosque or help at my ethnic community organization, it is a very good feeling, it brings back memories.

M1: Allot of our cultural believes originated from Islamic believes because Afghanistan is an Islamic nation. You know it says in Islam that the key to Jannah (heaven) is under your mother's feet so always respect your mom and dad. It comes from Islam and it had evolved for the better.

*Social support:* Another important coping mechanism for Afghans is having social support. The participants in this study sought support in the form of sharing information with others, getting advice, assistance and social interaction; as well as taking part in the community. Social support was provided by those who were willing to listen and those the participants came into contact with regularly (i.e. family, friends, classmates, and community member). In this engagement with others, participants felt they were able to overcome challenges and move ahead. Consequently, in responding to what has helped them overcome those difficult moments, participants gave the following answer:

F2: It was friends at school that helped me the most. The main source of help was school and friends at school. Family is the most important thing. Having family on your side makes a huge difference.

M1: It came up during a discussion with our neighbour. We had told our neighbour that the price of laundry detergent is so expensive and they told us to go to the grocery store because it would be cheaper there. We just asked people, we communicated with our friends and neighbours. They all guided us and we eventually figured our way around. When we discussed within our family and couldn't figure things, we would rely on our neighbours and friends. People who had come to Canada before us and knew more about life in Canada.

F5: Our friends and family have also been very helpful. Their help has made it easier for us to face the challenges for the sake of my children's future.

F4: My mother and family, friends help me overcome any practical or emotional problems I encounter. My family gives me strength to move on. If my family was not around during the tough times, I would be suicidal, emotional and all other bad things that could happen to any young person. My family around me always gave me support, especially moral and emotional support. Now, the only thing that keeps me going is remembering all that my family has done for me my entire life. Whenever, I feel down, I don't think about myself, I think for my parents and other siblings which keep me going.

Both informal and formal social supports are important. For the Afghan refugees, it seems as though formal support of settlement organizations is a form of attaining integration in the job market and the greater Canadian society.

F1: If you go to the Afghan community even if they can't help, they are compassionate and that makes you feel better. I feel I can talk to them openly and share my secrets. For example, I was looking for a dental assistant job for two years but no one was even accepting my resume. I found an Afghan dental clinic and right away they helped me and allowed me to go practice. For two years, I tried and no one was helping me but the Afghans did.

M1: Yeah, They did provide help. Those organizations are good and I support them because they help immigrants adjust as best as they can. They provided me with the shortest way to school. We stayed at COSTI for a month. They helped my parents get a bank account; they told them where to go and what to do. They would also took us to trips. They showed us City Hall and Centre Island. Other organizations took the responsibility after we moved from COSTI. They provided my parents with language training. When my baby sister was born, they helped us financially, I mean those diapers are expensive. There was a whole centre downtown for young mothers. Through another organization, my mom went there and they guided her in what to do. Although my mom had brought two children before, it was different. In Afghanistan, they tie kids for 40 days in a tight blanket saying that it is good for them. In here, they say that, it's not good for them; you should allow the child to move their arms. They helped my mom understand all this.

Evidently, Afghan refugees use both formal and informal social supports as coping strategies.

The association of social support with the Afghan culture is tied within the collective beliefs and values of the Afghans. Based on their responses and as defended by previous research

(i.e. Dossa, 2008; Dupree, 2002; Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010), Afghans' central source of

support is family, then friends and community members. There is a collective belief that family will provide support and one must always be available to provide support to family, friends and community members. In this context, Afghan people's willingness to receive and provide social support for family and community members validates its cultural importance as a factor in personal resiliency.

### **Cultural Resources: Key findings**

*Respect:* Respect is one of the cultural strengths that Afghans bring with them. Respect for elders and self-respect was an important cultural value that the participants repeatedly emphasized.

M1: Overall, well, one thing in my culture is that one must always, always, always respect your elders, your parents, the person who put food on the table, roof over your head and cloths on your back. I take that to heart, I have always showed respect, not just to my parents but all elders. That's a big thing in our culture and when I see disrespect towards anyone, not just my parents, I get disappointed. My friends for example, if they show disrespect towards their parents or anyone else, I tell them they should listen to their parents and understand their point of view. Your parents might be wrong but there is no need to look at them negatively. They are the reason for your being right now.

F2: One value that I try my best to hold on to is self-respect. Everything is associated with yourself respect. If you keep in mind that everything you do reflects not only on yourself but from people in your background. The way you treat people, what you expect from people and the way you wanted to be treated has all to do with having respect for yourself. That's the main thing and religion counts too.

F4: I am very culturally rooted. Family value is the biggest in our culture. There is also respect and hospitality.

Having respect for people, elders, humanity, culture and religion is a cultural value that Afghans bring with them. The participants identified respect as coping mechanism when they expressed the importance of being respectful not only to themselves, their families and community members but also to the greater Canadian society while accepting their differences in culture and space. The participants deemed it important to modifying oneself to adapt to the changed

circumstances while maintaining a sense of continuity with respect to the culture of origin because respect relayed will be reciprocated.

F1: Afghans are very respectful. They respect their elders, they are very hospitable and they are respectful to all humans.

F2: I would say at home YES but outside it is different. It also depends on the crowd that I am in. My father says when you live in a society regardless of what your background is or what your cultural beliefs are, don't go against humanity and follow with the rest of the society. He says you don't have to wear a burqa where everyone else doesn't; you have to show respect to people and their space. Because of that, I keep cultural practices within your cultural space and group, outside you have to respect other because there are many different cultures. You have to respect others culture because you want them to respect yours. Within family gatherings or the Afghan community, I am an Afghan and I follow the culture to be respectful to my people but outside I hold my identity but I try to be normal like everyone else. Not that being an Afghan is not normal but to be the same as everyone else outside.

Lastly, the notion of respect as a cultural value was related to the concept of responsibility and obligation. One way of showing respect to elders or parents would be to provide them support, whether emotional, psychological or financial.

F3: Respect, respecting our parents, older brothers and sisters and taking care of your family. Taking care of family is perhaps the most important thing, not only the family that is currently living with you but those back home and here.

F5: One important cultural value for us is respect, respecting parents. I tried to teach my kids the importance of respect in our culture because I have taken care of them today and tomorrow, they will need to take care of me. I want my kids to grow up to be good human beings to be respectful of the young and old and adhere to their cultural values. It is not the same in the Canadian culture, most kids say that they don't care if that person is their uncle, aunt or any other elder person but that's not how it is in our culture. Our most prominent cultural value is to respect everyone and anyone around us. We need to respect everyone to be able to demonstrate our Afghanhness and our Islamic believes.

*Positive Outlook on Life Experiences:* Some participants in this study saw negative life experiences as rewarding and a form of growth. Two participants in particular took pride in their

negative experiences because they felt that those experiences have shaped their current state of mind and have made them stronger.

M1: You know they say you live and you learn. The saying what doesn't kill you will only make you stronger. The events I have experienced in my life are probably more than those twice my age. I would say I have a bit more knowledge or wisdom that I didn't have then. Now, I know how to best deal with conflicts. In the past, I was very hot headed, if you did anything wrong to me, I would get violent. Now, I know there is no point and that violence will only escalate it. When I see what kind of past I have had and how I used to be, I reflect on to act in my present and make my future better.

