Learning to Belong, Belonging to Learn: Syrian Refugee Youths' Pursuits of Education, Membership and Stability in Lebanon

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Dedication

At our very first meeting, Waadi tells me the decision calculus young Syrians’ must make as they cautiously imagine their future: “We have two choices, just two choices: either die in Syria, or die in the [Mediterranean] sea...In Syria, you don’t know if you will die today or tomorrow. It depends on the situation. But in the sea, you have 50% [chance] to be alive, and 50% to die, so it’s better to go by boat. It’s a bigger chance. You have more of a chance to live [than be in Syria]...When you get to Germany, Sweden, or Spain or France, you start the beginning of your new life.”

Those early moments of our conversation take me back to the many telling and retellings of my maternal and paternal grandparents’ experiences of the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, of them believing that they could no longer belong in and with the land that had birthed them, of their pursuits of a “new life,” a life of uncertainty, hope, and opportunity, whose lure is visible in Waadi’s glistening hazelnut eyes. Though Waadi and my grandparents will never meet, the refrains of a hopeful future are intimately threaded together.

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experiences of loss and liberation. I hope I do justice to your narrations, and tell and retell your experiences in ways that are respectful, authentic, and whole.

To my grandparents and parents, thank you for being my first teachers, for showing up repeatedly and unquestioningly, and for inspiring and igniting in me the desire to do good in the world, even when it can seem so terribly fractured and divided. This one is for you.
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Abstract

The need to belong is a fundamental human need, yet in contemporary contexts of migration, conflict and forced displacement, it remains severely contested and continually undermined. The policies of education institutions and beyond, and the practices of individuals embedded within these institutions, can deepen or diminish individuals’ sense of belonging and membership within the communities they find themselves in.

The world is currently experiencing yet another epoch of migration—65.6 million people were displaced by conflict in 2016. How do refugee youth displaced by conflict foster and challenge their claims on membership and construct their need to belong? Through three papers, this study investigates these issues in the case of Syrian refugee youths’ belonging in Lebanon. Data for this study are based on 62 in-depth, repeat interviews conducted with Syrian refugee youth and policy makers over two-phases of a year’s worth of data collection in Lebanon, in 2016.

Through literature from the fields of sociology on boundary crossing, and from the field of forced migration studies on refugees’ unique position in between nation-states, the first paper conceptualizes ideas of refugee youth belonging. Through three portraits, it investigates refugee youths’ every day practices by which they come to acknowledge, negotiate and transcend the very boundaries of belonging that have otherwise constricted them.

The second paper examines the role of higher education policy and practice in expanding the boundaries of belonging. Specifically, it investigates the role of higher education scholarships for refugee learners and through Lipsky’s theory on street level bureaucracy and Nancy Fraser’s scales of justice, it unveils the many equity considerations
that are often overlooked in organizations’ distributional efforts to level higher education participation for refugee youth in Lebanon.

The final paper analyzes the role of social supports for refugee youth in Lebanon, as mediated through individuals and institutions. Building on work from the fields of community psychology and sociology, it finds the many locally and globally situated supports that refugee youth marshal and share, as they chart pathways to their education and life aspirations.
Introduction

The world is currently experiencing unprecedented levels of forced migration as a consequence of conflict, the highest since the Second World War (UNHCR, 2014). A million South Sudanese arrived in Uganda within a single year in 2017 (UNCHR, 2017), 800,000 Rohingyas are in Bangladesh at the time of this writing (UNHCR, 2018). Refugees, individuals who flee their country owing to persecution, war, or violence and are unable to return home (United Nations, 1951), experience the most immediate, personal, and debilitating impacts of conflict and displacement. This experience is particularly acute for children and young people who become refugees, especially as they experience ruptures in their social environments of family, school, neighborhood, and society (Garbarino, 2001).

Juxtaposed against the phenomenon of mass displacement is the global rise in nationalism and nativism across the Western world, where immigration has become a highly contested issue (Bonikowski, 2017). For youth forcibly displaced by conflict, where are places where they can feel they truly belong, spaces where they are able to experience stability, safety, and a sense of attachment and membership to a larger collective? Conflict forever transforms the way young people relate to themselves, others around them, and society at large (Dryden-Peterson, Bellino, & Chopra, 2015; Sommers, 2006; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009). Yet, mounting evidence has noted the many ways in which young people display unbridled agency and relentlessly pursue their education and life goals, despite their personal experiences of conflict and displacement (Bellino, 2017; Clark-Kazak, 2011; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2015; Sommers, 2012). Given the simultaneous rise of nationalism and the unprecedented levels of forced migration and displacement, understanding how
refugee youth navigate boundaries of belonging and chart pathways to their education and life goals is an urgent theoretical and empirical priority.

When displaced, refugees occupy a precarious position within the host nation-state. Devoid of the social and legal rights afforded to the host nation-state’s citizens, refugees are never able to experience full membership and often find their lives governed and impacted by the policies and decisions of actors within global and national institutions. In this situation, refugees occupy the particular role of “noncitizens” within their host nation-states.

In this three paper dissertation, I ask how young Syrians confront and contest the boundaries of belonging and continue their pursuits of education when displaced to Lebanon. As of October 2016, Lebanon was hosting 1.5 million Syrian refugees within its national borders (UNICEF, UNHCR, & WFP, 2016). With a population of just 4 million, one in four individuals in Lebanon is now a Syrian refugee. The Government of Lebanon’s response to this influx of Syrian refugees in the country is guided by Lebanon and Syria’s tumultuous historic past, along with the fact that 450,000 Palestinians continue living in Lebanon, some since 1948 (UNRWA, 2013).

The three papers that together comprise this dissertation approach the inquiry through different lenses, representing the vast constellation of actors that intersect the lives of young Syrian refugees: structures and institutions in Syria and Lebanon, within and beyond the domain of education; Lebanese nationals; other young Syrian refugees in Lebanon; and, Syrians in diaspora. Each of these actors contributes to deepening or diminishing young Syrians’ belonging in multiple and, oftentimes, contradictory ways. Threaded through these papers is a particular focus on examining the global, national, and local forces that circumscribe young Syrians’ opportunity sets as they pursue their lives and
education goals. Using data gathered through repeated interviews with fifteen young Syrians, each of these papers deliberately centers their experiences, perspectives, and voices.

Drawing from sociological work on belonging and its relationship to the maintenance of social and symbolic boundaries (Alba, 2005; Lamont & Molnár, 2002), the first paper investigates the many ways young Syrians perceive and navigate the boundaries of belonging in Lebanon. Through portraits of three young Syrians, I begin to build a portrait of the concept of refugee youth belonging. I find that participants frame safety and dignity as foundational to the idea of belonging as noncitizens in a state that continues to reject them through its policies and practices. Tired of being rendered invisible in Syria under the dictates of a brutish regime that continues to persecute them, young Syrians aspire for visibility in Lebanon. Unsurprisingly though, their quest for visibility in Lebanon is accompanied with multiple vulnerabilities. Despite these vulnerabilities and seemingly insurmountable barriers, they continue their pursuit of their education and life goals, sometimes by waiting patiently and, in other instances, by slowly charting their ways forward. To successfully do so, participants rely on key relationships that help blur and dissolve brightly etched boundaries to belonging in Lebanon. Not only do they use these relationships to blur these boundaries for themselves, but they also develop key relationships with other Syrians to dissolve these boundaries for others like them. This paper concludes with implications for educational research and practice to support young Syrians’ in fostering deep, meaningful, and authentic relationships that allow them to experience safety, self-worth, and dignity.

The second paper examines the role higher education plays in dissolving and diminishing, or developing and deepening these boundaries of belonging. Specifically, this
paper examines the ways global and national actors within the field of refugee higher education leverage scholarships as a mechanism to expand access to higher education for Syrian youth. However, I find that, as is with any distributional efforts, fundamental considerations of equity emerge. This paper is among the first to apply Lipsky’s theory of street level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980) to the field of refugee higher education. It then uses Nancy Fraser’s 3R framework of redistribution, recognition, and representation (Fraser, 2000, 2010) to examine the equity considerations that emerge through the redistribution of scholarship money to young Syrians. I find that fundamental dissonances emerge in the ways young Syrians and the organizations funding their higher education envisage the future of young Syrians in Lebanon.

Though organizations’ imaginings of the future are tied to the idea of developing agentic, capable Syrian citizens, willing to engage in post-conflict reconstruction, young Syrians’ imaginings of the future are vastly different and are instead linked to opportunity, regardless of geography. Moreover, though organizations continue expanding access to higher education, they are unable to overcome the many institutional and structural barriers that exist within the Government of Lebanon’s bureaucracy, barriers that are oftentimes beyond those within the purview of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and consequently harder to dismantle or negotiate. Furthermore, in their singular focus on expanding access to higher education, organizations tend to overlook the many challenges that confront young Syrians as they transition through their higher education trajectories. The paper concludes with concrete recommendations for policy and practice and key questions that organizations involved in the delivery of refugee higher education scholarships should consider in the design of their policies and programs.
The third paper engages with the challenges uncovered in the second paper. Given the lacunae in formal, institutionalized supports available for young Syrians to overcome the challenges they encounter in their transitions to higher education, the third paper focuses on the self-initiated social supports that young Syrians marshal and share onward with other Syrians. Drawing from work in community psychology and sociology, it investigates the timing, sequence, and sources of different social supports and their salience in young Syrians’ education and life trajectories. These social supports serve multiple functions—academic, emotional, informational, financial—and are used in multiple ways at different time points as young Syrians adjust to life in a new society, Lebanon, with whose socio-cultural scripts they are largely unfamiliar.

Furthermore, given the multiple spaces that young Syrians occupy—in Lebanon, in Syria, and onward in diaspora—these supports cut across time and geography, bringing into relief their transnational dimensions. These supports acquire salience since there are no formalized supports that pay heed to young Syrians’ psychosocial needs and the informational gaps they confront when in Lebanon. Cognizant of the absence of these key material and non-material supports, and based on their experiences of supports that have bolstered their trajectories, young Syrians also transmit and share these supports onward with other young Syrians. However, participants focus on self-initiated, naturally occurring, loosely organized social supports that they themselves are able to develop and sustain. Given the haphazard nature of these supports, their sustainability and efficacy over the long-term remains questionable.

Together, this dissertation examines refugee youth belonging from global, national, and individual lenses. It finds that international refugee law and refugee higher education policy and practice shape a promise of possibilities of belonging in Lebanon for Syrians. The
everyday experiences of young Syrians in Lebanon, however, disrupt this narrative. For these young Syrians, belonging in Lebanon is virtually impossible. In the absence of local belonging, I ask if transitional belonging is a more stable, secure, and sustainable possibility for young refugees and propose the potential transnational spaces might hold for rendering the supports that formal, humanitarian organizations are unable, or unwilling, to provide to young refugees.
References


Physical borders, symbolic boundaries & refugee youth belonging:

Young Syrians’ experiences of displacement in Lebanon

Introduction

On 14 February 2015, 23-old Ali, a Syrian refugee in Lebanon, volunteered with a group of Syrians, handing out free red roses to Lebanese passersby in Beirut’s bustling Hamra shopping district. Attached to each flower was a handwritten note that read: “From the Syrians to the Lebanese people – thanks for hosting us, thanks for the hospitality.” The flowers and the note were a token of appreciation acknowledging the hospitality Lebanon and its citizens had extended by hosting nearly 1.5 million Syrian refugees since conflict first began in Syria in 2011. As the volunteers handed out the flowers, some brushed away the young Syrians, overlooking them entirely. Others were suspicious and thought the group of youngsters was asking for money. A third group of Lebanese graciously accepted the token, noting that it was their “duty” as Lebanese people to expand the boundaries of inclusion and belonging.

Refugees, like Ali, are individuals who cross international borders to flee from persecution, war, or violence and are unable to return home due to fear of persecution and violence (United Nations, 1951). As they cross territorial borders and physical boundaries, they often confront a different set of boundaries that host country governments and citizens construct. One way in which these boundaries are marked is through nationality and citizenship. Though the rights afforded to refugees are articulated in international global instruments, such as the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, nation-states hosting refugees must in turn interpret and apply the principles and rights enshrined within these instruments. Even when nation-states hosting refugees, or
noncitizens as they are often referred to, create provisions for refugees to access social services, the everyday practices of host country citizens can expand or constrict refugees’ sense of belonging. Like Ali’s experience on Valentine’s Day, refugees’ interactions with host country citizens are variegated, with implications for their experiences of exile and belonging.

