

A call to action: The use of Photovoice to increase awareness of the migration and integration needs of Yazidi youth refugees in Canada

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Abstract

Exposure to traumatic stressors is common among refugees. This is true for Yazidi refugees, who have experienced immense pre and post-migration trauma. Two separate, but often concurrent, outcomes of exposure to traumatic events are posttraumatic responses and posttraumatic growth. While both are common, the literature tends to highlight negative outcomes. This study explored the migration experiences and needs of Yazidi youth refugees in Canada. Using Photovoice, an arts-based research design that placed the youth at the helm of the research process, the perspective of Yazidi youth was explored. Data was analyzed using participatory analysis, structured from Wang and Burris (1997) three-stage approach. Through collaborative discussions, five themes were identified by the youth: Educating Others on Yazidis and Our Experiences, Bullying and Racism, Help Families in Iraq, Rise Against the Oppressive Government, and Desire to be There to Help. Within these themes, the youth demonstrated the ability for growth and emotional distress to coexist. The use of Photovoice as a research design allowed youth to be placed in control of the data generation and analysis, and this facilitated their empowerment. Recommendations were shared to support youth in maintaining control over their narratives, while emphasizing the importance of building relationships and working with youth to tackle systemic and structural issues.

Keywords: participatory action research, Photovoice, posttraumatic growth, refugee youth, Yazidi youth

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Refugees are migrants who have been forced to flee their country in search of safety and are unable to return due to the threat of persecution associated with war, violence, or mass disorder (Henkelmann et al., 2020; UNHCR, n.d.). Refugees are commonly exposed to multiple harmful and traumatic stressors (Ahmad et al., 2020). Past and current trauma experiences are often at the core of the adverse effects experienced with their physical health, mental health, and adjustment to a new country (Beiser & Hou, 2016; Ceri et al., 2016; Henkelmann et al., 2020). Despite higher occurrences of trauma-related disorders, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Chan et al., 2016; Kirmayer et al., 2011), there are many instances of resettlement success for refugees (Chen & Schweitzer, 2019; Kartal et al., 2018). While a substantial body of literature suggests that positive change can occur from trauma experiences (Tedeschi & Colhoun, 2004), these experiences are underrepresented.

Yazidis, an ethnically Kurdish group situated in the Sinjar region of Northern Iraq, are a distinctive population of refugees who have endured profound and on-going trauma (Canada, Parliament, House of Commons. Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration [Government of Canada], 2018; Kizilhan & Noll-Hussong, 2017). Marginalized due to their unique ethnic and religious identity, they have often been faced with the ultimatum to convert their religion or face execution (Asher-Schapiro, 2014). In 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) perpetrated the 74th recorded genocide against the Yazidi people, leaving nearly 200,000 Yazidis displaced and even more fearing for the lives and wellbeing of themselves, their families, and their broader community (Asher-Schapiro, 2014; Government of Canada, 2018).

While there is considerable research on refugee pathology and growth, research with Yazidi refugees has primarily focused on highlighting traumatic experiences and their negative impact. There is limited attention to growth after trauma for Yazidi youth refugees in Canada. This study was intended to contribute to this gap in research by utilizing an arts-based methodology to understand Yazidi youth refugees' migration experiences and needs. It explored their experiences of trauma while highlighting their strengths and growth. This was accomplished by implementing a Photovoice design. The study was situated within a larger participatory action research (PAR) project examining the experiences of Yazidi youth refugees. The study took a holistic and social justice-oriented approach to identifying barriers and facilitators to resettlement for Yazidi youth refugees, with a focus on identifying the supports they still required. Within this approach, there was a central goal of empowerment and advocacy, fostered through illuminating the voices of the youth participants and being guided by their ideas on how to meet the needs of their community.

Interplay of Trauma, Age, and Refugee Status

Trauma can be understood as the emotional response to a distressing event (American Psychological Association [APA], n.d.), whereas PTSD refers to the immediate and long-term impact of exposure to trauma involving death, threat of death, serious injury, or sexual violence (CMHA, 2016; Hoffman et al., 2018; Mash & Barkley, 2014). Trauma and subsequent PTSD can be the result of direct experience with the aforementioned, witnessing it, learning it has occurred to someone close to you, or by repeated or extreme exposure to the adverse details of the trauma (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; CMHA, 2016). The impact of trauma is influenced by many factors, including age and experiences.