F3: First time, I went to work, I couldn't even talk properly. I had studied English in Iran but it was totally different here. When I went to first day of work, my manager said to greet the customers but I couldn't even do that. It was so hard for me to say a sentence even though I knew it. I was really shy. It was actually a shoe store so I would find the sizes but if they asked for something beyond that I would be lost and question them about what they are asking me. Some of them was really nice and would take the time to explain but others would swear and tell me to go learn English. People were very rude. It always made me feel so bad but its ok, even if they hurt you, you only get stronger.

F4: We all (siblings) went through that phase and I am so glad we did because that's when you actually value things. Also it makes stay grounded and it makes you appreciate what you have in life.

This positive outlook also incorporated pride in all Afghan people's resiliency. One participant explains that despite having been through many struggles, Afghans never give up.

F5: Of course we faced challenges in our country too, the difficulties that come along with war, poverty and hunger. We have all went through all those horrific days and we didn't give up even then thinking that there is always a light at the end of the tunnel.

The positive outlook to life experiences is linked to many aspects of the Afghan cultural heritage in terms of Afghans being adaptive, appreciative/grateful, flexible and persistent. These themes will be further explored, along with strong kinship bond. However, the collectivistic preferences of Afghans that require the submission of personal desires for the sake of significant others was prominent in their constant positive outlook to life experiences.



F1: It's because of my children that I want to have a better life. I work very hard and face what I have to so my children have a better future.

F2: Never give up, hope for the best. I hope that my family is together and that we still have our family friends. I hope we are involved with our own people, gathering and community. I hope to be able to do all that I want to do for myself and others. For Canada, I hope it goes on the way it is. I hope that democracy never loses its ground and everyone gets the rights they have and deserve and the right to be who they are. I hope that everyone has respect for each other and that there is no discrimination.

F2: I live day by day and it is really hope that keeps me going. You never know what tomorrow brings; it is my future plans that keep me moving. Also having other people involved in my life like my family, I want to be there for them and do things for them to make their life better. Making other someone else happy makes everyone in the family happy. I move on with that attitude, if I do this, this is how it will benefit me and how it will change someone else's life. I just go on with a positive mind and see what happens.

*Balancing the Two Cultures:* The balancing process involves adapting to the host culture and maintaining the culture of origin while negotiating the differences.

*Maintaining the Culture of Origin:* The security inherent in maintenance of culture forms an integral part of negotiating development for Afghan refugees in Canada. The cultural foundation (i.e. norms and practices) maintained helps provide Afghans with recreational opportunities that are not otherwise accessible.

M1: Cultural practices, we celebrate new years with hell of bang. We also have two Eids. Our new years is different from the Christian calendar, we go by a different calendar. It falls in March. Everyone looks forward to it, it's time to leave everything else aside and celebrate. Everyone gets together, we have this thing called Haft Mewa, its 7 different types of dried fruits prepared together, everyone drinks that. It's just a very good time. The ladies gossip, the men talk about politics.

F1: For example, when we have Eid, we try to find one day when everyone is off and celebrate. We just try to do as much as we can. If we can't find a day off, we don't celebrate, we just skip the celebration. We don't enjoy life the way Canadians do and when we can't even celebrate those specific dates.... that's why we become very stressed. We can't celebrate the Canadian culture and we don't have the chance to celebrate our own culture.

F3: For practices, we have New Year's and Eids. At the moment that the New Year starts, we go over that table we have set up and we start reading

the Quran. After reading the Quran, we wish everyone a happy new year. We have saying that any day that brings you happiness is an Eid and for that reason even for New Year we wish each other a happy Eid.

The maintenance of cultural beliefs and values also provides an opportunity to pass on their heritage to the next generation.

F1: Of course, my kids need to know about their culture. If my great, great grand kids don't know anything about their culture that would be understandable because they would be considered fully Canadians which is fine but for me it is important for my children to know about their culture but I am sure they won't know.

F5: Of course, every year for the past 7 years that I have been in Canada, I have celebrated every cultural occasion. The cultural foods that are usually prepared on those occasions, I prepare those foods and just like we send food to neighbours in Afghanistan as a way greeting, I send food to my neighbours here too, that is if they don't mind the food and are willing to accept it. I also tell my children too that even when I am not here tomorrow, this is how you should celebrate; this is how celebrated back home and you guys should carry it on this way.

*Strong Sense of Identity:* Actively seeking to instill the Afghan cultural values in the next generation was associated with the notion of exploring identity. In providing conditions for cultural transmission and retention, such as, participation in cultural/religious practices, eating ethnic food, interacting with people from the same ethnic group and encouraging familiarity with ethnic social customs, they are providing the next generation with an identity and an opportunity to know where they came from.

F2: In the future, when you have a family of your own and have your own kids, the generations that are yet to come you want them to know who they are and where they came from. Also, you want your kids to enjoy all the celebration that you enjoyed. I feel like allot of kids that are born here, whose parents have been raised here, they don't know anything about our culture. Christmas for them is like our Eid because they have not been anywhere, where they celebrate cultural events. It is different to celebrate it in a big way with the Afghan community.

M1: It means a lot, it's part of my identity. It's what I identify with, that's what my people, my grandfather, my dad and other family members celebrate. One quote that would apply is, in order to know where you're going, you got to know where u came from. I take that to heart. All of this means allot to me and its part of my identity.

Actively seeking preservation of their own cultural heritage gives them a sense of confidence in their self-identity, and enhances their ability to make a cultural transition and accommodate in integrating into the Canadian society.

F4: The fact that I am so proud to be a Canadian comes from the fact that I am an Afghan. It only takes an Afghan to say that because I am so proud of my origins and home land that I feel pride in Canada for making me what I am. I am able to be what I am because I have had that mentality of being a proud Afghan.

F5: I am now a citizen and you could say that I am a Canadian but at the same time I am an Afghan, I am a Muslim. It means I come from somewhere in this world that has its own culture, faith, practices and we look a certain way that's different from the rest. I am happy with being an Afghan and that's why I feel a sense of pride when I introduce myself as an Afghan.

*Strong Kinship Bond:* For these participants, actively seeking cultural maintenance also contributed in preserving the cultural value of strong kinship bond. Although immigration resulted in the disturbance of the extended family structure, these new immigrants maintained cultural events as an avenue to maintain close connections with relatives.

F3: It means.... Eid e-fatre has a great religious meaning that demonstrates the value of family. It is the best day for us and we want to see our family in Eids.

F3: Yeah, these days to get together with relatives and family is important because they are your source of support. I think psychologically, it is important to know that you have the support of your family and friends. If they get together with you, they are your true friends.

F5: this is how celebrated back home and you guys should carry it on this way. I make sure my children have new cloths and they visit our relatives and I tell them that in starting any celebration, you have to visit the elders in the family and show some respect.

The importance of strong kinship bond in the Afghan culture was further illustrated when extended family members were identified as the main source of support and as individuals

responsible for assisting the participants in overcoming the inevitable difficulties that comes along with migration.

F1: Yeah, I have some friends and I have my niece. Whenever I have any problems I talk to my niece and I feel relieved. I also had my sister who always helped me with my kids when they were young. She took care of them when I was at school or work. My sister and her kids always helped me.

F5: I have my aunt in America and I wanted to be close to her. She has helped me allot with my emotional problems. She always assured me that within a few years I would settle and that my problems would reduce. She would remind me that when I learn the language, when I am accustomed to culture and when my children grow a little bit, everything would be better but she also reminded me that I should not dismiss my own culture and religion in the process.