Existing global refugee policy envisages refugees’ belonging and their long-term futures as inherently attached to, and bounded within, nation-states and their physical borders. With the goal of ultimately protecting refugees from harm and of sharing responsibility among countries hosting refugees, UNHCR, the UN organization mandated with safeguarding and advocating for refugee rights, has adopted a durable solutions framework. This framework offers three possible long-term solutions for refugees’ integration: voluntary repatriation, which entails facilitating refugees’ eventual, but voluntary and self-determined return, to their countries of origin once peace is restored and the threats to personal safety and persecution have subsided; local integration, or the inclusion of refugees in host countries, especially in cases where refugees are unable to return to their countries of origin; and finally, resettlement, which enables permanent residency in a third country, in most cases a developed country (UNHCR, 2003, 2014a).

Though a comprehensive framework on paper, in practice, it does not align unequivocally with the realities of refugees’ experiences and the patterns underlying contemporary forced displacement. Conflict and displacement are increasingly protracted; with no near resolution to conflict in sight, the possibility of return for refugees remains elusive. In 2014, the average length of exile in 33 protracted contexts was 25 years on average (UNHCR & Global Education Monitoring Report, 2016). Moreover, if and when return becomes possible, post-conflict situations in countries of origin are often
characterized by weak governance, fragile institutions, and ruptured social relations (UNHCR, 2003). Local integration presents its own set of challenges: 84% of the world’s refugees seek refuge in countries neighboring their own, countries with stretched socio-political institutions themselves (UNHCR, 2016). In these contexts, refugees often confront restrictive policies and practices that curtail their freedom of movement and thwart their access to quality education and productive livelihoods. These settings are therefore sites where “potential for human growth and development is stifled” (UNHCR, 2003, p. 4). Finally, the durable solution of resettlement to developed countries is available to less than 1% of the world’s refugees (UNHCR, 2014a).

Socio-anthropological research on refugees’ experiences in their host countries seeks to decenter, or even discard, these nation-state-based and legal categorizations of refugees. Instead, it examines multiple forms of refugee belonging, inclusion, and exclusion that exist, despite, or in addition to, these very legal and policy based tropes (Hovil, 2016; Kuch, 2017; Landau & Amit, 2014). These works have found numerous ways in which refugees negotiate formal conceptualizations of nationality and legal citizenship, and their experiences of belonging within the sub-national, local communities in which they go about their day-to-day lives. Moreover, scholars in the field of refugee studies have called for forced migration scholarship to reflexively distance itself from exclusively, policy-driven agendas and categorizations. These categorizations obscure the ways in which refugees actively build their worlds within broader social processes of globalization, migration, and social transformation (Bakewell, 2008).

Responding to these calls, this study adopts a grounded approach to examining the ways in which young, Syrian refugees perceive and navigate the boundaries of belonging when displaced in Lebanon. Through three portraits, it focuses on the ways Azaa, Ali, and
Amal, each a Syrian refugee between 18 and 30 years old, conceptualize and experience belonging in its multiple forms. I specifically focus on young refugees (18-30 years) because of the developmental stage individuals in this age find themselves in. As young refugees transition to an altogether new developmental stage, that of young adulthood, they also must grapple with the disruptions in their social order brought about as a consequence of conflict and displacement. As these two transitions—developmental and social—coincide or even collide, they fundamentally shape young peoples’ worldviews, and alter the way they relate to themselves and others around them (Dryden-Peterson, Bellino, & Chopra, 2015; Sommers, 2006; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009).

To create a conceptual framework of belonging, I first define belonging and its relationship to social, and specifically symbolic, boundaries. I then outline the different ways in which refugee youth, outside the parameters of legal citizenship in the nation-state they seek refuge in, perceive and navigate these different boundaries of belonging.

**Conceptual Framework**

**Belonging and boundaries**

Belonging is an intuitive concept, often described as feeling a sense of ‘home,’ where home symbolizes familiarity, comfort, security, and attachment (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Antonsich (2010) highlights five factors that contribute to this sense of rootedness to a place, to feeling a sense of home: 1) Auto-biographical factors as related to one’s past history or childhood memories; 2) Relational factors or the long-lasting, positive and stable inter-personal, caring, and supportive relationships; 3) Cultural practices, most significant of which is language, spoken and unspoken, that allow individuals to construct, convey and communicate meaning, and to feel heard and visible; 4) Economic factors in the form of stable material conditions that facilitate individuals’ sense of stake in the place they
live; and, 5) Legal factors producing a sense of safety and resources, including rights, for managing uncertainty and risks when they emerge.

Forced displacement complicates refugees’ sense of belonging. Conflict induced displacement resulting from a state’s use of brutish force and coercive power, or its inability to safeguard and uphold the rights enshrined to its citizens, ruptures refugees’ sense of belonging to their home country. For refugees, these experiences of ‘failed citizenship’ engender among them ambivalent attachments to their home country (Banks, 2017). Not only do refugees leave their countries of origin and the stability of past relationships, they now must forge new relationships in their host country environments. Developing and sustaining meaningful and productive relationships in new contexts is challenging for refugees. New relationships require bridging differences, most often in new languages, and according to different and unfamiliar ‘rules of the game.’ Refugees in urban settings are often socially isolated, residentially segregated to poor shantytowns; possess limited legal protections such as the rights to freedom of movement, work, and quality education; and often face xenophobia, forced evictions, and organized crime (Crisp, Morris, & Refstie, 2012; Landau & Amir, 2014; UNHCR, 2014b).

Though belonging, on the one hand, is an individual phenomenon experienced at a personal, inter-subjective level, it is equally about membership—to a group or collective, as in the case of belonging to a nation (Skey, 2013). In this way, belonging is an inherently social endeavor, in relationship to the presence or absence of the other. Feelings of belonging to a place emanate equally from the absence of the other, the alien or the stranger, who violates individuals’ sense of safety and belonging (Antonsich, 2010). In this way, belonging moves from the realms of the abstract to the concrete: not confined to the passivity of individuals’ emotional attachments, but instead an active undertaking. Belonging involves
acts of claiming one’s space and membership within a collective, while simultaneously marking and securing the boundaries of that belonging, what Yuval-Davis (2006) refers to as the ‘politics of belonging’ (p. 204). Belonging therefore becomes fundamentally about boundary creation and maintenance (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2011).

Symbolic boundaries, the focus of this study, refer to “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, peoples, practices, and even time and space” (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168). Boundaries aid individuals in constituting their sense of self and group membership. The boundaries we draw subsequently mark who we are, the values and morals we espouse, and the beliefs we internalize and represent. Through its practices and inter-subjective schema, boundary making guides interaction among individuals and generates distinctions, relegating and differentiating individuals to belong to either side of the boundary. When these boundaries and their underlying cultural repertoires and scripts are sufficiently internalized by a large group of people, they contribute to the production of social boundaries or exclusion, resulting in unequal access and distribution of material and nonmaterial resources. In this way, individuals within boundaries assert legitimacy and acquire resources, habits, or competences (Lamont, 1992), thereby deepening or disrupting individuals’ sense of belonging, depending on one’s position within or without of those boundaries.

One of the main social boundaries that limit refugees’ access to resources is that of formal, legal citizenship within the host country. As of 2015, 148 of 193 nation-states were party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol (UNHCR, 2015). However, there are no mechanisms for enforcement or oversight to ensure state parties guarantee the rights enshrined, and states can further make reservations to the articles of the Convention, such as on access to education, the right to work, freedom of movement among others.
Unable to return to their countries of origin as citizens owing to well-founded fears, and living as noncitizens within host countries, refugees are unable to draw on the legal frameworks and resources available to citizens (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). In the absence of a citizenship-based anchor, refugees are often “pushed into the gaps between states” (Haddad, 2008, p. 7). In practice, this means that though global human rights-based norms espoused in the Convention shape refugees’ aspirations for belonging in a host country, the policies and practices of host country governments eclipse and dash their hopes for belonging with local host country citizens (See Simonsen, 2017, for a useful distinction of immigrants belonging in or belonging with the nation).

Given the presence of these thick social boundaries, rooted within legal and nation-state based structures, what are the everyday symbolic boundaries of belonging that refugees experience and how do they manage these boundaries? In so doing, how are the contours of belonging shaped and contested by refugees in host country contexts?

Managing and negotiating symbolic boundaries
The nature of boundaries dictates how individuals manage, negotiate, or even contest them. In the context of ethnicity, Alba (2005) usefully differentiates between bright and blurred boundaries. Bright boundaries are those where individuals know at all times which side of the boundary they lie on, such as nationality and citizenship in the case of refugees. Blurred boundaries on the other hand allow individuals to manage and present their sense of self in complex and hyphenated ways, enabling them to occupy ambiguous locations with regards to the boundary. Blurred boundaries facilitate the development of belonging because the categories of “insider” and “outsider” can be swiftly obscured. Historical relations between the country of origin and the host society as well as the social, cultural, and legal institutions in the host country, determine whether individuals are able to blur the
boundaries they experience on a continual basis. For example, when language, religion, and cultural traditions and practices are shared between the country of origin and the host country, as in the case of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, there are possibilities for refugees to blur boundaries. However, in times of mass migration, boundary shifting or re-drawing boundaries remains far more challenging (Alba, 2005).

Through identity narratives, young refugees manage and negotiate symbolic boundaries. Narratives, whether verbalized or performed, are fundamental to examining how young people negotiate belonging and its boundaries. Identity narratives, or the stories individuals tell of themselves, of their past and present, of others like them, and those different than them, allow for both individual and collective meaning-making about group membership and shared experience (Hammack, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2011). These narratives shape and represent our identities, accentuating or attenuating difference, and subsequently expanding or shrinking the places for belonging. Individuals’ identity narratives, and the meaning-making they represent, allow individuals to cross boundaries (e.g. individual-level assimilation) or to blur boundaries (e.g. bilingualism and differentially performed behaviors and language use across different settings) (Zolberg & Long, 1999).

Education is a particularly relevant space in which learners create and perform their identity narratives as a means to eventually negotiate symbolic boundaries. The structure and substance of education shape the identity narratives and experiences that youth from minority groups, including refugees, internalize, enact and retell, to manage the boundaries of belonging (Davies, 2004, 2011; King, 2014). In the case of post-conflict Guatemala, Bellino (2017) finds that teachers’ decisions about how to engage with the past either forge collective identity and cement solidarity, or serve as tools to justify discrimination and exclusion. Similarly, in Botswana, when school administrators and teachers deliberately
choose to not question or debate equality of ethnic groups, students from minority ethnic groups experience social exclusion, impugning their belonging within the school’s monocultural representations of unity over diversity (Mulimbi & Dryden-Peterson, 2017). The everyday nationalism that permeates American classroom practice and pedagogy constructs identity narratives that relegate minority, immigrant youth to secondary positions outside the national imaginaries of belonging and what it means to be American in a post-9/11 world (Abu El-Haj, 2015; Sirin & Fine, 2007).

Identity narrative creation for refugees, as noncitizens, is not contained within nation-state spaces (Hovil, 2016; Van Hear, 2014). Through their involvement in transnational affairs (Al-Ali, Black, & Koser, 2001), protests and political campaigning (Clark-Kazak, 2011), young refugees challenge dominant discourses that synonymize belonging solely with legal citizenship and national membership. Through these acts of informal mobilization, noncitizens, such as refugees, act as citizens, asserting their “right to claim rights” (Isin, 2009, p. 371). However, Bloemraad (2018) warns that though these informal acts of “grassroots citizenship” (p. 13), generate solidarity, allowing refugees and immigrants to claim belonging within their host country contexts, they remain heavily structured by legal and institutional practices. She also suggests that belonging should no longer be viewed as a dichotomy distinguishing the “us” and the “them,” or those on either side of a boundary. Instead, perceptions and evaluations of belonging are fundamentally relational- and recognition-based claims. They are thus a matter of degree—individuals or groups can be closer or further away from embodying the characteristics that allow them to blur the boundaries of belonging and claim their legitimacy within society.
Belonging is thus multifaceted and dynamic; changes in external environments have significant consequences on the ways individuals perceive and navigate both the social and symbolic boundaries of belonging. For this reason, my focus on belonging in this study is deliberately open-ended. I do not seek to neatly package the idea of refugee belonging, or to forcibly attach it to nation-state based conceptualizations. Instead, I “follow the inquiry” (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017), to examine the ways refugee youth construct, negotiate, and experience belonging, or the lack of it, in its multiple forms, across time and space.