Given the variability in Western and Eastern cultures in what constitutes normal development and the interpretations of certain behaviours, focus should be placed on understanding the developmental tasks associated with adolescence and young adulthood (13-25) (Hazen et al., 2008). This extended developmental period encompasses identity formation (Shahimi et al., 2024), increased independence, the establishment of close interpersonal relationships, and—particularly in emerging adulthood—residential instability and the consolidation of autonomy in education, career, and intimate partnerships (Arnett, 2000). These developmental characteristics make youth particularly vulnerable to the impacts of trauma (Milan et al., 2012; Tsujii et al., 2017),

with effects manifesting in self-image, self-regulation, trusting others, sense of safety, and self-efficacy (Marquer et al., 2015; Mash & Barkley, 2014; Tsujii et al., 2017). During this period, traumatic stress can diminish one's ability to regulate internal states (self-regulation) (van der Kolk, 2005) and disrupt critical transitions to adult roles. Exposure to trauma during adolescence and emerging adulthood impairs functioning across different domains (social, interpersonal, developmental, educational, physical health, and occupational) (APA, 2013), placing youth at an increased risk for psychopathology, substance use, and quality of life deficits (Milan et al., 2012; Tsujii et al., 2017).

For refugees, exposure to trauma often begins before migration (Beiser & Hou, 2016; Kartal et al., 2018). During migration, their pre-migration trauma experiences are compounded by new traumas that occur (Beiser & Hou, 2016; Kronick, 2018). Research with Yazidi refugees has identified high occurrences of PTSD (Ibrahim et al., 2018). Richa et al. (2020) found a 70% incidence rate of PTSD among Yazidi refugees in the Iraqi Kurdistan region, and Ibrahim et al. (2018) discovered a prevalence rate of 90% in internally displaced Yazidi refugees. For Yazidi youth refugees, there have been significant impacts on their quality of life, including physiological symptoms (e.g., headaches, incontinence) and psychological symptoms (e.g., jumpy, cautious, and isolating from others) (Ceri et al., 2016; Wilkinson et al., 2019).

Post traumatic Growth

Post-traumatic growth (PTG) is another possible outcome of experiencing traumatic stress (Sleijpen et al., 2016; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). PTSD and PTG are distinct constructs that are not mutually exclusive (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). PTG refers to the positive change and growth that result from psychological struggle following an adversity (Collier, 2016), leading to improvements in various areas of a person's life (Tedeschi & Colhoun, 2004; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). For PTG to occur, following a traumatic event, a person must process their struggles and incorporate their experiences into their personal beliefs, rebuilding their worldview to include the new information (McCormack & McKellar, 2015; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). Although the trauma itself may continue to be distressing, the individual experiences a shift in their assumptions about the world, which results in positive benefits (Tedeschi & Colhoun, 2004). PTG is indicated if the person shows: greater appreciation of life and altered priorities; warmer, more meaningful relationships; a stronger sense of personal strength; recognition of new possibilities or directions for their life; and/or spiritual growth (Collier, 2016; McCormack & Strezov, 2021; Tedeschi & Colhoun, 2004).

The potential for PTG is influenced by age, the nature of the trauma experienced, and the amount of social support received (Chan et al., 2016; Sleijpen et al., 2016). While trauma exposure can disrupt development and create adverse outcomes (Milan et al., 2012), age is also a mitigating factor for PTSD (Ahmad et al., 2020). During adolescence, many brain-based developmental changes are caused by experiences, not genetics (Perry, 2002). The fact that the brains of youth are more receptive to environmental input means there is considerable potential for PTG under the right environmental circumstances (Mohr, 2014; Perry, 2002).

PTG has been observed in many populations, including refugees and those who have experienced war and attempted genocide. Chen et al.'s (2016) study revealed PTG following genocides, the holocaust, and war, and Preiss et al. (2022) found significant levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms and PTG in first-generation Holocaust survivors. PTG is common among refugee populations (McCormack & Strezov, 2021), and has been observed in different populations of refugees, including Syrian refugees (Chan et al., 2016; Rizkalla & Segal, 2018).

Art, Research, and Post-Traumatic Growth

There is a connection between art and PTG. Art is a powerful means to support personal and social transformation (Goessling et al., 2021; Wright, 2021), and in both research and practice it is an effective approach for helping individuals cope with trauma (Mohr, 2014). Arts-based research offers participants and researchers a way to express themselves that does not rely on language (Lam et al., 2020; van der Vaart et al., 2018), which promotes an understanding of others' experiences that might otherwise be hard to access (van der Vaart et al.,

2018). It also can foster a sense of hope (Wright, 2021). Interpersonal consequences happen as well, as art brings together people of different ages and generations, and encourages understanding, cultural sharing, and renewal (Humpage et al., 2019; Jokela, 2019). The effects of this extend beyond strengthened communities and can influence system-level change by shaping policies and promoting broader systemic improvements (Goessling et al., 2021; Sanon et al., 2014).