*Shift in Familial Roles:* The cultural importance given to family and strong kinship bond creates an obligation on the members of the household to shift from the ordinary familial roles when required. In dealing with the challenges of being a newly arrived migrant, some of the participants embraced reversing parent-child family roles as a source of coping. One participant indicated that the children had to take on the financial responsibilities because their father was unable to take part in any form of employment while another participant identified their children as a main source of guidance in Canada.

F3: Yeah, one example is that I had never worked before and when I came here I had to start working. It was so hard for me, every day after work I would cry and complain to my parents about why we came here. My dad couldn't work because he couldn't speak English. Also, the work he did back in Iran, he couldn't do it here so it was extremely hard for us and my siblings and I had to start working.

F5: We tried our best to learn the language. I didn't sit at home and waste time, I went outside, I tried to interact with people and volunteered in school. I have volunteered in a school for over two years. Also, my children helped out in guiding us, translating for us etc.

The collectivistic cultures of Afghans that is formed around notions of interdependence and familial obligation is instilled in and expected of children. The participants indicated that parents

help their children when they need them and the children should step up for their parent's when they are dealing with the challenges of being newly arrived migrants.

F1: Yeah, I feel I have someone beside me. I raised my kids in accordance to the Afghani culture and not the Canadian culture so I feel I can trust them. I am not saying that I will need them all my life, I am an independent woman but I know that whenever I need them, they will be there for me.

F3: well, you know how I said that my parents have a language barrier; it is always me or my brothers that take them to do the doctor or anyone else. Basically, as their translator or do anything else they might need. We are always there for them at their service. We have this cultural belief that if you take care of your parents, your children will take care of you. So I am thinking of my future in a way, I feel like if I do something for my parents today, my children will take care of me tomorrow. Also, they helped me when I needed them as a kid and now it's my duty to help them. I can't repay them for all that they have done for me but the little bit I can.

*Strong Achievement Orientation:* The participants found that their strong achievement orientation allowed them to cope with the challenges of settlement in Canada. They created plans and goals to overcome challenges and improve their situation in Canada. This strategy was most evident in efforts to to learn English, attain higher education and find employment.

F1: Yeah, I set out a schedule for myself and I try to follow what I set out. That way, I feel I can achieve my goals. I wanted to go to college. In my education or work or anything like that, no one helped me, it was always in my mind to have high education and have a good job. It was always with me since I was in Afghanistan but to achieve that goal, I needed guidance and that school helped me, my teachers guided me.

F3: Nothing, I mean I try to work on improving my English every day.

F4: The hardest time was when I was in university, attending classes and working as a research assistant for a professor and at the same time I had night shifts at the factory, to make enough money to survive. I would come 7 or 8 AM sleep for two hours, go to my classes, do some research work and then go back to the factory. Life just moved on that way and on Saturday and Sundays when I did not have the factory job. Most Saturdays I would work but sometimes Saturdays and Sunday was my relaxing time that I would spent in university doing my assignments. It was a very tough time but when it was done, the challenge then was a job. I thought I had a good education and I came out of school with high expectations and considering all that I had been through. I had justified in my head that the job I get must good enough to pay for all my hard work but it wasn't so in 6 months, the

best I have found was a future shop saleswoman but it had nothing to do with my degree but I still didn't lose hope and I continued searching until I found the current job.

F5: In attempt to improve my language skill, I watched allot of cartoons everyday with my son. I also went to library and picked English books for beginners and tried to read it. My interest and zest for life gives me strength. I want to get somewhere and I want to find myself and where I stand in life. I wanted to go forward.

Some individuals also stated that a strong achievement orientation is valued in their culture and they coped by focusing on their need to improve their situation in life for themselves and their family.

F4: Oh yes, Afghan girls are very courageous and they will live up to the highest standard. In Afghan culture, girls are given allot of importance in how they dress or take care of themselves. I have never seen a badly dressed Afghan girl. Education is very important and they are very competitive. They have to live up to their parents' standards and family's expectations. I think all of this have to do with self-respect.

M1: Personally, seeing my parents struggle. If you ask this question from almost anyone of my generation, they would tell you the same thing. Their parents would probably be from the same generation as my parents. Within 30 years in Afghanistan, our parents went through allot. There was the civil war, the Russians and the mujahideen. All our parents who lived through those times struggled to some degree, some more, some less. My dad had to start life twice. A grown man, starting life with nothing, both in India and here. When we came here, my dad had only \$40 in his pocket. My mom too, not just my dad, they both left their families behind so their children could have a better future. Seeing all that they have been through, their efforts in helping me get through college, it adds fuel to my fire, it adds fire in me to do well and pay them back. For example, on nights when I pull all-nighters, my mom will set up snacks for me, she will make smoothies and she would encourage me to have them saying that they are brain food. Also, when I have to get up early, no matter what time he goes to sleep, he will wake up at the time when I have to be up and wakes me up. If he went to bed at 2 or 3, he will wake up at 6 to wake me up. I don't want their efforts to go to waste so I keep working hard and go on with my life.

Evidently, coping strategies for Afghans cross many spectrum from personal to social. However, family (both immediate and extended) holds an integral position in the Afghan culture. Thus, almost all the coping strategies were frequently discussed alongside interfamilial importance,

validating the Afghan holistic and collective orientation to life as a factor in one's personal resiliency.

*Adapting to the New Culture:* Where on the one hand migrants experience the process of cultural maintenance, there is also a parallel process of cultural adaptation to the mainstream society.

This struggle between cultural adaptation and maintenance is inherent in the very nature of the experience of immigration. The Adaptive, Accommodating/Flexible, Appreciative/Grateful and Persistence/Perseverance cultural characteristics of the Afghan migrants function as cultural strengths which facilitate their adaptation and adjustment in Canada.

*Adaptive:* The experience of feeling rooted to Canada and adapting to the Canadian culture was positively regarded: Where on one hand Afghans are keen at maintaining continuity with their ethnic culture on the other they talk about making a conscious effort in successfully adapting to mainstream culture.

F2: Yes, it has changed very much. I would say the first five years, we never tried to change or adjust to the life style of here. We accepted where we were and the society we lived in but we were still very conservative. In the next five years, when my siblings and I started attending university, attending events and meeting different kind of people and groups, there was more of understanding for the children and our parents. Our life style has changed. In the first five years, we didn't know so much. We didn't know about getting involved with people and community or even in decision relating to our school.

F4: I am actually very happy with the way it has been. I guess you can say it has to do with the fact that I am accepting of any community or how Canada was. Initially, there were financial problems and cultural clashes in the beginning but it was easier for me to deal with it then it was for my parents. It means a lot but being a proud Canadian is an Example of how accepting and adaptive Afghans are.

M1: Yeah, for example, in Canada or in the Western world it is ok for a guy and girl to be friends but in my culture, if you still go to Afghanistan, in weddings the guys and girls are separated. So, my parents had a hard time adjusting to that. They don't agree on guys and girl being best friends, to me it's fine. At first my mom was not accepting of the fact that I had girls as friends but I had to convince her. In this sense, I am kind of helping my parents adjust to the Canadian culture because I have spent most of life here.

*Accommodating/Flexible:* Being flexible to different cultural norms and linking values of harmony to the greater Canadian society was a common adaptive strategy that Afghan refugees used in coping with challenges of being a newly arrived migrant. This flexibility in balancing two cultural worlds is a source of strength because as the participants indicate, they have function within two worlds simultaneously. They have to be Afghan among the Afghans and at the same time they have to mingle with the greater population in conjunctions with holding their identity.