**Background and Context: Social boundaries of belonging**

Lebanon and Syria’s histories are deeply intertwined. Both countries gained independence from French control in 1946. In its history, Lebanon has hosted refugees from many different countries, including Palestinians after the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967. The increased number of Palestinians in Lebanon created a demographic shift, tipping a precarious sectarian balance between its many Christian and Muslim sects, ultimately sowing the seeds for a civil war in 1975. During this time, individuals from its Christian, Druze, Sunni and Shi’a groups formed different factions and joined non-state militias (Sozer, 2016). At the request of the Lebanese government, Syria sent its armed troops to strengthen the Lebanese army. Syria’s intentions soon flipped as a consequence of regional geo-politics, and tensions between Lebanon, Syria, Israel, and Iran prolonged the Lebanese civil war that lasted until 1990. During this period, scores of Lebanese sought refuge and safety in Syria, but eventually returned once peace was restored in Lebanon. Syria ultimately withdrew all its troops from Lebanon in 2005, and only recently, in 2008, did the two countries resume diplomatic relations (Council on Foreign Relations, 2005; Seeberg, 2013).
Despite political tensions that marked the relationship between the two countries, people-to-people contact between Syrians and Lebanese persisted. Inter-marriages on either side of the border; porous and fluid borders owing to a visa-free policy for citizens of the two countries; and, the presence of nearly half-million Syrian workers in Lebanon meant that Lebanese and Syrian people were integrated in each other’s social and economic lives (Chatty, 2017; Seeberg, 2013). When conflict broke out in 2011 in Syria, Lebanon’s fragile peace was threatened. Living memory of the not so distant, bloody, civil war has stoked apprehensions that once again, as in the case of Palestinian refugees, history will repeat itself, disturbing the country’s delicate sectarian and demographic balance.

As of October 2016, the Government of Lebanon estimated that it was hosting 1.5 million refugees (UNICEF, UNHCR, & WFP, 2016). In a country of 4 million Lebanese, the Syrian refugee influx has had debilitating consequences on Lebanon’s social, political, and economic fabric. Numerous reports have documented the increase in rents, the depression of daily labor wage rates, the strained delivery of essential, public social services of electricity, water, and sanitation facilities, and a decline in Lebanon’s GDP (Government of Lebanon and United Nations, 2015, 2017; Migration Policy Centre, 2014). With the Syrian conflict estimated to have cost Lebanon nearly USD 14.5 billion thus far (International Monetary Fund, 2017), the Government of Lebanon has stretched its hospitality to its limits.

These confluences of a tumultuous and factious historical past and current socio-economic consequences, have led the Lebanese government and its citizens to draw thick boundaries communicating that the spaces for Syrians to belong in the country are far and few. One way these boundaries of belonging are marked is through the prism of legality. Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or its 1967 protocol. As a result, it does not recognize Syrians as refugees and instead labels them as ‘displaced’
marking their presence in the country as ‘temporary guests’ (Chatty, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2016b). All Syrians above the age of 15 years in Lebanon must obtain a temporary visa, renewed annually for 200 dollars, to maintain their legal residency in the country (Human Rights Watch, 2016b; Janmyr, 2016). However, it is estimated that more than 70 percent of displaced Syrians live below the poverty line (Government of Lebanon and United Nations, 2017) and are unable to pay to maintain their legal status in the country. Consequently, the vast majority of Syrians in Lebanon are classified as ‘illegal’ and hidden from the Lebanese government’s records; in 2016, nearly two-thirds of Syrians in Lebanon lacked legal residency (Human Rights Watch, 2016a).

Legality, or the lack of it, has impacted young Syrians’ experiences in Lebanon. Syrians are barred from employment in Lebanon’s formal labor market and can only work in three sectors: agriculture, construction, and environment (Janmyr, 2016). Therefore, most young Syrians work in the secondary and unorganized labor market, often subjected to long work hours at less than minimum wages and with no job security. Lack of legality has further limited access to higher education opportunities. In 2016, to enter university, per the dictates of the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), Syrians were required to submit evidence of their high school leaving examinations, irrespective of whether Syrians completed their high school in Lebanon or in Syria (El-Ghali, Berjaoui, & DeKnight, 2017). To begin equating Syrian learners’ previous academic study in Syria with academic study in Lebanon, MEHE’s equivalence committee asked Syrian students to first demonstrate proof of their legal residency in the country, a legal status that has remained out of reach for the vast majority of Syrians. These social boundaries sustained in the name of legality have also given rise to a thriving, illegal market of peddlers who serve as Lebanese sponsors to Syrians in exchange for exorbitant financial sums. These peddlers are known to
exploit Syrians’ plight and desperation in exchange for their legality in the country (Janmyr, 2016).

Furthermore, since the first Syrian refugees arrived in Lebanon in 2012, there has been a rise in virulent social media campaigns vilifying Syrian refugees in Lebanon; widespread discrimination of Syrians in the public sphere; regular stop and frisk procedures at checkpoints, particularly for young, Syrian males; and local-level vigilantes to restrict Syrians’ freedom of movement (Chatty, 2017). Collectively, these policies and practices have shaped young Syrians’ experiences of belonging in Lebanon. In these circumstances, how do young Syrians experience, circumvent, or even transcend these boundaries?

**Methodology**

**Research approach**

In my data collection, analysis, and interpretation of young Syrians’ experiences of belonging, I draw from principles of “portraiture,” a social science methodology rooted in the phenomenological paradigm (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). A phenomenological approach focuses on “exploring the meaning of peoples’ experiences in the context of their lives” (Seidman, 2013, p. 20). Specifically, I sought to systematically and rigorously examine the contours of belonging that young Syrians’ described, experienced, and shaped, when displaced by conflict from Syria and living in Lebanon.

I deliberately draw from the principles of portraiture for two reasons. First, for too long, portrayals of refugee youth—in social science research, popular media, and international development agencies’ reports—have been driven by two extreme tropes: that of the passive, idle, and apathetic victims, devoid of all agency; or that of rebels, harbingers of violence, and inimical security threats for their susceptibility to extremist ideologies (Clark-Kazak, 2011; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2015). In its quest to generate research that
moves away from such facile representations to capture the richness, complexity, and
generosity of the human spirit, portraiture concerns itself with a search for “goodness,”
recognizing that expressions of goodness are simultaneously “laced with imperfections”
(Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9). It is not an approach that occludes or oversees
imperfections. Instead, it adopts a vigilant and balanced gaze to individuals’ expressions of
strength and resilience, while also acknowledging and chronicling individuals’ weakness and
vulnerability, inextricably intertwined with their promise and potential. Second, portraiture
consciously combines rigorous empirical inquiry with the aesthetics of writing, creating
scholarship that speaks to those in the academy and beyond. It is therefore inherently a
“people’s scholarship,” one that draws readers to the work for its artful and instigative
10-11).

Investigating the meanings underlying young Syrians’ experiences of belonging in
Lebanon necessitated the development of productive, symmetric, and reciprocal
relationships between my participants and me. I was keenly committed to not just identifying
the uncertainty and challenges that circumscribed my participants’ experiences, but also
sought to examine the relationships, practices, and spaces that uplifted and nourished them
amidst uncertainty. Developing relationships where participants could recognize and admit
their strengths and vulnerabilities often meant accompanying them to their place of work,
meeting university students on their campus, reviewing participants’ job applications,
providing study tips, and sustaining regular communication long after I had officially ‘exited’
my field site. These sustained relationships aided my continual contact with participants,
allowing us to pick up from where we had left off, especially when I returned to Lebanon for
a second round of brief data-collection.
My identity as a graduate student researcher from a U.S.-based elite university, who had never personally experienced forced displacement, meant there was considerable social distance between my young, Syrian participants and me. However, several commonalities helped bridge this distance. During our conversations, I referenced my early struggles as an international student navigating my pursuits of higher education abroad and my relationships with my family. Some other factors that served as a source of connection and identification between my participants and me included: my experiences working with youth in cross-cultural contexts; the visible challenges participants saw me confront as I navigated unfamiliar socio-cultural and linguistic terrain in Lebanon, a new context for me; and, my accounts of personal discrimination when mistaken for a South-Asian, blue-collar immigrant worker in Lebanon.

**Data sources**

The data for this study are drawn from a larger study examining young Syrians’ experiences of displacement, higher education and the social supports they draw from in charting their education and life pursuits. The data for this larger study were collected through 50 repeat interviews with 15 young, displaced Syrians. I collected these data in two phases: Phase I of data collection was undertaken between January – July 2016, when I was living in Lebanon. The second phase was shorter and lasted under two weeks when I returned to Lebanon in December 2016 to conduct follow-up interviews.

To be included in my sample, I applied the following inclusion criteria: participants needed to be between the ages of 18-30 years; forcibly displaced by conflict in Syria; self-identified as living in Lebanon’s capital, Beirut, or its surrounding Mount Lebanon area, since 2011 when the conflict in Syria first began; some working knowledge of English, the language of the interview; and, either currently enrolled in formal, certified higher education
opportunities in Lebanon or having disrupted, temporarily or indefinitely, their higher education trajectories owing to conflict.

As a non-Arabic speaker, I was unable to conduct interviews in Arabic, youth participants’ mother tongue. I recognize the limitations this bears on the data. Yet, I was also aware that the presence of a translator would impede or alter relational dynamics that would limit our interviews. After our repeated conversations, participants confirmed this proposition when they admitted their discomfort at the thought of sharing personal, sensitive details in the presence of a Syrian or Lebanese translator. To mitigate this shortcoming around the language for the interview, I always provided participants with opportunities to pause to recollect and write their thoughts in Arabic, or use an online translation application on my phone. All interviews were recorded, except one, after participants provided their consent.

In this paper, I present data and analysis in the form of three portraits of Azaa, Ali, and Amal, with the goal of illustrating and conveying the ways in which these three Syrian participants navigated the contours of belonging in Lebanon. In addition to formal interviews, I also collected data on the different contexts Azaa, Ali, and Amal inhabited and allowed me access to. In the case of all three participants, though I conducted interviews in coffee shops, these coffee shops were embedded within neighborhoods that participants had familiarity with and spent time in. Additionally, in Ali’s case, I was able to accompany him to his place of work, a video game parlor, and was therefore able to informally observe this setting. I integrated these context specific details into my analysis, recognizing that the “physical settings, cultural rituals, norms, and values, and historical periods,” lend an understanding of “how the actors or subjects negotiate and understand their experience”
Demographic about the larger sample, including Azaa, Ali, and Amal, are available in Appendix A.

**Interviews**

My interviews with Azaa, Ali, and Amal, drew from Seidman’s (2013) three-series interviewing structure. Over the two phases of data collection, I interviewed each of these three participants thrice. I also met each of them before and after these formal interviews to establish the context of the work and develop our relationship, and subsequently, to mark my ‘exit’ from the field, as I moved toward formal data analysis.

In these interviews, I sought to understand young Syrians’ experiences of displacement, mobility, their professional goals, and personal aspirations for the future. The interviews focused on exploring how young Syrians described and perceived different symbolic boundaries that deepened or diminished their sense of belonging, and the cultural repertoires they used to navigate these boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). I asked participants to describe the instances in their time in Lebanon where they felt included and excluded. In these conversations that lasted for an average of 90 minutes, participants led me into their lives, their emerging romantic interests, their trials and tribulations of the past and the present, and the ways they sometimes circumvented established social mores and regulations to navigate life in Lebanon as Syrians.