Verbal approaches to working through traumatic experiences may not be appropriate for all. Neuroimaging studies have shown that being exposed to traumatic reminders can influence blood flow in the brain, deactivating the expressive speech center needed to express thoughts and feelings (van der Kolk, 2006). Arts-based research and therapeutic work provide a way to explore trauma and facilitate recovery from traumatic experiences through non-verbal communication (Harris, 2009). Art is one way of expressing the discomfort associated with trauma in a way that empowers individuals for positive change, and it can help individuals attribute meaning to devastating events, which can facilitate resiliency following adversity (Harris, 2009). As such, arts-based activities are effective in promoting reintegration with children and youth who have witnessed violence and atrocity, and have been uprooted. Therefore, arts-based activities are a viable option to support Yazidi youth refugees in understanding and representing their experiences associated with migration and integration, while exploring the supports they still require. Hence, the purpose of this study was to investigate this option with Yazidi youth refugees.

Methods

Study Design

This study employed a Photovoice methodology grounded in PAR. It represented the third phase of a larger PAR project with Yazidi youth refugees. PAR emphasizes collaboration between researchers and participants at all stages of the research project, while honouring the goal of promoting social change (Heppner et al., 2016; Kim, 2019). Consistent with this approach, in this study, participants were engaged as co-researchers in all phases of the project (Doucet et al., 2022; Heppner et al., 2016). The researchers and the youth participants jointly explored the central research question of fostering positive change for Yazidi youth and their broader community (Kesby et al., 2007).

In keeping with PAR principles, the specific arts-based method was not predetermined. Photovoice was initially discussed with a community advisory group involved in an art therapy initiative with Yazidi parents at the community agency. With their support, Photovoice was introduced as one of several methodological options and was ultimately chosen by the youth participants as their preferred methodology during an earlier research phase.

This research was conducted with a local community centre servicing newcomer families in a medium-sized city in Southern Ontario, Canada. The research team had an established relationship with the organization, built through past collaboration and volunteer involvement. An advisory team, including the Director of Newcomer Settlement Services, agency staff, and Yazidi youth, were consulted through all phases of the research. Establishing mutual trust was foundational and aligned with the emphasis on relationship building in PAR research (Heppner et al., 2016; Kim, 2019). Prior to and following the study, the Project Coordinator remained actively engaged with the youth through involvement in cultural events and volunteer activities.

Photovoice is an arts-based research approach where participants use cameras to capture images that reflect their perspective (Lam et al., 2020). These photographs are then explored through writing (e.g., writing narratives of their photographs) or dialogue (e.g., individually sharing their photographs) (Latz & Mulvihill, 2017), allowing for deeper understanding (Doucet et al., 2021). The process has proven effective in research with refugee and youth populations, including people with limited language abilities (Coad et al., 2009; Lam et al., 2020).

Curation of the Research Study

Photovoice research can be structured and analyzed in various ways (Sutton-Brown, 2014). Two broad categories include participant-led and researcher-led designs. This study adopted a participant-led analysis, which

enhanced the study's validity and deepened insight into participants' lived experiences. Participant-led approaches involve respondents in all aspects of the research process (Bourke, 2009) and emphasize community-driven action and empowerment (Latz & Mulvihill, 2017; Tsang, 2020).

In the present study, the Project Coordinator served as a facilitator, structuring the analysis while participants led the data interpretation (Nind, 2011). Given that participants are often excluded from data analysis (Nind, 2011), this study emphasized their ongoing engagement to ensure the credibility and impact of the research (Rahman et al., 2022). The analysis followed Wang and Burris's (1997) three-stage process (selecting, contextualizing, and codifying images). The final stage, theories to explain identified concerns, was eliminated as the youth expressed it did not align with their goal of sharing their stories and creating change.

Procedure

The procedure implemented represented a modified version of Latz and Mulvihill's (2017) eight-step methodological script. Steps 3 to 5, which comprised data collection and analysis, were completed over the course of one afternoon.

Step 1: Identification. The research topic was identified in collaboration with the advisory team (Lantz & Mulvihill, 2017). Together, the target population was determined to be Yazidi youth aged 15 to 25. This age range is based on the United Nations (n.d) definition of youth, which defined a 'youth' as an individual between the ages of 15 and 25. The advisory team then expanded to include Yazidi youth refugees. The study topic was then determined – migration and integration experiences of Yazidi youth refugees – and the study question (“What would you like others to know about your migration and integration experience?”) was finalized. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained.