F2: I would say at home YES but outside it is different. It also depends on the crowd that I am in. My father says when you live in a society regardless of what your background is or what your cultural beliefs are, don't go against humanity and follow with the rest of the society. He says you don't have to wear a burqa where everyone else doesn't; you have to show respect to people and their space. Because of that, I keep cultural practices within your cultural space and group, outside you have to respect other because there are many different cultures. You have to respect others culture because you want them to respect yours. Within family gatherings or the Afghan community, I am an Afghan and I follow the culture to be respectful to my people but outside I hold my identity but I try to be normal like everyone else. Not that being an Afghan is not normal but to be the same as everyone else outside.

F4: Yes, I think for the most part I have not been an extremist because there are some customs that I don't support and they do not make sense to me. I have mixed other cultures with my Canadian culture. Mostly, the stuff I have adapted from the Canadian culture has some commonality with my own culture. When it comes to family and respecting others, also when it comes to religion and enjoying food and adventures. So I do keep up but it has been modified by my Canadian experiences. What I have adapted from the Canadian culture is what is acceptable within my own culture. I am not extreme to say I am not accepting of other people's cultures.

The process of cultural adaptation involves many changes for migrants. One important area of mutual negotiation and adaptation was between children and parents in regards to letting children mix with friends regardless of gender orientation. As one participant explains, it was a joint effort in accommodating the two distinct cultures.

M1: See here is the thing about the kids in our generation and our parents' generation, I mean we can go to our parents for help and they will no doubt



help us but what they say might not be practical in this culture and environment. You get what I am trying to say? I do go to my parents for help and try their best, I keep their suggestions in mind but I also go to my close friends and I rely on them to help me in certain situations. I take what my friends' advice and my parents and based on that I come up with a solution. That's what I think is the biggest problem with kids in my generation. People who have grown up as full adults in a different culture and then are introduced to the Canadian culture, what they say might not be that applicable because they have a different mentality. However, they install Afghan values in me which is great and I tell them couple of things about the Canadian culture.

*Appreciative/Grateful:* The Participants in this study all had very positive associations with Canada and the Canadian government overall. Perhaps because they came from a war torn country, their gratitude mainly revolved around the fact that there is peace and a lack of violence in Canada, which they believe compensates for any other difficulties associated with migration.

M1: For one, the opportunity to know that I will live tomorrow. I hear stories from my cousins and family back home, they tell me that there is a constant fear that something might happen. Every time, you hear a tire scratching, everyone fears that it might be a suicide bomber. Every time, people get loud, everyone fears that there is a bomb explosion. Mainly, it is the opportunity to know that I will live tomorrow.

**F3:** Yeah, I like the freedom I have. I like that I can speak and express myself. No one will torture me for the ideas I might have or what I might believe in. Whatever I want to do, I can do it and no one can stand in front of me and say I can or cannot do something because I am a woman.

F4: I don't know if it has anything to do with the kind of experience we went through before coming here. I like the life convenience and the fact that I could be Canadian without being born here. This is very important because that's how you can be loyal to a place. If you are not able to call a place your own you won't be loyal to that place. If I was like eh, I will study and work and leave when I don't want to be here anymore. That type of mentality can create a lot of negativity. In situation where I can call myself Canadian without being born here, I can proudly be able to give back to my community.

F5: Although, the population in Ontario is much larger but they are still great in attending to migrants as compared to other countries.

All the participants in this study indicated that they were migrants in other countries before settling in Canada. For this reason, some of the participants note surprise at being treated politely

and are greatly appreciative as it is a positive comparison with their experiences in other countries.

F3: I think Canada is the best country for any immigrant to walk into. If you have been an immigrant somewhere else, you would know what I am saying because anywhere else, they might be speaking the same language as you and be very similar to you culturally but they are still racist. I was in X country and they were so racist, so racist that I could not even tell anyone that I am an Afghan. Here, I can say I am an Afghan so freely and no one would bother you.

M1: I like the fact that the country is composed of individuals like me, who are immigrants. I like the fact that we are not looked upon negatively because of our political stance in the world. I like that, when I went to Afghanistan, I didn't tell people I was foreign because that causes problems with kidnapping and all but when I told people I was Canadian, people were like cool. My American friends who go there, they are called traders, they tell them that the country they live in are killing our Afghans. So, I am happy, I have got it easy by being a Canadian.

F4: Canada has provided a lot actually, it has provided me with the opportunity to live and say that this is my country. That's awesome because I have not had that in the past, in the previous countries where I have lived. My job, my part time job at the beginning, they didn't look at my colour, race or scarf. They just accepted me how I was.

There is also a strong appreciation of the medical care offered and the educational opportunities in Canada. Education for these participants was a top priority. Participants were appreciative that primary education in Canada is funded, as this was not the case in their home country or countries to which they had previously migrated to. Access to student loans, bursaries and scholarships for college or university was also important resources for participants' heightened gratitude for living in Canada. The general appreciation was noted by all the participants, irrespective of whether have or have not had used the educational or medical accessibilities in Canada.

F5: The first opportunity that has helped us is the healthcare system because when I came my children were very young and they needed to be seen by a doctor. I was also sick and I needed a lot of help and I think it is a big help that there was free healthcare.

F1: It is not like America or Germany, it is better than there. The health care system is good because it is free. The only thing is that the job opportunities are less.

F2: Education is number one. When we first came here and we were in the process of getting admitted to schools even though I was kid I remembered how much my dad had to go through to gather tuition for school. He would beg the principle to reduce the school fees for us. When we were getting admitted to school here, I was so worried thinking that it would be a whole allot of money to pay the tuition for school until my cousin told me that healthcare and school are free here. I was so young but there was so much happiness in my heart because school was free here. So yeah, education is a big one.

F4: Then, in university, I got scholarships, the Queen Elizabeth scholarship because of my marks. That is was very encouraging. There are also grants and bursaries, I never had the opportunity to take advantage of those because I was not aware of their existence but I do appreciate that those are available and they should always be available for the people who are less fortunate. There was also the research job I had with the university. It was funded by the government; it was an awesome experience because it gave me the opportunity to be a part of a project in association with NASA. It was boast to my self-confidence. I am proud of it.

Considering that all the opportunities in Canada are viewed through a positive lens and appreciated by the participants, they have felt a sense of belonging in Canada.

F3: yeah, I am happy here. No one bothers us. Canada feels like my own country. I have never been to Afghanistan so I feel like Canada is my own country. I feel at home and relaxed. I feel protected.

F4: I love Canada, it is like my home.

*Persistence/Perseverance:* Despite facing significant barriers in their settlement process, many of the participants made a sincere effort to remake their lives in Canada. Their sense of agency and self-efficacy was challenged by the conditions they have had to live through before migration and after migration but they claim to have not lost their sense of humanity and drive for a better life.

F2: I felt very unsatisfied because of my learning disability and I was really down for a year and half because I felt I was not getting anywhere. Also, I was left all on my own because there was no one else to help me with all of that, once I left York and found something I can manage doing. I just had to

find my own way around. This was the hardest time for me and it also took away 2 years from my studying which bothered me but not anymore because I found what I wanted to do.