**Data analysis**

Analysis of the interview data was ongoing and iterative. Following each interview, I listened to the audio recording to document and organize participant’s main ideas into broad analytic categories and themes. These notes were akin to what Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) refer to as “impressionistic records” (p. 188). These notes included a few verbatim quotes from the participant, along with my own understanding of what these
quotes seemed to imply in my participant’s particular context. This organization process, early in the analysis cycle, allowed me to stay grounded in the data while making emergent connections with other participants’ experiences. These notes provided opportunities for self-reflexivity to further refine my interview questions, to generate hypothesis, and identify dilemmas and gaps in data collection and analysis, and most importantly, to sharpen the focus of the inquiry.

Only once I had written these notes for each of the first interviews, I returned to interview the same participant a second and third time over. Writing these initial notes allowed me to easily reference details that participants had mentioned in previous interviews; identify initial emergent themes that informed later interviews; and, draw connections between young Syrians’ experiences in Syria and Lebanon to trace their experiences of belonging across time and space.

I personally transcribed 42 of the 50 interviews that constitute the data for the larger study; the remaining 8 were transcribed through a paid transcription service. This process allowed me to re-immerses myself in the data and to re-engage with participants’ voices. The transcription process allowed me to document not only the interview flow and participants’ verbatim responses, but also facilitated focused attention to participants’ silences, and their uncertainty and hesitancy around specific issues. I viewed these conversation fillers not just the absence of talk, but found them to be illuminating for they shone light on what was said, and yielded glimpses of what was implied but not directly stated (Maxwell, 2013).

After completing the interview notes and transcriptions, I used Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis software, to analyze a sub-set of interview data. In this first-stage, rough coding, I used a grounded approach to develop a set of emic codes that guided subsequent stages and levels of analyses. Throughout this formal coding process, I wrote a set of analytic memos
that allowed me to examine inter-relationships and patterns between different sets of data, specifically examining convergent or contrasting patterns. During my analysis, I focused not just on the strategies that participants adopted when they encountered bright and blurred boundaries, but also the ways they, too, constructed boundaries of belonging, and the internal schema they employed to shape understandings of what it meant to be a young, Syrian refugee, at a particular time in Lebanon.

I specifically chose to write about Azaa, Ali, and Amal, because they were simultaneously similar to, but also different from, the rest of the sample. The themes that echoed within these three narratives were resonant across the data: themes of loss and liberation, of the vulnerability that accompanied their quests for visibility as they fled a brutish state, and the myriad ways in which they exemplified unbridled agency and goodness, despite the uncertainty and predicaments they confronted on a continual basis. Each of these participants was also unique in several ways, including their varying comfort levels in Lebanon and the time they had spent in the country. For example, Azaa challenged common media portrayals of only Syrian men being politically involved and fleeing persecution; Ali was the only participant who knew so clearly that his time in Lebanon was temporary; and, Amal, who at 18, was the youngest participant in my sample and unlike the others, had completed high school in Lebanon.

Findings

Azaa: A portrait of belonging as safety

Everyone on Rue 31 knows where to find Dunkin Donuts. In the 1960s and 70s, before the onset of the Lebanese civil war, Rue 31 was known to be Beirut’s Champs Elysees. As the city’s main intellectual and tourist hub, wealthy Arabs from Saudi Arabia and other countries in the Arabian Gulf thronged these streets. Today though, their absence is
noticeable and representative of strained relationships between their countries and Lebanon. Lebanon’s role as a ready host to the 1.5 million refugees fleeing conflict in neighboring Syria is one of the main points of consternation among countries in the region.

Though the opulence and grandeur of Rue 31— colloquially known as Hamra Street — has declined with the passage of time, it still attracts in equal proportion the young and the old, the traditional and the modern. Narrow and tightly packed, Hamra Street’s long line of national and global banks with ATMs; shiny new international coffee chains; fast food outlets and pubs pumping deafening English and Arabic pop music and flashing blinding strobe lights; and, cellphone shops dolling calling cards to Lebanon’s often exploited immigrant laborers from Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Philippines and Sri Lanka, demonstrate that the tentacles of global neo-liberalism are here too, omnipresent and thriving. Interspersed within these modern landmarks are reminders of a Beirut of yore: the 2 by 2 feet, thin thatched, flimsy newspaper kiosks selling Arabic, English and French newspapers; countless local bakeries with wooden ovens dishing out freshly baked, inexpensive manakish - local flat bread topped with thyme, sesame, oregano and olive oil - a staple, ubiquitous snack in Lebanon anytime in the day; juice stalls churning fresh lemonade and seasonal pomegranate juice; hookah bars clouded in wafts of green apple and tangerine flavored smoke; and clothing shops vending hijabs and tunics in all imaginable hues, from subdued to gaudy prints. Though Hamra Street is no longer considered downtown Beirut, its sway on the lives of the city’s inhabitants can only be experienced in its sights, smells, and sounds.

Right here, on Hamra Street, hundreds of miles away from Damascus, the reverberations of the Syrian conflict are visible. In the recent past, besides its exorbitant rent paying occupants, Hamra Street has now made way to a new set of occupants—3 to 14 year old Syrian refugee children, often unaccompanied by adults, coaxing passersby to spend a
few dollars on the goods they sell—bunches of red roses, figs stuffed with pistachios and walnuts, and shoe shining services. Beyond prospects of commercial transactions, Hamra Street offers Syrian children the chance of visibility; no longer can Beirutis turn their gaze away from a conflict that is a few hundred miles away. The January 6th 2015 edition of An-Nahar, Lebanon’s most widely circulated and oldest Arabic daily newspaper, carried an article titled, “Hamra [Street] is no longer Lebanese…Syrian expansion has altered its identity.” The article asserted that Syrians had no claim to Hamra Street.

Dunkin Donuts is situated a few hundred meters from the entrance of Hamra Street. Despite the abundance of one-dollar Arabic coffee and espresso kiosks, this American, coffee franchise is perpetually full of eager customers. On an early Sunday evening, the chance to sit outdoors on Hamra Street’s unevenly cemented pavements while munching overpriced, sugary donuts and sipping watered-down iced lattes with ounces of whipped cream and drizzles of chocolate and caramel entices unwarranted crowds. As I navigate through the patio, I find 23-year old Azaa nestled under one of the pink umbrellas inscribed with the Dunkin Donuts logo. Dressed in a fitted crimson red sweater and black tights with a half-spent cigarette in her right hand, she is engrossed in a folded book tucked into her left hand. As I settle down in the seat beside her, she explains that the book is a course text for her upcoming exams in social and economic development.

In our last meeting, Azaa had shared her anxiety around passing her university exams. In addition to being a full time student at the Lebanese University, Lebanon’s only public university, Azaa is also the sole breadwinner for her ailing parents who live with her in Lebanon. To fulfill these commitments, Azaa juggles multiple part-time jobs: sometimes as an Arabic-English translator, other times as a teaching assistant at an NGO-school for Syrian refugees.
“My life sucks,” Azaa told me the last time we met. “I won’t have (a) salary next month and I’m freaking out right now…I’m so worried about this year because Lebanese University is so hard and I don’t have time to read books, or to learn more English, or to study.” As a young Syrian refugee in Lebanon, Azaa’s relationship with her university and consequently, with Lebanon, is at best complicated. After the fourth and final time when she was tortured in a Syrian government prison for a full day for her involvement in the Syrian revolution, Azaa knew she could no longer be safe in Syria.

Without letting her parents know, Azaa stealthily arranged for a taxi to take her to Lebanon, where her sister was living. En-route to the border, the Syrian guards stopped Azaa’s taxi, reminding her once again that her time in Syria was indeed up. “We’re going to let you go, but never return again or we will kill you,” were the last words she remembers hearing when on Syrian soil. In the moment that she crossed the Syrian-Lebanese border, her fear transformed. From being one that crippled her, the fear now awakened and enlivened her to a new reality. As she vividly describes the scene to me, Azaa exhales a loud sigh of relief, touches both her arms, and says aloud, “I’m alive. I’m here. I’m alive!”

Azaa continues sharing her story, but I find myself lost in thought. So horrific are her retellings of repeated torture and abuse inside Syrian prisons that at several moments I doubt their veracity, questioning why I am the recipient of such deeply personal and intimate details of her life. I remind myself of my commitment to this work; my participants, and my role, not as a human rights researcher documenting abuse, but as a social scientist attempting to understand how young Syrians, like Azaa, live out their lives when displaced by conflict and how they navigate and negotiate their claims to belong.

Azaa’s unwavering commitments to free speech, peaceful protest, and human dignity – even when risky – seem inscribed in her genes. In his heydays, Azaa’s father had protested
against Hafez Al-Assad, Syria’s current dictator Bashar Al-Assad’s father. As a result, the family was forced to flee to Iraq, where Azaa was born, only returning to Syria many years later. When they returned, her parents forewarned her repeatedly of the many risks accompanying political activism in Syria, but Azaa, like her father, was not one to succumb to seemingly insurmountable tasks. “Syria is my country…I’m a citizen, so it’s my responsibility… if I feel like something is wrong, I should do something about it,” she responded when asked why she was willing to risk her life, time and again. It was her political activism, and perhaps, even her unwillingness to give up her voice that eventually forcibly displaced her to Lebanon in the winter of 2013.

Once in Lebanon, Azaa called her parents, explaining that she could not return to Syria. Though she had previously concealed details of her political involvement, her parents had inklings and were not entirely startled. So Azaa could resume her studies in Lebanon, her mother sent across Azaa’s Syrian educational certificates through a taxi driver crossing the Syrian-Lebanese border. Six months later, Azaa’s parents also moved to Lebanon.

But Azaa was not ready to resume her studies. Mentally and physically worn, Azaa touches her back and left knee, nearly sounding out an entire color palette to describe her wounds and the pain she languished. “My back was all green and yellow, uhh all green and blue because of the uh…” A deliberate silence lingers. Her words trail off, but from our previous conversations, I know she is referring to her torture in prison. Inside Syria, Azaa motivated herself to “just keep going…to forget that anyone has hit you.” In Lebanon though, without a job or university, the incidents in prison played on loop in Azaa’s mind each day when her sister left for work, leaving Azaa alone with her thoughts. Unsure of where to seek help or whom to speak to, Azaa remembers spending her time “reading and communicating with myself.” In her short lifetime, Azaa has experienced a multitude of
extreme emotions. From the adrenalin rush accompanying protesting and of being on the precipices of nearly ushering the winds of democracy in a dictatorial state, to loneliness and depression in exile in Lebanon, Azaa acknowledges the onset of a new emotion: guilt. “I know a lot of people are now outside Syria and they regret it and they feel guilty about it, and I’m one of them. I want them to know it was not really a simple experience to live.” Worn, but not devoid of agency, Azaa tried not being idle in Lebanon, volunteering her time with NGOs supporting Syrian refugees in need, attempting to simultaneously tackle her guilt and find renewed purpose.

A year after she arrived in Lebanon, in December 2014, Azaa finally signed up for the Lebanese University. Though her Lebanese peers paid 350 dollars for a year’s worth of tuition, as a Syrian refugee she paid twice that amount. At first, she was told that as a Syrian she would need to restart her university education. Embodying her name’s meaning, courage, Azaa refused to venerate an officious university administrator’s authority. She petitioned her case directly with the Ministry of Education. She describes walking into a bureaucrat’s office, setting her bag on his table and waiting quietly in front of him for 50 minutes. When he finally took notice of her, she told him, “I’m in the third year and you will put me in the third year and if you don’t want to put me in the third year, I will stay in your office forever…I want to continue my education and whether you like it or not, I’m going to do it.” The bureaucrat finally paid heed to her demands, only after letting her know that she had a “mind of a rock.”

Azaa finally enrolled in her third and final year at university, continuing from where she had left off in Syria. With a tone of levity, Azaa explicates the “trick” for navigating these boundaries; hurdles few other Syrians like her have been able to leap over: “The trick is to be serious with them, to be like I’m stronger than you and I’m going to have whatever I want
from you – this is the trick!” In Azaa’s eyes, there is no room for Syrians to display weakness, even if just momentarily, for the Lebanese public’s gaze.