Step 2: Invitation and Participants. Purposive sampling was utilized (Lantz & Mulvihill, 2017). Youth were recruited for a full-day art-creation activity through flyers and word-of-mouth. Eleven Yazidi youth, 3 males and 8 females, participated. Their mean age was 17.4 years old ($SD = 2.60$) and they had lived in Canada for an average of 4.3 years. The sample size aligned with typical Photovoice studies (Sanon et al., 2014).

Step 3: Education. Participants were educated on Photovoice and details of the current project were reviewed (Lantz & Mulvihill, 2017). Upon arriving to the activity, participants were read the Letter of Information and asked to sign an Informed Consent Form. With IRB approval, no parental consent was obtained because individuals 15 and over were determined to be able to understand the risks and benefits of participation and make informed decisions about their involvement. Translation assistance was available through all stages. Participants were instructed on how to use a camera and time was spent reviewing confidentiality and potential risks linked with the study.

Step 4: Documentation. Respondents were divided into four teams, each consisting of two to four people. Each team received one camera (Fujifilm Instax Mini 11 Instant Camera) and was paired with a volunteer from the advisory team for support. Participants were asked to take photos that depicted: 1) their migration and integration challenges, 2) their migration and integration successes, and 3) the support they still needed.

Step 5: Narration. Participants immediately began the narration phase. This marks the data analysis stage of the study, where the youth interpreted their photos and assigned meaning to their images. This phase followed a modified version of the three-stage approach by Wang and Burris (1997), which included selecting, contextualizing, and codifying. First, participants were asked to share and discuss their photos with the group, then they worked together to identify which photos best represented their collective story (Lantz & Mulvihill, 2017). A total of 16 photos were selected by the participants: seven to depict migration and integration challenges, five to show migration and integration successes, and four to illustrate the ongoing support they needed.

In accordance with Wang and Burris (1997), the youth then worked together, following the VOICE acronym (Voicing Our Individual and Collective Experience), to provide context for the chosen photos and to create a story that represented them (Lantz & Mulvihill, 2017). Through group discussion, participants told the

story of the photographs and created captions and titles for each. Two to six captions were created for each photo. This categorizing of photos represented the initial step in identifying the photo themes.

Lastly, in line with Wang and Burris (1997), the youth categorized the pictures by identifying five themes, including two concerns needing immediate action (issues) and three concerns for future investigation (themes) (Lantz & Mulvihill, 2017; Sutton-Brown, 2014). They initially started by identifying broad categories of themes. Through discussion, the youth began creating a story within these broad themes. The youth received a \$25 gift card as an honorarium and bus tickets to cover their transportation, and they also were entered into a draw to win four cameras and extra film.

Step 6: Presentation. The final art piece included four framed displays: one overview frame and three frames containing pictures, captions, and titles that responded to the specific photo prompts. At the youths' request, this final art piece is being displayed at the local university in the Faculty of Education department to support their goal of raising awareness about the experiences of Yazidis. This is where teachers and counsellors in training attend classes. The results from the activity also have been presented at conferences focused on supporting newcomer settlement and integration, as well as training conferences for mental health professionals.

Results

The youth created five themes (two issues requiring immediate attention and three themes for future investigation) from their photos and discussions about their experiences (Lantz & Mulvihill, 2017; Tsang, 2020; Wang & Burris, 1997). These narratives reflected experiences of trauma and adversity while also highlighting strengths, supports, and growth after trauma.

Photo Theme 1: Educating Others on Yazidis and Our Experiences

Youth emphasized the need to educate others about their identity and experiences. In a powerful statement summarizing this, the youth expressed a desire to be heard: "We want people to understand because only Yazidis know about it [the genocide]. We want to be heard." This was referenced in their caption on the photo frame *Support Still Required*, in which the youth expressed the following about the need for support:

We need support to educate others on the genocide and what the Yazidis in Iraq are still dealing with right now. We need support to tell our stories of what happened to us, what ISIS did to us, and why. It is important because we still have family living in this war every day. And there are girls, women, and boys still in captivity or being forced to be ISIS soldiers. There are men still missing that we do not know if they are alive.

Educating others also was important to the youth because "Others think we are fake and acting and that our experiences are not crises." They suggested creating online articles to spread information as one way to educate others about Yazidis. Online learning was a consistent theme throughout the photographs and discussions. Participant #3 disclosed that "I would learn about the Internet and I read articles which helped me learn." This was described in the context of information gathering and learning about activities they could share with their Canadian peers. Participant #4 shared a picture of the computer, explaining that with the computer, "You can help yourself, and the computer helps you help yourself." This was in the context of information that can be gathered through digital platforms.