M1: Another thing about my culture is that we are very loving and warm hearted people. For example, when I went to Afghanistan a couple of years ago, EVEN THOUGH, even though we have seen so much and we have lost our families, people have lost their arms and legs and everything, we still have not lost our sense of humanity. In Afghanistan, I took a cab when I went around right, if I took more than 10 or 20 seconds in taking money out of my pocket, the cab driver would be like, it's ok don't worry about it. I mean, if I didn't have money in my hand they would call me "lala" meaning brother and say don't worry about it. If you tell a cab driver here in Canada, you don't have the money; they will chase you down and stab you for the money. So yeah, we are very love people. No matter what happens we will always have a smile on our face.

F5: Exactly, for kids or elders, there will always be challenges and difficulties in life but you can't give up. So as long as there is blood in your veins, one should find a way out, the right path. I tell this to my kids all the time, they should never give up because the only rout to success is dedication and perseverance.

Evidently, the participants in this study have positive associations with Canada and the Canadian society overall. They expressed heightened level of gratitude to the opportunities they have been offered in Canada. It was within the framework of their culture to show only appreciation and gratitude for those who have respected them and welcomed them to Canada. For this reason, when asked what they require from society and the government to help them adjust or what they hope for Canada's future, they consistently replied that it is great the way it is.

F2: For Canada, I hope it goes on the way it is.

F3: I think the way it is good.

F4: I think the way it is, is good as long as it does not go downwards.

F5: I like the system that they have and I hope they keep it this way.

M1: I hope the situations stay the same in terms of acceptance of different individuals from across the world.

On a different note, as much as there were experiences of receiving social support and being accepted and welcomed, when analyzing their needs based on their struggles and some of their

suggestions, there is heightened need for more institutional support, community development through institutional support, better education system and more acceptance from society.

*Institutional Support:* Two of the participants had experienced incidences of discrimination based on ethnicity while seeking assistance from refugee centered settlement organizations. For this reason, they desire institution support that is free of discrimination and is responsive to their specific needs. These respondents questioned the motivations of service providers within ethnic organizations who claim to attend to Afghan refugees.

F5: I don't want my ethnic community organization to differentiate between the different people from Afghanistan. We are all Afghan and we all hold the same status in Canada. I don't think it is ethical of them to differentiate between the Afghans from different parts of Afghanistan. I just have a wish that they provide everyone equal help. I have not asked them for help over the past six years because of how they treated me and I am sure there are other like myself.

**F3:** My ethnic community organizations did not help us at all. As soon as they saw what part of Afghanistan we were from, they just disregarded us.

*Institutions*—The participants indicated that settlement agencies and religious institutions are integral part of one's community. When community members see a pressing need for a service or formal support, their first contact might be that agency. They had indicated that the Canadian government differentiates between economic immigrants and refugees. The economic immigrants are attended to in a greater level when considering the number of settlement agencies and religious institutions that are available to them. In comparison to economic immigrants, Afghan refugees have limited access to formal institutions (one ethnic community organization and one mosque). The participants indicated that limited access to such intuitions hinders their adjustment process in Canada.

F1: Government agencies! Afghanistan has had war for many years. We come from a war torn country but that does not mean that we don't deserve respect. They don't have education because they never had the opportunity to attain education. They need more support from the government in getting an education, building organizations, mosques, senior homes. They help and are more respectful towards the Jewish and Iranian community because they

are rich, they are lenient towards the Chinese community because they are educated. These people had opportunities in their country as well; they came to Canada with education and money. When they come they have an advantage. Afghans don't have the same advantage, they come here with nothing. Afghans need more help and support.

F1: Jewish people are the richest people in Canada. It is not fair that because they are rich they have a lot more rights. They are able to practice their holidays. They have days off on their special events. They have many places to pray but Muslims outnumber the Jewish people yet they don't have the same privileges. Afghans, Somalians, Bengalis and all other communities have one or two mosques. If these ethnic people build places of worship with their own money, they can otherwise there is no help from the government. This is not fair. Why should Afghans not have an identity here, why do they not have as many places of worship, why do they have less number of organizations. There is only one Afghan organization. Afghans want to do more but they don't have support. The government does not help them. If the Afghans want to pray, they have to travel two to three hours to reach the afghan mosque. Afghans have very few opportunities; they are always labelled as terrorists. Afghans are very good people but they have suffered allot and when they came here. They came with no money and education so people disrespect them. People here think that Afghans have no identity and education. Afghans are not happy about this.

*Discrimination in hiring practices and the greater Canadian society:* The participants looking for work noted that at some instances they were explicitly denied work because of their ethnicity or have been treated poorly by coworkers and supervisors. In such situations, these participants have generally felt unable to take an active action. Participants identified the support of their trusted ethnic based settlement sector when looking for new work.

F1: The Canadians expected your English to be excellent and they don't want ethnic people; other communities are interested to hire people of their own background. That's why I went to my own community. I called my ethnic community organization and they gave me the number for the Afghan dentist and I went there and they accepted me right away.

F4: I was very quiet and shy so there were coworkers that took advantage of that and made me take on their work as well. Initially, I did because I wanted to be on their good side.

Although the participants were appreciative of how they have been welcomed and accepted upon coming to Canada and undermined their negative experiences, it needs to be acknowledged that

several participants experienced discrimination and/or racism. Some participants stated that Afghans didn't even receive fair treatment in government offices and others stated that they could not reveal their Afghan-identity fluidly without any feelings of distress or confusion among the general public. They hoped for a fairer and equitable society and that people would not judge based on stereotypes. In these cases, helpful intervention beyond interpersonal level is definitely needed.

F1: At the beginning when I first came to Canada, people had a lot more respect for immigrants but now I don't see that anymore. Specifically, in social service, when I first came, they helped me with a lot of respect but now they disrespect you allot. The money comes from the government, it doesn't come from their own pocket but the people that work at the government offices, especially in social services treat people really bad. Now, they don't respect immigrants anymore because they think that they come here and they get free money. The money doesn't come from them, it come from the government but they don't even talk respectfully with people. It is disappointing, it doesn't matter how long you have lived in Canada, its life anything can happen and you might need to end up asking for help from the government. The people that work for the government are not nice at all. The government should think about this. All the people in the working in government offices are rude and impolite.

F2: not just discrimination, also being looked at differently. When people hear my name first thing they related it to is Middle Eastern as if we are something so different from other humans. They think Middle Eastern people are these weird people with horns or something not normal. That's why I always expect the worst and when you expect the worst, you are always prepared for it. You don't always get the worst so it is not always as bad or as frustrated by people's ignorance but you have that expectation that people will say something or look at you differently. You know that their reactions are not right but when you expect the worst, you won't act enraged by people's remarks and reactions. This way you won't get into any conflicts with anyone.

M1: Ignorant people yes. Some people think just because I am an Afghan that I must be an Osama Bin Ladin supporter or an Al-Qaeda member or a terrorist. I run into ignorant people from time to time. I usually associate myself with smarter individuals but you do run into people like that and to avoid conflict, I don't tell them that I am an Afghan.

In summary, Afghan refugees come with a number of cultural strengths that help them cope with the challenges of migration. Of particular importance is the cultural strengths that they apply in

negotiation between maintenance of natal culture on one hand and adapting to the western world on the other.