Once Azaa stepped inside the seemingly calm buildings of her university, her old and new worlds collided. Inside her campus building, Azaa found walls plastered with posters of Hezbollah and Harakat Amal, Lebanese political parties associated with Lebanon’s Shia Muslim sect reported to hold close ties to Iran, and subsequently, close allies of the current Syrian regime. Azaa’s father’s friend, a Lebanese, had cautioned her to not say a word against these political parties or of her involvement in the Syrian revolution.

For a month, Azaa remembers sitting alone in her cafeteria, surrounded by Lebanese students following conservative, populist political parties that often spoke ill of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. She heard her peers sneer, loudly but deliberately within earshot: “We don’t want Syrian refugees in Lebanon. They are destroying our country…We are with the Syrian regime and we think the revolution is wrong and controlled by the U.S. and by Saudi Arabia, so we don’t want anyone who’s a refugee in the university.” Fellow Lebanese students would often ask Azaa her full name to speculate about her religious sect and allegiances to Syria’s current dictator. Azaa knew that the only way she could gain belonging was by playing into the popular narrative and consciously decided to “change the story.” From being vehemently against the Syrian regime—for the sake of gaining belonging at university—Azaa became an ardent follower of it.

Azaa soon realized that the physical and psychological safety that undergirded her sense of belonging, of feeling secure, and that she had the resources to manage uncertainty, was fragile. Though physically safe from torture, her psychological safety was diffused when she came face-to-face with one of her Syrian captors on campus—“the scariest day of my life,” as she describes it with her eyes lightening up. In her university at Syria, Azaa had once
been caught by the Secret Police, the *mukhabarat*, for fanning her political views in the open. This same captor had links with a political party’s student club in the Lebanese University and was by chance visiting, when he recognized Azza. He approached Azza when she was casually hanging out with her new, Lebanese friends. With an air of coolness, Azza brushed him off by saying, “I’m sorry I can’t remember you. I know many people so I can’t remember everyone in my life.” He continued persisting, providing more details about their encounter than she wanted her Lebanese peers to know. Azza inhales deeply and holds her breath to mimic the only thought pre-occupying her in that instance, “F%*#*, I’m done today, right now!” Azza took her captor aside, once again stewing a different narrative of her allegiances to the Syrian regime: “I see the importance of the Syrian regime and I’m with you guys…I don’t want the Syrian revolution again.”

When I ask Azza to draw her identity map, a pictorial representation of her identity and story, she sketches a large set of eyes in a saffron crayon. The eyes are wide, awake and alert, seemingly peering over an imaginary object. Below the pair of eyes, Azza writes: “I feel there is someone watching me all the time.” The unsettling feeling of hyper vigilance has led Azza to feel she is “back in Syria again.” Once free from the manacles of an oppressive, dictatorial regime, Azza still finds herself trapped, in Lebanon, a country where the current Syrian regime should technically have no control over her as a Syrian citizen. She takes out her lighter to light up yet another cigarette that I have realized is pointless counting, and remarks, “Until now I can’t say my opinions about the Syrian regime and there’s a lot of people talking about the Syrian regime, about the Free Syrian Army, and about the revolution. I feel like I’m stuck in Syria all over again.” Though away from the Syrian regime, Azza’s safety remains undermined at university. The political repression that impelled her to seek refuge in Lebanon has transformed in appearance, but hovers in essence. Unlike a
brutish state threatening to persecute its critics, repression now comes from the opinions of ordinary Lebanese citizens, 20-something old, young adults in university, still coming to terms with who they are. Azaa knows that to confront and cross deeply entrenched, sectarian-based symbolic boundaries in Lebanon, she must not isolate the ghosts of her past from her present. Instead, she deliberately allows them to intersect, retelling an entirely different version of herself and her past, one where she sides with the aggressors—to protect herself. For Azaa, belonging, without first considering safety, is elusive.

Ali: A portrait of belonging as dignity

No one on Hamra Street knows where KI Coffee House is, until, of course, you ask a student. Two blocks beyond Hamra Street’s midpoint, just behind the trendy H&M store and Libraire Antoine, Beirut’s only English bookstore, tucked into an inconspicuous corner is KI Coffee House, a mecca for students burning the midnight oil. At 9.30 p.m. the coffee shop is abound with over caffeinated, college-aged students occupying all the seats at its center, rectangular table, running the near full length of the café. The smell of menthol and tobacco hits me in the face as I enter. Enviously eyeing the students sprawled on the coffee shop’s dull grey velvet couches and armchairs, my eyes swiftly scan the space in pursuit of an empty and quiet spot. In addition to the sea of hoodies and sweatpants slouched on couches, filling already overflowing ashtrays to the brim, I also see a vast array of laptop screens, textbooks, gigantic headphone sets and mobiles strewn across the center table. From YouTube videos to science textbooks and Calculus problem sets, it is easy to decipher that the 1 a.m. closing time of this coffee shop is purposefully set.

At the far end of the coffee shop are stairs leading upward to a handful of carrels for quiet study. The two sides of the shop’s wall to ceiling glass windows lure students to procrastinate and offer reprieve to the non-smokers as the crisp Mediterranean breeze of a
February night circulates. The fluorescent green and sky blue walls add little to the shop’s décor as do the stale pastries and the many acrylic painted portraits of Bob Marley, Madonna, Marilyn Monroe, alongside the iconic ‘Afghan Girl,’ an Afghan refugee to Pakistan, whose picture was plastered across National Geographic’s covers back in 1985. Today, I am here to meet Ali Halabi, a 23-year old Syrian refugee from Halab, or Aleppo.

Ali saunters in to the café in all black ensemble: skinny tight black jeans accentuating his slender frame, a black sweatshirt and a string of black beads or _mishaba_, in Arabic, dangling from his left wrist. Ninety-nine in number, the beads are used by some to count and recite the names of the Allah, while others, like Ali as he later tells me, use them as worry beads, a way to turn inward and switch off from the world. Though I have met him briefly just once before to introduce my research, Ali seems markedly less chatty today. His timbre is soft and unenthused, his characteristic bun is untidily held up, and his eye sockets are hollow and enveloped in dark circles marking fatigue and exhaustion. “I was kicked out from my house yesterday,” he tells me ten minutes into our conversation. “The owner had a better offer. We used to pay rent for 650 (dollars). Someone came to her and paid 750,” he explains. Confronted with a rapacious landlord, Ali and his remaining three other Syrian flat mates were given four hours to evict the premises. The wounds of the forced eviction are still fresh, and I question my decision to continue our conversation given Ali’s evident fragile state.

Ali is quick to attribute this incident to him being Syrian, to having “no established rights” as a noncitizen in Lebanon. Vehemently and with frustration, he contrasts his liminal legal status to that of the Lebanese: “The Lebanese people have, have someone to help them in the security system, in the military. Anyone can help them. I have nobody.” Though forcibly displaced and in search of international protection as a refugee in Lebanon, Ali
remains acutely aware that his Syrian nationality severely circumscribes his ability to cross social boundaries and to make claims on Lebanon’s state apparatus and legal structures.

When I ask Ali to describe how he understands the word home, he looks away and murmurs, “safety” and then emphatically adds, “Home is the place where I work and live with dignity.” As he talks of his home in Aleppo, he paints a picture of home that is universal and familiar, imbued with the warmth and affection of loved ones; the fragrance of morning jasmine and freshly baked bread trailing his neighborhood’s streets; the brew of strong, Arabic coffee available and consumed in copious amounts all day long; and, the melodic strains of Fairuz, a Lebanese singer renowned across the Arab world for being an “Ambassador to the Stars.” Unsurprisingly, many of these characterizations, cut across borders and are widely present in Lebanon too, including the fact that Ali’s family is easily accessible as they now live in the southern part of Lebanon. But Ali’s description of Lebanon is incisive and telling: “Lebanon doesn’t belong to me.”

But belonging to the nation-state, for Ali, is murky and far from being a facile binary. Though Lebanon does not belong to Ali, no longer did Syria belong to him either. As a young male, Ali was desperately trying to escape a year and a half’s worth of military conscription, an institutionalized practice for all males living in Syria. Ali had used his university enrollment as a means to delay, and hopefully, even to deter, his military conscription twice. The third time, the officer asked for a hefty bribe that Ali refused to pay. Ali recalls the experience as inherently “humiliating,” one for which he was imprisoned for eight days. Ali knew that Syria was becoming a country where his dignity would continue being infringed upon.

Though the southern Turkish border is barely 90 minutes away from Aleppo, Ali and his family decided to come to Lebanon instead in the fall of 2012. He rationalizes the
decision: “I was hoping to continue my study in Arabic…We came here because here there is Arabic language and we can easily connect with the people.” Little did Ali know that ‘connection’ with the Lebanese would remain eclipsed by episodic incidents of discrimination and xenophobia.

For three years since he first arrived, ironically, Ali lived and worked in Beirut’s Shatila camp, home to nearly 22,000 Palestinians who sought refuge in Beirut in 1949. Since the Syrian conflict and the influx of Syrian refugees, Shatila’s population has now increased to nearly 40,000. The physical presence of Shatila and other Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon have served as a continual reminder—to the Lebanese government and Syrian refugees—of the ways long enduring conflict with no resolution in sight can forever leave displaced individuals in limbo, complicating their sense of belonging, and simultaneously, fundamentally altering Lebanon’s social milieu and demographics after hosting refugees for more than six decades. It is perhaps this reason why the boundaries for who belongs to Lebanon and who does not, are so brightly etched for Palestinians and Syrians alike. Like the Palestinians, who are barred from entering more than thirty professions in Lebanon (Hanafi, Chaaban, & Seyfert, 2012), Syrians, too, can work legally in just three sectors: agriculture, construction, and trash collection (disguised under the label of ‘environment’ as an occupation) (Janmyr, 2016).

To familiarize himself with Lebanon, Ali volunteered with different NGOs in Shatila, where he received just enough money to cover his subsistence expenses. Ali describes the year between 2013 and 2014 as a year where he “forgot about studying.” “I was only thinking about how to live the next day,” he says while chuckling and revealing his receded upper gums. Volunteering was a transformative experience for Ali, an experience where he recognizes “finding” himself. It strengthened his belief in the potential for
goodness in humanity: “When you help someone, you feel that when you need help, someone will help you.” Ali’s deliberate volunteering with organizations that predominantly served refugees was a way to “help [his] country citizens: a country of refugees,” as he now knows and describes Syria. As he talks of the importance volunteering has played in his life, Ali invites me to one of his volunteering activities planned for two days later, targeting Syrian children in Hamra; an invite I accept.

It is Valentine’s Day, and Hamra Street is pulsating with activity. Ali is an hour late and I have mapped Hamra Street, walking up and down, to and fro, several times over. I can close my eyes and recall the shops with the most garish Valentines Day decorations. Ali arrives with four other volunteers, also Syrian, and takes me to an empty, semi-open, parking lot attached to a Catholic school. The parking lot is thankfully open from two sides, dispelling the staunch odor of car fumes, leaking petrol, and engine grease. The low ceiling is sullied with numerous marks of a dirty football that has been bounced around or kicked too hard. Green paint chips off one wall of the parking lot, but is not yet marred entirely revealing a discernable, but eclectic and incoherent mix of symbols: sailboats in water, cheese burgers, and animated, fizzy, Coke bottles with smiles. On a foldable table that the volunteers have opened, lie crayons, red plastic string, a few finger puppets, including one of Aladdin, glue sticks and a bottle of hand sanitizer. The activities were supposed to start at 2.00 p.m. but an hour and fifteen minutes later, there are no children anywhere in sight.