Figure 1
Computer



Note. This picture, taken by Participant #4, was selected to represent migration and integration successes associated with Technology.

Photo Theme 2: Bullying and Racism

The second issue that arose for the youth was the bullying and racism that took place since arriving in Canada, requiring a need for immediate action. While sharing their photographs, Participant #5 stated: “When I came here, many people were bullying me. I cried too many times.” This feeling of being rejected by others was endorsed by Participant #11, who reported, “People not accepting of you. Neighbours hateful to us and make it hard to feel welcome. Similar to back home because people used to hate each other back home” about their pictures on migration and integration challenges. This idea formed the basis of a photograph chosen by the participants to depict their migration and integration struggles—a photo of a sign where youth expressed, “People were rude. They didn’t respect us, our culture, or our religion” and “people bullied us. They had hate for us and our families.”

Unfortunately, this trend of bullying and racism also occurs in other environments that include adults in positions of power. When describing the challenges associated with school, the youth depicted bullying imposed by teachers in a caption: “Sometimes the teachers show us they don’t like us or care.” Participant #3 also suggested that Yazidis were often blamed for things and not allowed to be heard, reflected in the statement: “If we got in a physical fight they would blame you anyways. Others that live here [born in Canada] would not get in trouble, it would be me.” A collective view among the youth was that support was still needed for their health and dental care to combat the discrimination they experienced. When curating this frame, the caption noted the following: “We [the Yazidis] have been refused help from dentists and doctors because they don’t understand us or because they are racist.” The impact of bullying and racism ran deep within the lives and integration experiences of the youth, and their discussion focused on a need to “[...] create change to make things better,” as captured by Participant #11. They felt one way to foster this would be to have accountability. They brainstormed the idea for a reporting center where professionals could be held accountable, which they felt could combat systemic racism that was being experienced when trying to access health and dental care.

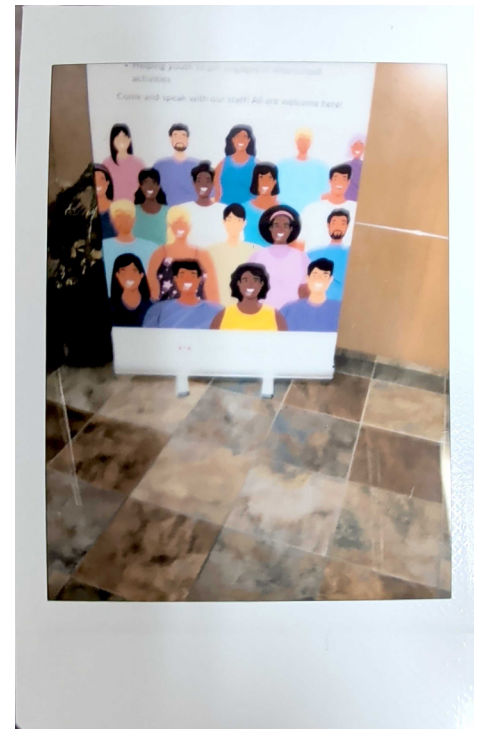
The youth also endorsed the positive impact that others have on their integration experience when they were met with positivity and acceptance. When sharing photos of their successes, the youth identified that forming friendships had given them connection and support. This was endorsed by Participant #6 in the statement, “Having friends here helped to feel safe and better,” and Participant #9 in the statement, “If you need help, you can ask your friends at school anything.” The helpful people at the local community centre also have played an important role in supporting the youths’ basic needs and processing their traumatic experiences. Youth curated the caption “The Centre helps us with documents and bills and gives us opportunities to be involved and face our fears” to accompany a picture of the Centre. The influential role, both positive and negative, that others played in resettling Yazidi youth highlights the importance of supporting positive encounters and combating experiences of bullying and racism.

Photo Theme 3: Help Families in Iraq

The youths’ primary concerns for future investigation surrounded their families and the broader community. Here, concern for Yazidis still in Iraq was at the heart of the message youth tried to capture in response to the prompt “What are the supports you still require?” The youth wrote many captions reflecting this desire to

Figure 2

People



Note. This picture was selected to represent people who contribute to migration and integration challenges for the Yazidi youth.

help their people still in Iraq, including: “The government of Canada, and the countries throughout the world, need to support individuals still in Iraq and suffering,” and “We need others to know what happened because the Yazidis in Iraq are not in a safe place. All we want is support for Yazidis.”