## Discussion

This study explored the experiences of resilience in recent Afghan refugees during their settlement and adaptation in Canada. The intent was to get a reading of refugee experience in Canada, in order identify the cultural resources that play a role in shaping the risk and protective factors contributing to the experience of resilience. To a certain extent, culture based resiliency characteristics of Afghan refugees demonstrated in the current findings echo those found in literature previously discussed (i.e. Eggerman and Panter-Brick, 2010; Dupree, 2002; Nourpanah, 2010). However, there are a number of cultural strengths of Afghan refugees that have been ignored that may help guide their resiliency in Canada and other third countries of asylum. In this regard, the emphasis has been placed on both using cultural frameworks of ethnic culture and western normative frameworks of the host society on their experience of resiliency. Within this framework, the process of adjustment involves a bridging of two cultural worlds. Considering that Afghans are seen as racially different from mainstream Canadian society, as are their distinctive religious (Islam) affiliation, practices and the holistic and collective orientation to life (Stack & Iwasaki, 2009; Waxman, 2001), it was essential to note how Afghans use culturally rooted understanding of adaptive functioning to manage the process of adaptation and development in Canada.

Through these interviews, the attempts of the Afghan participants to regularize their surroundings and establish opportunities to express their identities were clearly evident. They are neither victims in need of psychological care as suggested by Michalsky (2001), nor poverty-stricken people as suggested by Hiebert (2008). Furthermore, as Nourpanah (2010) explains Afghans are “neither passively waiting to be plucked into a particular bureaucratic system to



shunt them towards a “better life”, nor were they the dogmatic religious fundamentalists of media imaginations” (p. 95). In fact, it was evident through the interviews that Afghans are skilled at using cultural resources as an avenue through which they re-state and protect their identities as “Afghans”, as well as respectfully accommodated the host culture.

### **Personal Coping Strategies**

Previously, research highlighted the importance of such personal coping strategies as strong religious orientation/ spirituality (Carone & Barone, 2001; Friberg et al., 2003) and social support (Greeff & Human, 2004) as protective factors against poor mental health (Seligman, 2002), and as strategies that reduce the impact of adversity (Greeff & Human, 2004). The present study adds to this body of knowledge by indicating that religious beliefs can provide order and understanding to an otherwise chaotic and unpredictable world. The Afghan participants in this study also turned to God, prayers/worship, reading religious texts, carrying out religious practices as coping mechanisms in dealing with life stressors. Religion/spirituality is a source of individual strength in the face of adversity because it constitutes the strong conviction of an individual (Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010). Among the Afghan participants in this study, religion was credited with shaping cultural values that hold important prominence. Consequently, religion, although a personal coping strategy, falls within the frame of cultural strengths that Afghan refugees bring with them and use in the process of adaptation and migration.

Social support contributes to improved coping skills (Taylor, Buunk, Aspinwall, 1990) and was identified as a key coping tool among the current study participants. Predominantly, all newcomers come with cultural knowledge of social support that may shape their expectations of giving and receiving help (Simich et al., 2011). Prior literature demonstrates that social support is influenced by differences within families, specific cultures, circumstances of stress, and

community service settings (Youn, Knight, Jeong & Benton). Among the Afghan participants, social support consists of a form of interaction with family, friends, and professionals that provides both practical and emotional help (Carranza, 2007; Eggerman and Panter-Brick, 2010). Studies of social support have explored both structural (quantity of relationships) and functional aspects (e.g. emotional); (Simich et al., 2011). Adding to this body of knowledge, this study suggests that social support among Afghans articulates the ability to achieve consensus in decision-making, resolve disputes and promotes development. The participants expressed the importance of both informal and formal social supports. Formal support of ethnic settlement organizations is a form of attaining integration in the job market and the greater Canadian society. Considering that Afghans come from a collectivist society, there is greater importance given to family qualities such as warmth and unity. Also, collective cultures like that of Afghans involve role based obligation and fulfillment of group needs with a great emphasis on prioritizing relationships, familial dynamics and holistic views (Dwairy, 1999). Evidently, this obligation of fulfillment of group needs is a strong cultural resource that Afghans bring with them and its contribution to the resilience of Afghan migrants in Canada is a great.

### **Cultural Resources of Afghan Refugees**

According to Panter-Brick and Eggerman and (2012) “cultural values are the “bedrock” of resilience: they underpin the meaning attributed to great suffering, hope for the future, and a sense of emotional, social, and moral order to ordinary and extraordinary aspects of life” (p.369). Yet, the mainstream models of resilience have thus far failed to incorporate the unique cultural experiences of ethnic minorities in the process of settlement and adaptation in the diaspora.

The process of adjustment entails bridging of two cultures and the present study emphasizes the importance of culturally rooted conceptualizations of adaptive functioning among the Afghan migrants to understand the process of their resilience in Canada. The current

data highlighted a number of such cultural values, beliefs and practices that contribute to the experience of resilience for Afghan migrants. Among Afghans, respect and positive outlook to life experiences is founded as the fundamental cultural values that give order and promise to life. As Eggerman and Panter-Brick (2010) explain, respectability among Afghans is the “key to social functioning and individual dignity and core psycho-social dimensions of resilience” (p. 81). Yet, the study of resilience has primarily focused on individualistic notions of personal freedom, assertiveness and internal locus of control (Friborg et al., 2003). The current study highlights the collectivistic preferences for respect, notion of responsibility and obligation holding significant precedence over personal ones. Respect for people, elders, humanity, society culture and religion is a cultural value that Afghans bring with them. One specific way of showing respect that is correlated with the notion of resilience is providing support, whether emotional, psychological or financial to family and/or friends and social support has repeatedly been identified in academic literature as an important mechanism in one’s personal resilience.

Along with bringing the cultural value of respectability, Afghans bring the strong belief in looking at life experiences positively. Seligman (2002) identifies optimism and a positive outlook as important coping strategies that have been shown to act as a defense against poor mental health. Scheier and Carver (1992) add on that positive outlook reduces the impact of stressful events. Certainly, the Afghan participants in the current study have shown an ability to integrate and negotiate the difficulties that come along settlement, to the extent of looking at negative experience as learning opportunities. Their positive outlook was associated with their strong achievement orientation. The participants’ made an effort at creating opportunities for improving their situation in Canada by attempting to learn English, attain higher education and find employment.

Nourpanah (2010) explains that “Afghans would remain suffering victims, reliant on state hand-outs, unable to gain independence and self-reliance, marginalized, ostracized, homesick and grieving but they keep their culture, because it helps them with keeping the connections that are important as cultural strengths” (p. 94). According to the current interviews, the cultural strengths that come with cultural maintenance are sense of identity, strong kinship bonds, strong achievement orientation and shift in familial roles.

According to Lee (2005) ethnic identity is central to the psycho-social wellbeing of migrants. “Ethnic identity pride operated as a protective-reactive factor that moderated the effects of discrimination on depressive symptoms and social connectedness” (Lee, 2005, p.36). Similarly, the current participant state that their active preservation of their cultural heritage gives them a sense of confidence in their self-identity, and enhances their ability to make a cultural transition. In this context, in retaining a sense of natal identity, participants are able to overcome the challenges that come along the settlement and adaptation process. For these participants, actively seeking cultural maintenance also contributed in preserving the cultural value of strong kinship bond. Dossa (2008) argues that strong kinship ties and family networks are significant strategies which Afghan migrants deploy to adjust to life in Canada. Similarly, the current participants identified strong kinship bond as the main source of support and extended relatives as individuals responsible for assisting the participants in overcoming the adversities of resettlement. The cultural importance given to family and strong kinship bond among Afghans also involve role reversing for family members as a source of coping. The notion of interdependence and familial obligation once again serves as coping mechanism in the face of adversity.