As if I don’t already feel like an outsider enough in this gathering given my lack of Arabic language skills, all the volunteers have now adorned ugly, white apron-like vests, clumsily knotted across their shoulders, a uniform to signal their role to the children. Smacked right at the center of the white vests is the Arabic name of the NGO. Ali has gone off to round up all the children on the street. With pride he tells me, “I know them all.”
Leaving me to my own devices, I awkwardly pace the car park, neither knowing nor asking 
how to be of use. Five children between 8 and 14 years walk in through the main gate, in to 
the car park, and are enthusiastically cheered on by the volunteers. The one woman 
volunteer leads with stretching exercises and call and response chants in Arabic. Ali walks in 
with four other children, much tinier, and evidently younger, than the previous ones. The 
group expands to form a circle, and a rag doll like puppet is used as a way to share 
information with the children about the NGO’s services targeting children. The younger 
children are enraptured and bewildered by the magic of a talking puppet, while the older 
children watch and listen patiently, but seemingly, doubtfully. In this moment, these children 
can escape the constant snubbing of pedestrians and adult responsibilities that dominate 
their lives, reclaiming traces of a childhood otherwise ruptured by conflict and displacement. 

The activities are short and transition quickly to time to draw, followed by the 
distribution of sugary drinks and fried snacks. To mark the near end of the event, the 
volunteers encircle the children and break into the Chicken Dance, gently goading them to 
join. For a moment, Ali, too, becomes a child, lost amidst infectious giggles and delight. Ali’s 
act of eliciting the joy from the group is also an act of service, as he upholds the dignity and 
right to childhood of Hamra Street’s otherwise overlooked, Syrian children. 

For our final conversation, five days later, Ali is running late again. When he arrives 
in his usual black attire and grey and white canvas shoes, he looks even more fatigued than 
before. His eyes are hollowed out, his speech is slow and slurred, and his curly hair is barely 
tied together. I have wondered if Ali’s disheveled demeanor is a consequence of his sleep 
deprivation or his incessant smoking. He tells me that his alarm did not go off and that he 
overslept. I learn that in addition to working the graveyard shift at a 24-hour video game 
parlor in Hamra, Ali has now taken on an additional assignment of writing a report for an
NGO, a job he was completing during the day. I order the strongest Turkish coffee available, his beverage of choice, and he takes on my offer to cut short our conversation in exchange for the time to wash his face and fully awaken.

Unable to openly voice his political views in Syria for fears of imprisonment, Ali now claimed his visibility in Lebanon. With other Syrians, Ali recalls protesting several incidents that served as epochs in the Syrian conflict and forcibly displaced Syrians’ experiences in Lebanon: Russia’s involvement as an ally of the Syrian regime that exacerbated the Syrian conflict; Lebanon officially closing its borders and refusing to take in any more Syrian refugees past the 1.5 million mark; and, the Lebanon’s Ministry of Interior’s policy mandating all Syrians to legally register themselves, annually, with the government for 200 dollars. Despite the many protests that Ali has shown up for, deep down, he knows that “nothing is going to happen like we (Syrians) want.” Yet, these non-violent protests have also been a chance for him to assert his voice with dignity and to make his presence as a Syrian felt: “It is just to say that there are Syrian people, there is a Syrian voice here in Lebanon.”

As with any narrative, these protests too, are accompanied with a counter-narrative. Ali explains that each of these protests have been punctuated and countered with discriminatory slurs by Lebanese people that contest Syrians’ claims of belonging in Lebanon. Ali recounts the time when he was protesting and a taxi driver slowed his car to shout above the protestors: “Go away, go home! You destroyed your Syria, your country. You did a lot in Syria. Don’t do this here!” As he narrates the incident, Ali chuckles dismissingly, and with alacrity describes a different incident when a taxi driver yelled at a Syrian family, “God bless Bashar Al-Assad (Syrian dictator) because he brought you here.”
In the wake of these incidents, Ali’s strategy is to wait, withdraw, and silently observe from a distance: “You can’t say anything to him because he’s Lebanese and you’re Syrian.”

Ali remains aware that there is little support available for Syrians to lead a life of dignity in Lebanon. As he saw his Syrian friends leave Lebanon, undertaking a perilous journey across the Mediterranean, placing their trust at the hands of exploitative, illegal, human smugglers, Ali’s friend, Mohammad shared the prices of the journey with him. In an attempt to lure Ali, he told him, “Look, it’s just this price. Come!” Firm in his conviction to pursue a life of dignity, but not as an “illegal” or “irregular” migrant in a detention center in Europe, Ali refused. “I was waiting for the real chance. I don’t want to go by sea. To live as a refugee is [as it is] hard in Lebanon,” he acknowledged. Ali is aware that living in Europe as a refugee will entail navigating a different set of symbolic and social boundaries, boundaries that he is not willing to confront or cross.

Despite several futile attempts at finding a legal way to leave Lebanon, Ali finally applied to a scholarship to study in Latin America in 2015. The scholarship, organized by students in a university in a Latin American country, was a chance for him to further his education; to make his claims on the global public good of education enshrined in international conventions and promised in principle to scores of refugees like Ali. Ali was soon informed that he was selected for the scholarship and that his program would begin that summer. With an imminent pathway to legality and education in the horizon, to avoid incurring tuition costs at university, Ali deliberately dropped out of his university program in Lebanon and did not enroll for the summer semester. The summer came and went, but Ali had yet received no scholarship funds disposal to leave Lebanon. His sponsors—university students—told him that they were still fundraising and needed additional time. For a year, Ali placed his education on hold.
Three months later since our final and last conversation, it is now May 2016. Pro athetically, I am back at KI Coffee House, the coffee shop where we first began. But this time it is to mark Ali’s exit from Lebanon, the commencement of a new chapter in his life.

As I walk in, a large group of Ali’s Syrian friends have surrounded him, some squeezed tightly on his armchair rest, and pressed against him. The group is affectionate and welcoming. Several of his friends try engaging me in conversation in Arabic and a few words of English. For the first time, Ali’s face glows in the soft light of a Beirut dusk. His face is lit up, the dark circles that have previously enclosed his eyes are no longer visible and he seems well rested. Ali’s quest for belonging has remained tightly tethered to leading a life of dignity.

Ali’s strategy to navigate Lebanon’s symbolic boundaries has been one of deliberate wait: to wait patiently for the scholarship to arrive while others like him imperil themselves; to wait and refrain from reacting when incited with xenophobic slurs; and to wait to not just belong and embrace any country, but instead for the country to belong and embrace him.

Later in the night, Ali’s long enduring wait will draw to an end. He will embark on a new journey that will potentially alter his life trajectory forever: a journey of a thousand miles, one that will not just take him further away from a home that he has already left behind, but hopefully one that will bring him much closer to finding a home where he can “work and live, with dignity.”

Amal: A portrait of belonging as relationships

Amal does not know where the Dunkin Donuts on Hamra Street is. Not only has she never heard about the coffee chain previously, she is also unfamiliar with other landmarks on Hamra Street. It is abundantly clear to me that this is one part of Beirut that she, as an 18-year old Syrian female, has not ventured into. After much coordination over text messages we meet on a Monday afternoon at 3 p.m., after Amal has returned home
from university. Once she arrives at Hamra, I get a frantic Whatsapp message that reads: “I am in the main street. Where are you exactly??” When we finally run into each other on the street, while jostling through Hamra’s pulsating traffic that has little regard for its pedestrians, I see that Amal is not alone.

Instead, her mother is accompanying her. The encounter throws me off balance, making me momentarily disoriented about where we are on Hamra Street, and I find myself inundated with multiple thoughts: “Why is her mother here? Is she here to vet me and protect her daughter from a male outsider? Is she here to shop while Amal and I talk? Will Amal be willing to share in front of her mother? Is it appropriate for me to ask her mother to wait at a separate table? Did my research methods classes prepare me enough to address these relational ambiguities?”

Amal’s mother walks with us to the Dunkin Donuts, making it evident that she is here to stay. As a mark of respect, I offer to buy coffee for everyone, and even though Amal’s mother speaks little English, we find a way to engage in conversation about Syrian food, her mother’s culinary prowess, my upbringing in India, and the similarities in our traditions. There is no interview with Amal, but hopefully enough information about my work and the beginnings of trust that can enable future encounters independent of parental guidance.

The next time Amal and I decide to meet in her part of town, at Bourj Hammoud, in the North Eastern part of Beirut. I have not yet been to this part of the city, but when I ask my Lebanese colleagues, I am told it is right across Beirut’s “river of trash” on Damascus Road. The start of Damascus Road is widely known in Lebanon. The distance you drive straight on this road can take you places: three hours to Damascus, Syria; ninety minutes to Tripoli, Lebanon’s second largest city; forty-five minutes to the country’s best beach resorts
flanked by an aqua blue Mediterranean and DJs spinning electronica; fifteen minutes to the river of trash and Bourj Hammoud, the city’s immigrant enclave. The river of trash began developing toward the end of 2015, when the government closed the city’s main landfill without opening an alternate one, or renewing trash collectors’ existing contracts. The result has been a snaking river of putrid, black colored garbage bags, piled high by a government reneging on its social contract. Unsurprisingly, Syrian refugees in Lebanon have become political scapegoats for further swelling this burgeoning trash crisis.

Originally, marshlands hosting Armenians fleeing the Armenian genocide in 1915, Bourj Hammoud is one of the most densely populated areas in the Middle East, home to nearly 105,000 residents within an expanse of just 2.5-kilometers. Though a majority Lebanese-Armenian neighborhood with several of its streets named after cities and towns in Armenia, Bourj Hamoud is also home to Lebanese Christians, Shi’a Muslims, Kurds, Palestinians, Iraqi Christians, and a growing mix of migrant labor from Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Philippines and Sri Lanka. The warm glow of incense, the aroma of Ethiopian coffee, and the rancid odor of dry fish coalesce in Bourj Hamoud. History repeats itself, and now added to this syncretic mix are Syrian refugees like Amal and her family, who embrace the neighborhood as their new home.

To see the sky, one must peer through the web of Bourj Hamoud’s flimsy interlaced electric wires connected precariously to street lamps and satellite dishes dangling from the neighborhood’s three-storied buildings. Beirut’s skies are grey and overcast this evening, making it difficult to read advertisement hoardings in Armenian, Arabic, English and French. Amal tells me to wait for her at Honey Boo, a coffee shop on Armenian Street, offering an eclectic mix of American fast food, ice cream sodas, dessert crepes, and flavored hookah. As Amal walks in clutching on to her oversized black purse falling off her shoulder,
a middle-aged gentleman follows. I am introduced immediately to the adult accompanying Amal today, her father. I know there is no way around this situation, and compared to her mother who spoke a little English, Amal’s father speaks no English at all. In fact, there is little attempt at conversation beyond a ceremonial handshake acknowledging each other’s presence. I follow her father’s lead to a table on the mezzanine where the television broadcasting a soccer match between two, local, Lebanese clubs is in good sight; clubs that I later learn are organized on the basis of religious sect.

Amal is admittedly nervous. Her one hand fidgets with the purse buckle nestled on her lap, and with her other hand she traces her fingers against the outline of her hijab, quickly adjusting its grip to make sure it’s not too loose to slide, or pressing too tightly against her face. Once we begin conversing, Amal fumbles several times, apologizing profusely for not being able to string the words in English to respond to my initial icebreaker questions.

The questions do little to thaw the ice and before our conversation has barely lifted off, Amal wants to stop the recorder. Her father is oblivious, lost in the match and the rambunctious cheering bouncing from the tables surrounding ours. My patience is wearing thin, but in front of me is Amal nervously gulping her bottle of water, rubbing her fingers and sweaty palms vigorously. “I can’t. I don’t know why. I forget everything. I’m not OK today,” she notes. I close my diary of field notes, marking my willingness to end, reminding her of her rights as an interview participant, but fifteen minutes later, Amal decides she wants to give this a second try, steering our conversation in a different, yet productive direction that I had not imagined.

When we begin, Amal equates her home to Syria, immediately connecting ideas of belonging to the nation-state: “My home represents my country…It’s the place that I belong
to. You feel comfortable, feel that you are surrounded by people like you…in principles, in tradition. There is no difference between you and them.” With little prodding, almost immediately, Amal transitions to narrating her schooling experiences inside Syria. When Amal was in Grade 9, missiles hit her school playground, when she and other Syrians teens were inside their classrooms. She folds her arms, crouching her head into a brace position to underscore what comes next: “Just imagine, I spent three hours at school on the ground. Like this.”