This need for help was twofold. The youth wanted to support Yazidis still in Iraq in finding refuge in Canada, just as they have done. At the same time, they also advocated for helping those in Iraq rebuild their lives there. When discussing this topic, Participant #3 shared the following: “Yazidis don’t want to leave their country, they want to stay and rebuild their houses but they can’t financially.” This led the youth to wonder about many things that warranted further investigation, leaving them with many unanswered questions, including: “How can we support Yazidis who want to remain in Iraq or return to Iraq?” “How can we support Yazidis to rebuild their communities in Iraq?” and “How can we get the government of Iraq to help these individuals?”

The youth expressed a feeling that if others knew what they had experienced and what Yazidis in Iraq continued to experience, more support would be provided to them. Within this way of thinking, the youth suggested that one approach to this theme would be to write letters to the government that could help gather this type of support. However, as Participant #11 stated, it was vital to “find the right way to do that.”

Photo Theme 4: Rise Against the Oppressive Government

The youth also discussed their desire to do something concrete. This centered on a longing to raise awareness of the humanitarian needs of Yazidis in Iraq. Here, there was a trend of raising awareness of the Government of Iraq's practices in order to understand people’s current knowledge of unjust practices. The youth felt that a survey may be an appropriate way to identify the knowledge people had and the stories they had to share, to shed light on the unfair and unjust practices occurring. Participant #3 summarized this by claiming the following: “People would learn it is very discriminatory against people, biased against specific religion and culture.” The youth described their own perceptions of these discriminatory government practices. In some cases, the youth described a gender bias, in which females did not have the same freedom as males in Iraq: “Sometimes we have dreams, and we want to achieve them, but we didn’t always have the support. Didn’t have these chances back in Iraq as a girl.” There was also bias against the entire Yazidi religion and culture. Participant #11 shared this perspective on people in Iraq: “They think Yazidi means terrorist.” These biases have resulted in a lack of support from the Government: “The law did nothing because Yazidi means nothing.” While the youths’ primary concern was to provide support and create action to help Yazidis in Iraq, they felt this was connected to raising awareness of unjust practices.

Photo Theme 5: Desire to be There to Help

Rooted in their desire to do something concrete and their focus on supporting their families and communities, the final theme that emerged was a desire to be in Iraq to help their families and friends. This was hindered by the strict rules on leaving and re-entering Canada before receiving citizenship. When describing these challenges, Participant #7 discussed citizenship challenges: “You can’t leave Canada until you have citizenship,” which means they cannot return home — “We can’t go home [to Iraq].” The ability to get citizenship and have the freedoms that came along with this was made more challenging by the language barrier, as noted by Participant

Figure 3
The Centre



Note. This picture was taken to represent The Centre, which was pivotal in the migration and integration successes of the youth participants. The centre was central in many aspects to resettlement success, including being a place where the youth were surrounded by helpful and supportive people.

#13 when sharing a photograph of a citizenship handbook: “It’s hard to get citizenship because I couldn’t speak the language.”

The youth wanted to educate others on the impact these rules and regulations have on them, including how refugees are perceived. The youth felt that Yazidis have only one chance to enter Canada, which seemed unfair compared to other people, religions, and cultures who “get so many second chances.” They felt this was another form of discrimination. The youth noted that others, including individuals who joined ISIS, have had the opportunity to return to Canada even after leaving for harmful purposes. They described this in their statement:

We have only had one chance and those that have hurt us are allowed back in the country with no problem. What’s the logic in letting these people that left Canada to hurt others return here? These people are leaving Canada and going against Canadian values of freedom and are allowed to come back. Those who are getting hurt by those actions aren’t allowed to enter the country.

All in all, the youth felt it was not fair that people from Canada can leave and fight with ISIS, and then return to Canada and be free, all while the Yazidis were still stuck in Iraq, and the Yazidis in Canada could not leave. They hoped that by sharing this, they could impact policy to allow them to travel back and provide help to their families in need. Thus, the rules surrounding leaving and entering Canada and the impact this had on refugees by being denied entry while others were granted it warrants further exploration.

In conclusion, Yazidi youth in this study were vulnerable in sharing their experiences and needs as related to their pre and post-migration experiences. While their own distress was evident in their individual and collective stories, the youth demonstrated significant personal growth by using their voices for activism. This was evident by their central focus on educating others. While the youth shared the positive impact this would have on themselves and their own adjustment in Canada, predominantly, their goal was to rally support for their families and communities still in Iraq. They also aimed to shed light on the unfair and unjust practices that occur, which have had an immense impact on Yazidi youth, their communities, and their ability to adjust after migration. This included ongoing bullying and racism, the oppression faced by Yazidis by the Government of Iraq, and policies in Canada that seem discriminatory.