Where on the one hand migrants experience the process of cultural maintenance, there is also a parallel process of cultural adaptation to the mainstream society. The Adaptive,

Accommodating/Flexible, Appreciative/Grateful and Persistence/Perseverance nature of the Afghan migrants function as cultural strengths which facilitate their adaptation and adjustment in Canada. Similar to Dossa's (2008) findings, the current study identified themes such as food, parenting, friendships, social networks, education and religion as underlying motif to remain "Afghan" while developing a sense of belonging in Canada. This flexibility inherent among the Afghan participants functioned as a common adaptive strategy that was used in balancing cultural adaptation and maintenance.

Furthermore, the participants' ability to maintain positive emotions (e.g., appreciation and gratitude); despite facing adversities is a factor in their resilient adaptation. Welsh & Brodsky (2010) explains that there is direct relationship between positive emotions and psychological resilience. "The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions provides a helpful framework for understanding the relationship between positive emotions and resilience. The theory posits that positive emotions broaden one's attention, thinking, and behavioral repertoire (Welsh & Brodsky, 2010, p. 171). The participants in the current study repeatedly expressed appreciation for safety and security of their present, the help they receive from settlement organizations, the opportunities they have for education and work, as well as the free medical care system present in Canada. However, as Nourpanah (2010) explains, it is important to emphasize that the generally positive and appreciative responses, as well as the Afghan participant's cultural resourcefulness and determination to succeed should not be mistaken with the approval of Canadian immigration policy or refugee resettlement policy. Through the interviews, it was evident that the participants face a number of adversities during their settlement process including discrimination, racism, apprehension and exclusion. The respondents wish to emphasize the more positive aspects of their resettlement, touching upon the negative very lightly, if at all because it is within the religious traditions to express gratitude

toward life at all circumstance. Islamic traditions emphasize on gratitude as a path to a good life, and prescribe methods for practicing appreciation and gratitude (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). In this context, positive attitude and appreciation are valuable cultural resources that contribute to Afghan participants' experience of resilience.

In addition to being grateful for the opportunities the participants had acquired in Canada, they showed persistence and perseverance in making their life better in Canada. As Eggerman and Panter-Brick (2010) explains "By and large, Afghan families suffer great material poverty, but not a poverty of aspirations" (p.81). Despite facing significant barriers in their settlement process, many of the participants made a sincere effort to remake their lives in Canada.

### **Conclusion**

Finally, in considering the overall data in relation to some of the questions posed at the beginning of this paper, it is apparent that there are a number of cultural strengths that Afghan migrants bring with them. In balancing the process of adaptation to the host culture and maintaining the natal culture while negotiating the differences, Afghans utilize some common cultural strengths that come along with being from a culturally collective society (i.e. social support, strong kinship bond and Shift in Familial Roles). In maintaining their identity, they utilize cultural values such as respect, positive outlook on life experiences and strong achievement orientation as an avenue for successful coping. On the other hand, cultural characteristics such as adaptability, appreciativeness, accommodating and persistence are deployed to overcome the adversities of migration and settlement. In this context, their cultural strengths contribute to both internal/psychological and external/environmental experience of resilience in Canada. These cultural strengths provide the Afghan migrants with unique resources that allow them to fulfill many of their goals. Several of the participants acknowledged that their cultural beliefs, values, norms and characteristics were the main factor in their experience of

resilience. It was the cultural identities and characteristics of the Afghan participants that made them feel a sense of belonging in Canada.

Strong kinship bond and a strong religious orientation also play an integral role among the Afghan migrants as it has with other migrants. As evident through the interviews, strong kinship bond plays an integral role because Afghans do come from collective societies and religion by and large influences their cultural values and beliefs. Evidently, there is a clear trend in resiliency related to ethno-cultural dimension of the Afghan newcomer community. Policy-makers concerned with the settlement and integration of migrants should consider taking these qualities into account. Afghans have a strong sense of belonging, of wishing to establish and are highly appreciative of the way of life available to them. They lack the resources and connections which could make it easy for them to utilize those cultural resources. According to the participants in this study, there is a heightened need for more institutional support, community development through institutional support, better education system and more acceptances from society.

From a policy perspective, Canada's Multicultural Act provides the basic framework for accommodating cultural pluralities of ethnic migrants. However, the Multicultural Act holds two seemingly contradictory principles. It's principle of universalism implies blindness to difference by focusing on individual rights and freedoms and the Multiculturalism principle implies a positive recognition of difference, focusing on the acceptance of the different cultures and ethnicities (Waters, 2009). Based on the discriminatory experiences of the current participants, there is a clear ambivalence in ethnic and cultural tolerance as a result of such contradiction in the Multicultural Act. In this context, it is evident that the principle of non-discrimination and equality requires more than just protecting culture and identities of minorities. There is a need to promote those identities in every aspect of the Canadian society, government and institutional

settings. The promotion of their cultural differences has the power of spreading awareness, understanding and acceptance. Furthermore, considering that maintaining cultural practices holds a significant role in resilience, there should be policies in place that excuses ethnic minorities of work and schooling obligations in order to celebrate important religious and cultural events without penalty. Lastly, all ethnic minorities bring cultural strengths and there is a need for the educational institutions to include ethnic minority parents and their cultural values and strengths in the upbringing and schooling of their children. Having said this, it's also important to acknowledge that including the numerous unique cultures in policy design and implementation is complex but in a multicultural society like Canada, policy cannot be effective in the successful adjustment of migrants if it does not take into account the culture of migrants entering Canada. In this context, it is mandatory to pursue interventions that privilege cultural strength.

#### *Limitation*

The result of this study also has its limitations. The sample for this study was recruited using a snowball sampling method, where a number of individuals known to the author of the study were contacted through e-mail. Considering that the e-mails were sent to those with access to a computer, the study group is not a representative sample of the larger Afghan population. Furthermore, the results and the analysis in this study are based on a sample of six Afghan Tajiks living in Canada. The extent to which experiences within this study are common to other ethnic immigrant groups from Afghanistan needs to be explored further.



## Appendix A



### **Yeates School of Graduate Studies MA Program in Immigration & Settlement Studies Consent Agreement**

**Title:** Cultural resources that Afghans bring with them and its contribution to overcoming difficulties in Canada.

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent to be a volunteer, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure you understand what you will be asked to do.

**Investigator:** Venos Kohistani (Graduate Student), Immigration and Settlement Studies Program (MA), Ryerson University, Toronto.

**Supervisor:** Dr. Kiaras Gharabaghi, PhD, Associate Professor, School of Child and Youth Care & Immigration and Settlement Graduate Program, Ryerson University, Toronto. He can be contacted by e-mail ([k.gharabaghi@ryerson.ca](mailto:k.gharabaghi@ryerson.ca)) or phone (416-979-5000 ext. 4812).

**Purpose of the Study:** This study is about the cultural strengths that Afghan refugees bring with them and how that contributes to their success in Canada despite having faced difficulties. The researcher is interviewing 6 adult community members from Afghanistan who are living in Toronto and have lived in Canada for over 1 year and under 10 years.

**Description of the Study:** If you agree to participate in this study, the researcher will meet with you in a location of your choice for the interview. The interview will be similar to a conversation and will last up to 1 hour. The researcher will ask you questions about your culture, the adversities you have faced and how you have overcome those adversities. Before the interview begins, you will be given an opportunity to have any questions you may have answered and to discuss the study and consent form. You do not have to be a part of this study and you may withdraw at any time without any consequences. Your participation in the interview and any conversations about the study after the interview is voluntary. You do not have to answer any question(s) that you do not want to.