Over an entire school year, Amal attended school intermittently, barely totaling a month. Though her descriptions of a school filled with children being bombed paint a picture of conflict that is grotesque and inhumane, her actions demonstrate unbridled human agency. In the remaining months, to teach herself, Amal directly copied and wrote pieces of text from her Science textbook as a way to cram and memorize large chunks of curricula that were untaught at school; portions of text that were expected to appear in her Brevet examinations—a high-stake exam that students in Syria and Lebanon take in Grade 9 to transition to senior secondary school. Threading the past with the present, Amal acknowledges the bearings this strategy has had on her current learning at university: “My basics are very bad because I didn’t understand. I just memorized everything.”

To avoid the missiles darting the sky as conflict in Syria worsened, Amal and her family shuttled between their apartment and the basement in their building that served as a bunker. Amal recalls the time as one when she slept barely three hours each night. She explicates her family’s strategy to move between the bunker and the apartment: “In the morning there were many projectiles, you can’t study anything, you can’t sleep. You don’t know how you will die.” In the darkness of the night, when visibility was reduced, she would stealthily return to the apartment to study. Day after day, the same cycle ensued.
Before the conflict in Syria, Amal’s father was working in Lebanon, and would visit the family once a month, hoping to save enough money to buy a new home. However, conflict fractured the family’s goals and he eventually returned to Syria to bring them to safe harbors in Lebanon. Once in Lebanon in the fall of 2012, Amal’s naiveté led her to believe that the move was temporary; she would resume her studies in Syria from where she had left off. Little did Amal know that her parents had already envisioned a different future for the family. Deep within, they knew that their return was not imminent. Even though Amal felt that her family left Syria hurriedly, her parents had exercised pragmatism and precaution by taking her Syrian education certificates with them.

In policy, Syrian students are not allowed to enroll at Lebanese public schools without receiving approval from Lebanon’s Ministry of Education. The process is known to be long-drawn and complex—one that entails equating past, Syrian academic credentials with Lebanese education standards. To enable Amal’s resumption of formal schooling soon, her parents had already scuttled between different government departments but with little luck. Eventually, they received her equivalency certificates the following April, nearly seven months later after they came to Lebanon. In the meanwhile though, a generous Lebanese school Director had already made exceptions for Amal. Barely within a span of five weeks from when she moved to Lebanon—a time frame unheard of in the case of most Syrian learners—Amal was now enrolled at a Lebanese, public school.

Ironically, on her first day of school, her class was rehearsing a skit for the upcoming Lebanese Independence Day, a celebration whose historical past and rituals she was unaccustomed to. It was not just the momentousness of the event that was unbeknown. English, the language of instruction at school, was also unfamiliar to Amal. “I didn’t understand ANYTHING!” she shares emphatically, while noting how “hard and sad” she
felt in the time. Yet, Amal recalls participating in the rehearsals. A seemingly guileless act, it was replete with symbolism. As a 14-year old, going with the flow to participate in the rehearsal was her strategy to mark her visibility in the moment.

Moving from an all-girls school in Syria, to now being the only Syrian in a co-ed high school in Lebanon necessitated Amal traversing a different set of social norms. She tells me in a hushed tone: “There were many embarrassing situations there…Many problems…I was nervous because I didn’t know how to deal with people.” I gently probe if there are examples of particular incidents she is willing to share, but she remains reticent. Almost as if to recompose herself from the ebbs and flows of her transitions to high school in Lebanon, she describes the Lebanese as “another community.” She continues, “It’s very different. There are a lot of differences between our community and their community. It’s okay to have problems at the beginning, but after that I got friends and we are like family.” I am struck by the linearity of Amal’s narrative, of experiencing trials and tribulations at first, and then, finding friendship. Her rendition of the experience is seemingly devoid of the hues of substance and struggle, of the brightly etched barriers to belonging that she perceived in those first moments.

In those early days of struggle, Amal’s relationships and connections with her teachers were diverse. Amal recalls her English teacher as one who “hated the person that is weak in [English] language.” To facilitate her unfettered learning, Google Translate was a close companion in this time, a tool that allowed Amal to gain familiarity with academic vocabulary in Arabic and English. She laughs while rapidly reciting geometry shapes and terms in Arabic. Almost as if with an ounce of pride, she remarks, “Sometimes I feel lucky because I have double language [Arabic and English].” It was her English teacher, Nancy, who helped Amal leap across her language barriers, boundaries that for so many other Syrian
leaners have been brightly etched and seemed impenetrable. Though she taught Amal just for a year, Michelle assigned Amal extra reading, including Edgar Allan Poe’s poems, calling her to summarize and share her understanding in front of the rest of the class. Afraid of floundering, Amal tried refusing: “No, no way, I can’t.” But Michelle was not a teacher who was going to bow out to a hesitant student. “No, you can! You can!” she coaxed her. Michelle further promulgated class norms that eased the social anxiety Amal experienced. She told her class: “If anyone here laughs on her language or anything, I will decrease five points from your exam.” In contrast to the start of our conversation when Amal’s tone quivered, when she talks of her teachers, Amal’s tone comes off as increasingly articulate, steady, and confident: “She [Michelle] motivated me that I can do it!”

Like Michelle, other teachers, too adopted practices that enabled Amal to flourish and deepen her sense of belonging with school. In her first year, Amal’s Chemistry and Mathematics teachers made concessions for her homework. “If you know it, write it in Arabic [and] I will correct it,” Amal’s Chemistry teacher told her. Even though Amal had the flexibility of submitting her homework in Arabic, she did not avail of the opportunity for it would not serve her learning goals in the long run. Amal’s Mathematics teacher explained concepts in Arabic and at the end of the class, would often turn to her: “Amal, do you have any questions? Can I help you with something?” Learning English not only facilitated subject-level comprehension at school, but also allowed Amal to foster friendships at school. Amal’s tone is upbeat as she describes her “whole class as a family.” Curious to understand how this came to be, Amal notes the fluidity of the boundaries of her friendships with those at school: “We [used to] meet outside the school, going in trips together and do some activities together at school. When someone faced problems, we used to help them and we had many things in common.” From “not knowing how to deal with people” to finding
commonality with her Lebanese peers, these connections paved a way for Amal to foster belonging.

At university though, the belonging that relationships at school helped sow was soon eroded. As the only Syrian Muslim in her class of 80 in her first year at the public university, Amal felt overexposed and undermined. The gaze of her classmates was penetrating, their jibes pernicious. “They didn’t respect my principles. They said very bad words. And I decided to never gain friends [at university].” During our second conversation, I cautiously skirt around the issue of “principles,” hoping to get specific about what exactly transpired at university that first year. Amal’s tone and stance develop an air of defensiveness. The terrain is slippery, Amal is evidently not ready to revisit the experience, and I, for one, fear the conversation terminating once again. We subtly steer the conversation away. Amal describes her friendships at university as marked by “formality.” She notes that she “feel[s] more relaxed” in the library, “read[ing] a book instead of going with them [Lebanese peers].” Amal repeatedly harkens back to the idea of principles, an idea that seems so central to her experiences of belonging, but one that I am not privy to. With a conviction that I have not heard in her voice earlier, she states: “Your principle is more important than anyone. It’s more important than making friends. When someone wants to be your friend, he will accept you in all your principles.”

Six months later, in our last conversation, Amal finally brings me in on a secret that she has shared only with a select few; one that begins unraveling the layers that have so clearly influenced her thinking about ‘principles.’ When she began university, as a consequence of her past learning strategies inside Syria, her basics in Science stood on shaky grounds. Unlike the safety and warmth of supportive relationships with teachers at high school, Amal found a paucity of similar relationships at university. Amal’s tone shifts to one
of self-inflicted shame and guilt: “All the Professors told me that your brain is not scientific… What are you doing here in Science?” Additionally, her classmates chastised her for wearing a hijab. In their eyes, being a faith-abiding, pious Muslim was fundamentally incongruous with being a successful scientist. Amal describes that first year at university as one marked with depression, sadness, and tears. Though there was one professor who encouraged her to pursue her dreams “even though” she wore a hijab, Amal’s connections with her Lebanese peers at university were tenuous.

As Amal experienced her sense of belonging rapidly evaporating, she established her own set of boundaries, marking what it means to belong to Syria and to be Syrian in Lebanon now. Reflecting on Syrians that “change their principles to gain friends,” Amal believes: “Most people will truly accept you because you really are Syrian and you conserve your principles.” Demonstrating a maturity uncharacteristic of an 18-year old, Amal reflects on the lessons she has learnt and internalized through her experience of forced displacement: of working hard and building character; of being exposed to an education system in Lebanon that values “thinking logically” over rote; of gaining fluency and confidence in English. Referencing these benefits, she wants her Syrian peers to know that these benefits are not inherently incompatible with Syrian values, and that the twain can co-exist, as they have in her case: “You can adapt to Lebanese traditions, but without leaving your principles.”

Through the NGO that funded her university scholarship, Amal has begun volunteering an hour per week, guiding Syrian children between grades two and four with their homework. In 2016, within a span of six months, Amal’s group of eight Syrian children doubled in size, all of them coming together to learn informally, in a space that renders comfort and familiarity—a gracious Syrian neighbor’s home. Equipped with a basic, but
seemingly superfluous training spanning five hours, Amal was thrown into the deep sea, expected to support young Syrian children with their homework in French, the second language in Lebanon’s schools, a language Amal herself barely knows. Each Friday, the group huddles together enthusiastically at the prospects of learning, fostering belonging through relationships with one another, and with Amal as their teacher at the fore. Once again, Google Translate has remained Amal’s trusted companion. She laughs aloud at the predicament of these informal, homework support groups: “I was lost all the time! There is no English language. Only French!”

Amal’s decision to devote part of her Fridays to young Syrian children stems from her own past. Not only has Amal experienced the fertility of productive relationships in nourishing the seeds of learning, but she also understands the ways that these relationships buttressed her sense of belonging at school. Relationships enabled Amal to transcend the boundaries of belonging, allowing for her personal growth and learning. In a tone that is clairvoyant of the past, but still puzzling to me, she recalls: “When I came to Lebanon, I didn’t find someone to help me. That is the truth - no one could help me. So I help others because I really lived in a hard situation. I love to do this, to help them. They have dreams, they want to study, and I will help them.”

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The experiences of Azaa, Ali, and Amal, point to three particular ways in which they, and other participants, construct and experience belonging. In their narratives, belonging is constructed through the presence of safety, dignity, and productive relationships in Lebanon. Their experiences illuminate the myriad ways in which refugee youth evaluate the boundaries of belonging, their distance from it, and their continual negotiation of these boundaries.
across time and setting. Below, I discuss three ideas of refugee belonging that emerge from this work.

Whither belonging? The politics of belonging

One of the perennial questions that this work builds from, and contributes to, is the question of where do refugees belong and to what ends should refugee belonging be conceptualized, let alone fostered? (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Haddad, 2008; Hovil, 2016) As the findings from this work suggest, “belonging is fragile and contradictory” (Gonzales & Sigona, 2017, p. 8). Through Azaa, Ali, and Amal, we see the ways conflict fractures and complicates, if not entirely severs, young people’s relationships with their home nation state, that of Syria, in the context of this study. Fears of persecution and threats to Azaa and Ali’s freedom of speech, and political beliefs encroach and damage their constructions of safety and dignity. So far-reaching are the tentacles of brutish might and extreme political repression, that even in Lebanon, a sovereign state where the Syrian state apparatus holds no validity, Azaa internalizes feelings of continual hyper vigilance. Though Amal left Syria when she was barely 14 years, her first-hand experiences of violence and the strains of its enduring psychological tolls are visible in the ways social anxiety and mistrust manifest during the course of our initial conversations. Though Azaa, Ali, and Amal hold legal, Syrian citizenship, their trust and belief in Syrian institutions is eroded. Their narratives are testimony to their experiences of ‘failed citizenship’ (Banks, 2017), and consequently, they hold tenuous and seemingly ambivalent attachments to the Syrian nation-state.