Discussion

The experiences and difficulties of the youth in this study, as described in the five photo themes, can be understood as intra- and interpersonal experiences, as well as structural and systemic experiences. This aligns with McLeroy (1988) Social Ecological Model, which highlighted the complex interaction of personal and environmental factors on behavior and well-being, emphasizing the importance of addressing all areas as part of intervention and support (Golden & Earp, 2012). Woven into the discussions we had with the youth also was a clear picture of both post-traumatic responses to trauma and PTG. Throughout this study, the youth represented the ability for growth and emotional distress to coexist, which clearly reflects concurrent constructs of posttraumatic responses to trauma and PTG, as described by Zoellner and Maercker (2006).

Figure 4
Citizenship



Note: This photo, taken by Participant #13, was selected by the youth to represent Citizenship as a challenge associated with their migration and integration.

Intra- and Interpersonal Experiences

Yazidi youth in this study discussed intra- and interpersonal experiences associated with migration, depicting both difficulties, connections, and growth. On an intrapersonal level, the youth struggled with navigating their feelings and experiences related to their traumatic encounters and migration experiences. This was evident by their deep emotion associated with sharing their individual and collective stories of trauma of the genocide and of their missing family members in the theme labeled, “Educating Others on Yazidis and Our Experiences.” It also was observed through the uncertainty they held for the wellbeing of those in Iraq, as described in the theme “Help Families in Iraq,” and the discriminatory practices they experienced noted in the themes “Rise Against the Oppressive Government” and “Bullying and Racism.” Youth described personal struggles with seeing individuals who have targeted their community living freely in Canada, as described in the theme “Desire to Be There to Help.” Their ability to process and live with their experiences was further hindered by their interpersonal encounters, such as seeing those who support and are connected with ISIS, and the general lack of awareness of their experiences. As part of the “Bullying and Racism” theme, the youth described discriminatory encounters with neighbors who had hate for them due to being refugees, individuals who did not respect their religion, and outright discrimination when being refused services or dismissed by health care providers. In other instances, such as with the theme “Educating Others on Yazidis and Our Experiences,” the youth reported that others did not believe “their crises.” While the youth clearly described many instances of discrimination, they also discussed times when they felt misunderstood by others because their stories were not known by others. In contrast, the youth discussed many examples of interpersonal connections that were facilitated their migration experiences. Within the theme “Bullying and Racism,” the youth described the immense positive impact others had on their integration. The friendships formed, and guidance from services and organizations were central to promoting their migration and integration successes.

Structural and Systemic Experiences

While many of the youths’ experiences happened at the intra- and interpersonal levels, numerous instances pointed to structural and systemic problems that need to be addressed in Canada and Iraq. The youth felt impacted personally by the trauma they had experienced through war, violence, and threats to their own and community livelihood, all of which are precursors of posttraumatic responses (Beiser & Hou, 2016; Kartal et al., 2018; Mash & Barkley, 2014). None of those experiences, however, represented intra- or interpersonal problems. This pointed to deeply rooted systemic racism occurring within Iraq. This culture of racism and discrimination allowed for an entire ethnic group to be targeted, violated, and killed for centuries in an attempt to eradicate their population. The youth in this study depicted the nature of the government system in Iraq in the themes “Educating Others on Yazidis and Our Experiences” and “Rise Against the Oppressive Government.”

The Yazidi youth reported feeling physically safe here in Canada, but sadly, post-migration, they continued to experience instances of racism and discrimination. The spread of misinformation and lack of accurate information fostered a culture in Canada where Yazidi young people felt misunderstood, rejected, and discriminated against by peers, neighbors, the school system, and health and dental care providers. As was described in the theme “Desire to Be There to Help,” rules regarding citizenship seemed biased in favor of Canadian natives. In addition, our youth participants had a strong desire to return home to Iraq to see their family members and help their community rebuild. Yet, they were hindered by the strict rules in place in Canada while awaiting citizenship. This called into question the system's structure, which places such strict rules and regulations on refugees. Our Yazidi youth called for action to change this process to allow them to be a part of the change and support relief being provided to Yazidis who remain in Iraq. Moreover, the process of obtaining citizenship was challenging due to other structural barriers, such as the language barrier, which made it difficult for Yazidis to access the system to receive support and pursue citizenship.