**Risks or Discomforts:** There is little risk involved in this study, but if you feel upset during the interview by what is discussed, you may stop either temporarily or permanently. Furthermore, if you wish, the researcher can provide you with information about settlement services in your community.

**Benefits of the Study:** The researcher hopes to use this information to contribute to the body of scholarly knowledge on Afghan culture and how cultural strengths are used in overcoming difficulties. I cannot guarantee, however, that you will receive any benefits from participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:** What you say in the interview will be confidential and not be shared with anyone in connection with your name. Information from all the people interviewed will be combined without identifying individuals. If you agree, what you say during the interview will be recorded on audiotape. Your identity will not be recorded on the audiotape or revealed to anyone outside of the research team. Your name will not be recorded in notes or used in any public reports or other publications, but only recorded on the consent form, which will be held in a locked and secure location.

**Voluntary Nature of Participation:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with the researcher or Ryerson University. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to stop your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are allowed.

At any particular point in the study, you may refuse to answer any particular question or stop participation altogether.

**Questions about the Study:** If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact.

Venos Kohistani  
venos.kohistani@ryerson.ca

If you have questions regarding your rights as a human subject and participant in this study, you may contact the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board for information.

Research Ethics Board  
c/o Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation  
Ryerson University  
350 Victoria Street  
Toronto, ON M5B 2K3  
416-979-5042

**Agreement:**

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature also indicates that you agree to be in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You have been given a copy of this agreement.

You have been told that by signing this consent agreement you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

I agree to participate in this interview:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I agree to have the interview audio taped:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Appendix B

**RYERSON UNIVERSITY**  
**350 Victoria Street**  
**Toronto, Ontario**  
**M5B 2K3**

**TITLE:** **Identifying Cultural Strengths of Afghan Refugees as a Source of Resilience**

**PURPOSE:** I am a graduate student at the Ryerson University looking for participants for research as part of my Master's thesis for the Immigration and Settlement Studies Program. This study is about the cultural strengths that Afghan refugees bring with them and how that contributes to their success in Canada despite having faced difficulties.

**ELIGIBILITY:** I am looking to interview 6 adult community members from Afghanistan who are living in Toronto and have lived in Canada for over 1 year and under 10 years. The interview will be similar to a conversation and will last up to 1 hour. I will ask you question about your culture, the adversities you have faced and how you have overcome those adversities.

**CONFIDENTIALITY** What you say in the interview will not be shared with anyone in connection with your name. We will keep your identity confidential to the extent permitted by law. Information from all the people interviewed will be combined without identifying individuals.

**CONTACT:** If you are interested in participating please contact Venos Kohistani by e-mail using the following e-mail address [venos.kohistani@ryerson.ca](mailto:venos.kohistani@ryerson.ca)

## Appendix C

### **Identifying cultural strengths of Afghan refugees as a source of resilience**

#### **1) Challenges:**

**What are some of the challenges you have faced?**

Probes:

What struggles have you faced since moving to Canada?

Can you give me any specific examples of especially challenging events or time periods?

How has your adjustment to life in Canada been?

Have the challenges in adjustment to life in Canada changed over time? If so, How has

#### **2) Resiliency:**

**What has assisted you in overcome the challenges you have faced?**

Probes:

How do you manage the adjustment challenges you experience in general?

How did you manage... {specific challenges identified above}.....?

Is there anything that you do on a daily basis that helps you move on?

What specifically gives you strength to move on? Can you give an example?

#### **3) Resiliency and Culture**

**What does it mean to you when you identify yourself as an Afghan?**

Probes:

Can you tell me a little bit about your cultural values, beliefs, norms and practices?

Do you practice the customs of your country of origin?

If yes, how have you kept up with the customs of your country of origin?

What do those customs mean to you?

If no, why not?

Does your cultural background play a role in how you deal with your difficulties?

If yes, can you tell me more about them?

#### **4) Religious Orientation:**

**Are you relying on any community of faith or spiritual practices?**

If yes, would you mind telling me more about them?

#### **5) Sources of support:**

**Is there anyone who is helping you with your practical and/or emotional problems?**

Immediate or Extended Family members?

Friends?

People in your community, or anyone else?

In what way are they helping you?

Are you helping anyone?

How?

**6) What have you learned during your adjustment that someone from Afghanistan coming to Canada should know?**

Probes:

Old and new ways of coping with difficulties

How is your ability to overcome challenges related to your past?

What helps you in your everyday life now in Canada?

**7) Were you provided with any assistance in Canada that has helped you in your adjustment?**

Probe: Have you found help in Canada from..

Settlement agencies?

Ethnic organizations?

Language training programs?

Legal aids?

**8) What opportunities were you provided in Canada that has helped you the most?**

Probe:

Education/work training/loans?

Health?

Work opportunities?

Your treatment by the greater population?

**9) Social Equity:**

**Is there anything that you require from society or the government to help you meet challenges, and support your settlement and social integration in Canada?**

Probes:

Cultural sensitivity?

Health, employment, Acknowledging foreign credentials or other information?

Social services? Other?

**10) Do you like Canada? What do you like about Canada?**

Do you feel like you have been received well or been treated well?

If yes or no, could tell me more about it?

What do you hope for the future?

Probes: Sense of justice and fairness, acceptance

**11) Do you have any recommendations to make?**

for the government and how they receive refugees in Canada?

for people who work with refugees?

for the ethnic organizations that support Afghan refugees?

## Appendix D

- 1) Feeling different
- 2) Preconceived notions of others
- 3) Prior migration
- 4) Comparing to other Afghans (lack of culture maintenance)
- 5) Comparing to Afghanistan (opportunities, culture and respect)
- 6) Inability to maintain original culture values, beliefs, practices and norms
- 7) Negotiating differences
- 8) Balancing the two worlds
- 9) Flexibility is part of the culture strength
- 10) Expectation from children (taking care of parents, respect and understanding)
- 11) Respect of elders
- 12) Depending on each other
- 13) Parents and family are a priority
- 14) Obligation towards family
- 15) Parents sacrificed for kids
- 16) Attributing ability to overcome challenges to family
- 17) Emphasis on education
- 18) Hospitality
- 19) Strong religious orientation
- 20) Culture as natural part of living
- 21) Pass native culture to the next generation
- 22) Wish kids were more cultural
- 23) Holding onto culture (religion, practices and norms)
- 24) Having dual identity
- 25) Being Afghan part of identity
- 26) Family always there.
- 27) Culture more accessible now
- 28) Community as support is good
- 29) Hospitable culture
- 30) Feeling of being judged
- 31) Finding job was challenging
- 32) Government gives immigrants freedom (no one forced values, govern help, school trips, language classes)
- 33) Admiration for host country (health care, work opportunities, acceptance, settlement organizations, Education opportunities)
- 34) Friends' support
- 35) Community support
- 36) Willing to adjust, adapt
- 37) Accommodating
- 38) Family as support
- 39) Culture influenced by religion
- 40) Culture important for identity
- 41) Emphasis on education
- 42) Identifying with Canadianness
- 43) Proud incorporated both cultures
- 44) Lack of initial guidance
- 45) Self-efficacy
- 46) Wish children knew more culture
- 47) My parents took care of me
- 48) Responsibility

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