Growth

Despite the trauma they experienced, the youth in this study showed significant personal growth, which was in line with PTG (Tedeschi & Colhoun, 2004). While much of this growth was reflected on an intrapersonal level, the youth expressed hope that their personal development could inspire systemic growth and change. A changed sense of priorities and a recognition of new possibilities for their life (Tedeschi & Colhoun, 2004) was evident by the way they began to see themselves as activists. They felt a greater sense of personal strength (Tedeschi & Colhoun, 2004) as they moved from feeling like recipients of support to seeing themselves as agents of change who can support others. It was also evident in how they felt that they could now share their stories to educate others to be heard and seen for who they are. Despite feeling vulnerable in many ways, as a result of discriminatory treatment, the youth established a sense of relative safety in Canada in comparison to before migrating, which allowed them to speak out against their oppression and call for change. This all reflected personal growth across many domains of our Yazidi youth participants, who began to see themselves as agents of change who can move the needle toward larger, system-level change.

Implications

The youth in this study showed a strong ability to express their own views and to create a story that reflected the collective perspective of their community. Using an arts-based research design, which helps overcome the fact that trauma can affect a person's ability to articulate thoughts and feelings verbally (van der Kolk, 2006), the youth were able to move beyond their circumstances to a place where they felt empowered to advocate for themselves and their communities. This research design promoted a sense of community as the youth worked together to move from their individual stories, to creating a collective story and a call to action (Humpage et al., 2019; Jokela, 2019).

Overall, this research emphasized the importance of nonverbal methods for processing trauma experiences and engaging in activism among Yazidi youth refugees (Harris, 2009; Mohr, 2014). As shown in this study, art was an effective way to evoke deep insights into the youths' experiences that might have been otherwise hard to access (van der Vaart et al., 2018) due to trauma's impact on the brain (van der Kolk, 2006) and language barriers. These findings have been, and will continue to be, valuable for program development. Following this study, the researchers helped facilitate the creation of a children's yoga group for Yazidis, providing an opportunity for additional members of the local Yazidi community to process their experiences nonverbally. Furthermore, knowledge from this study should continue to inform program development aimed at supporting Yazidi refugees by offering them diverse and meaningful opportunities to process trauma and engage in self-and-community advocacy through arts-based approaches. Counselors and psychologists also can use these findings to guide their session planning when helping Yazidi refugees and perhaps others who have experienced severe trauma. Further, these professionals can utilize arts-based methods instead of verbal support approaches to assist these populations.

Aligned with the above noted actions, this research highlighted the need for opportunities for Yazidi youth refugees to share and discuss their experiences in contexts where they feel in control of their narrative and empowered. This could involve continuing to foster safe spaces for Yazidi youth refugees to share their stories, while also taking a strengths-based approach to providing support. A strengths-based approach shifts the focus from deficits and challenges to success and growth. In clinical practice, this may involve balancing unpacking past experiences with highlighting areas of resiliency, helping Yazidi youth identify sources of support, and adopting solution-focused approaches that align with their desire for advocacy and change.

This study also illuminated the important role of relationships for Yazidi youth and their resettlement journey, which highlighted the need for a social-ecological approach to understanding and support. It is clear that negative interactions with peers, teachers, and service providers, intertwined with misunderstanding, prejudice, and judgment, left a lasting impact on our youth participants. In contrast, positive interactions that included openness, acceptance, and understanding had a significant impact on the Yazidi youth and their resettlement

experiences. Yazidi youth need support in building these connections with others. The youth in this study believed that sharing their stories was one way to help foster this. They believed if their stories were heard, their community would be more understood and ultimately more accepted by others. Action is needed to support Yazidi youth in their advocacy and activism journeys. As practitioners, those connected with the school system should actively engage in advocacy efforts that help to inform the school community on the experiences of the Yazidi community with the goal of increasing empathy, reducing the risk of triggering traumatic memories, and advocating for practices and supports that would be beneficial. Furthermore, deeper exploration of the role of relationships in the migration experiences of Yazidi youth is needed. This should include a more extensive examination of the prejudicial and discriminatory elements, which our youth described as an issue requiring immediate action.

While discrimination and prejudice affected the youth in this study on intra- and interpersonal levels, it pointed to a much deeper rooted problem of racism and discrimination that is occurring in Canada and Iraq. Structural barriers are impacting the migration experiences of Yazidi youth, which represents a structural and systemic level problem requiring action. Importantly, the youth in the present study expressed a desire to be a part of this action. Thus, action that creates change beyond the personal level for these youth is needed. Action that addresses the barriers they are experiencing and the deeply rooted systemic discrimination is needed. This calls for policy modifications that are informed by the experiences of Yazidi youth and works with this population to create meaningful change. This change needs to address the discrimination and prejudice occurring in Canada, as well as raising awareness of the political climate in Iraq and the subsequent impact of this climate on Yazidis still residing there. On this note, Yazidi youth need to be part of this change. Their voices and the needs of the Yazidi community must be central to the change occurring to ensure those needs are met.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors of this study have no competing interests to disclose.

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