Through an international protection apparatus of a supranational body, UNHCR, Azaa, Ali, and Amal, are able to seek refuge, safety, and belonging in a neighboring nation-state, that of Lebanon. Ali comes to Lebanon hoping that he will be able to continue learning in Arabic, while Azaa longs physical and psychological safety. Amal, like here
parents, too, desires her learning to resume swiftly, but once again, each of them discover, much to their disappointment, that their educational and life goals are truncated by global and national, policies and practices governing the influx of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

Though Lebanon provides them with physical territory to live and belong in, they each have their own realization that they can never really belong with Lebanon. Here, the terrain is not fertile enough to plant and nourish the seeds of belonging. Here too, their relationship with the Lebanese nation-state is characterized by a state of ambivalence. Ali seeks membership and belonging in a state outside Lebanon, but is emphatic that this membership must be legal, and therefore waits for the “right chance,” as he describes it. While refugee rights enshrined in international conventions create among refugee youth expectations and the possibility of belonging in their host nation-state, in reality, restrictions on their rights to freedom of movement, work, and education continue situating them outside the boundaries of belonging in the host nation-state, even if they physically inhabit its territory.

This is not to say that Lebanese citizens do not tackle similar constraints, or that all Syrian refugees should be afforded the same rights as Lebanese citizens, or that refugee youth will never confront these dissonances and fundamental inequalities created as a consequence of their status, within or without of a nation-state. However, it does question the expectations that are created among refugees through the legal categorizations and labels that are attached to define their status. Might there be ways to support young refugees in making meanings of these labels, in coming to terms, or radically renegotiating the terms of their social contracts with their host nation-states? Which are the spaces in which young refugees may simultaneously hold, explore, and question these multiple tensions? And might there be ways in which this process of exploration and negotiation are well designed and
intentional, rather than assuming that young refugees will come to their own realizations in
due time, and more so, when they confront seemingly impenetrable barriers that they are
expected to overcome alone?

Learning and re-learning belonging

Azaa, Ali, and Amal’s strategies to navigate the boundaries of belonging are
simultaneously similar, yet different. For example, in all three cases, we see the central role
volunteering plays in their engagement with their community. Whether volunteering be a
means to overcome idleness, to cement solidarity, to seek membership and belonging, or be
dictated by organizations sponsoring their scholarships, as in Amal’s case, it is evident that
volunteering, even if unstructured, enriches participants’ lives and affords them the
opportunity to teach and learn belonging.

It is in these sites that they are able to blur the boundaries of belonging that are
otherwise so brightly etched and seemingly impenetrable. Azaa, Ali, and Amal’s volunteering
engagements are not merely acts of service, but also pathways to foster belonging. Azaa uses
volunteering as a way to take her mind away from the psychological duress of her
treacherous past and to search for meaning in the present. She remains hopeful that
volunteering opportunities may engender stability and lend access to resources that can
strengthen her psychological safety in the now and the future.

In Ali’s case, volunteering is a way to preserve his dignity, and that of Syria’s next
generation, its young children. It provides him with the chance to teach and learn belonging
through active engagement. Teaching young children informally allows Amal the chance to
give back to her community and to help Syrian children navigate boundaries that once
seemed bright, bold and challenging to transcend. Based on the teacher figures in her high
school, and the lack of them at university, she is reminded of the many ways in which deep
relational engagements can enable Syrian children to recognize and perhaps even transcend, through learning, the boundaries of belonging.

As is with other works that have researched youths’ shifting identity narratives as they confront and cross boundaries while straddling multiple spaces of school, community, and work (Abu El-Haj, 2015; Sirin & Fine, 2007; Warikoo, 2011), here too, participants’ strategies for boundary crossing are variegated. Azaa changes her identity narrative altogether, starting from a fresh slate, so she can learn at university without the incessant, inquisitive questioning of her Lebanese classmates regarding her political allegiances. As Ali sees his friends traverse physical boundaries, illegally, by boat to Europe, his strategy to cross boundaries is of waiting and legality. When presented with the chance, he refuses to cross these boundaries, in the hopes that one day, he will cross these boundaries through legal means where his dignity is not impugned. Finally, in Amal’s case, relationships with her teachers allow her to learn and succeed at high school, to transition successfully to university, when in fact university education remains out of reach for the vast majority of Syrian youth in Lebanon, and refugees, globally. Under 1% of all university aged refugees (18-24 years), globally, are able to access tertiary education (UNHCR & Global Education Monitoring Report, 2016).

Analysis across the three cases indicates that when productive, formal learning, at school, and informal learning through volunteering, present opportunities to develop the “navigational capacities” (Dryden-Peterson, Dahya, & Adelman, 2017) necessary to learn, relearn and negotiate the boundaries of belonging. Refugee education would usefully be informed by an examination of the policies and practices that develop and deepen these navigational capacities, and to systematically understand how and where young refugees blur the boundaries to belong in their host nation-states.
Finally, this study documents not just the fragility of belonging, but also its fluidity and fleeting nature. Belonging shifts across time and settings, and at any given time, institutional policies and practices can undermine individuals’ sense of belonging. Though local institutional actors may expand the spaces of inclusion and access to services for refugees in some contexts, in other contexts, these same local agents may impose additional levels of enforcement, curtailing or shrinking the spaces for inclusion and belonging (Antonsich, 2010; Gonzales & Sigona, 2017; Skey, 2013). This is most salient in Azaa’s case where her “rock of a mind” character trait enables her to successfully negotiate her university learning with an education bureaucrat. Though she retells her identity narrative at university to seek belonging, a mere chance encounter with her captor marks the illusory nature of her belonging.

Similarly, Ali’s quest to membership and belonging in a Latin American country is placed on hold when his sponsors are unable to raise the funds for him to leave. Having withdrawn from university in Lebanon and with no university education accessible immediately abroad, Ali finds that he has little to hold onto in concrete and tangible terms. The relationships that Azaa has so intentionally cultivated at school with her Lebanese teachers and friends do not transfer to university. As she transitions from one stage of her education to the next, she realizes that her sense of belonging has shifted, or maybe even weakened in its intensity.

Through these three portraits, I find that individual’s sense of shared membership and belonging that is seemingly solid in one moment can rapidly fade in another. Further research might explore the ways in which refugee youth conceptualize belonging across
different kinds of contexts, and under which conditions individuals’ belonging is deepened, diminished, or disrupted in its most extreme form.

Finally, but most importantly, across the cases, there are countless instances of unbridled agency, hope, and optimism to cultivate pathways that are purposeful and generative. In Azaa, Ali, and Amal’s narratives, we see their imperfections, their trials and tribulations, their highs and lows, and the many vulnerabilities accompanying their quest for recognition and visibility. Yet, even amidst this murkiness, we see their pursuits to belong.

This research points to two implications for the field of refugee education, broadly. First, though belonging is a fundamental human need that cements solidarity and engenders positive feelings of group membership, it is never a given for young refugees. Education policies and practices across different settings of school and university can undermine individuals’ sense of belonging and their search for membership. A more thorough examination of the formal and informal spaces, beyond school, where refugee learners experience their belonging deepened or diminished is warranted. Second, in the context of refugees, education holds enormous, untapped potential in deepening individuals’ sense of belonging in and with their communities. The question that remains is how this process plays out for refugee learners who are often in between nation-states. The quality of refugee education remains far too low, and necessitates a radical shift in proportionately focusing not just on refugee learners’ mastery of the basics, but also simultaneously enhancing their navigational capacities to acknowledge, blur, and transcend the boundaries of belonging.
### Appendix

#### Appendix 1A: Youth participant details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial No.</th>
<th>Participant name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age (in years)</th>
<th>Details of arrival in Lebanon</th>
<th>Primary occupation at time of first interview</th>
<th>Level of study</th>
<th>Number of times interviewed</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Nisreen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Waadi</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Student &amp; working</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Haani</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>September 2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ali</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>October 2012</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>January 2013</td>
<td>Student &amp; working</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Nasser</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<td>October 2012</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>F</td>
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<td>2014</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Tarek</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>2012</td>
<td>Student</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>Student</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Basel</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>February 2016</td>
<td>Recently arrived &amp; looking for opportunities</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Fares</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>July 2012</td>
<td>Working</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>Shereen</td>
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<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Azaa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>December 2013</td>
<td>Student &amp; working</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total sample average</strong></td>
<td>7 women, 8 men</td>
<td></td>
<td>23.7 years</td>
<td></td>
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References


Doing good on the promise of refugee higher education in Lebanon

Introduction

“It broke my heart,” said Tarek, a 24-year old male, Syrian refugee, displaced by conflict in Syria and now in Lebanon, when recalling the first time he encountered an NGO assisting Syrian refugees. To cope with his stark new reality of becoming a refugee in Lebanon, Tarek closed the shutters to his outer world. He paused briefly and softened his tone to share: “For one or two months, I didn’t speak. Just crying, crying, crying.” With certainty reflecting off his baby blue eyes, he remembered the day he broke his silence. “One day I went to bed and after that I got up early and said, ‘It’s enough! I should start a new life.’” Starting a new life also entailed resuming his undergraduate education as a refugee in Lebanon. But enrolling at a low-quality, middle-rung, private university in Lebanon cost upward of USD 1000 a year, and required his past education certificates from Syria, neither of which he had. For a year, Tarek placed his education aspirations on hold until he could retrieve his documents and find a scholarship to fund his university study.

A native Arabic speaker, Tarek had limited language proficiency in English, the language of instruction at universities in Lebanon. The only way for him to get through his first year was to work with an online translation tool on his phone. To demonstrate the numerous pages of a microeconomics textbook he translated from English to Arabic, Tarek flipped the pages of the pocket notebook he was carrying on him. Eager to tell me all the details, he stopped for no air when describing the jeers and jibes hurled at him when he presented in front of his classroom for the first time: “I went back home and I cried, yeah. Yeah, it was bad. Very bad.”
The incident scarred Tarek, but there was no one except himself to turn to for help. Cognizant of the tensions between Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities, Tarek was not willing to share these details with the representatives of the NGO that funded his scholarship. In Tarek’s eyes, the NGO could do nothing, especially because the NGO’s employees were “Lebanese, in the end.” As the oldest Syrian male child in his family, Tarek felt the burden and shame of opening up to his parents: “They have their problems and I give them my problems? No!” Tarek did not want to share details with his Syrian peers either. “I feel my problem is like all the Syrian people. How will they help me if they have the same problem?”

Despite the resource constraints, social isolation, helplessness, and academic struggles that Tarek confronted in his pursuit of university education as a refugee, he is privileged. Tarek constitutes part of the fewer than 1% of the global, university-aged refugee population of 18-24 year-olds, who are able to access higher education (UNESCO & UNHCR, 2016). Though academic literature has documented refugee communities’ desires to access and complete university (Crea, 2016; Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2010; Zeus, 2011), in reality, the opportunity to complete a full cycle of education for refugees remains far out of reach for almost all.

The fact that higher education opportunities for refugee youth are so severely constrained is disconcerting and in need of immediate remedy. To address this inequality and to realize the global education community’s commitments to create life-long learning opportunities for all, multilateral organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and private philanthropic foundations are increasingly leveraging scholarships as a mechanism to expand refugees’ access to higher education (Institute of International Education, 2015).
This move within refugee education mirrors larger trends within the field of comparative and international education wherein scholarships have been used to bridge resource and knowledge gaps between countries in the North and the Global South (See for example, Bhandari, 2017; A. Campbell, 2017; King, 2010). Target 4.b of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires member-states to widen access to higher education by 2020 through, “substantially expand[ing] globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries” (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2016).

Examining the policies and practices influencing the delivery of higher education scholarships, and its consequences on refugee learners is critical in contemporary times where conflict has induced unprecedented levels of forced migration, the highest since World War II (UNHCR, 2014). While primary education initiatives focus on developing the next generation of a country’s citizenry and work force, higher education opportunities shape the social and economic potential of the current generation; individuals who in the present can play active roles in fostering social cohesion and human capital within their communities.

Higher education undergirds the development of individuals’ “critical consciousness,” thereby supporting young refugees in making informed choices and decisions that directly influence their life and education trajectories (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2010, p.5). Despite these benefits of refugee higher education, organizations’ bids for efficiency and cost-effectiveness in conflict and post-conflict contexts have often led them to prioritize basic education over higher education (Milton & Barakat, 2016). Therefore, in contexts like Lebanon, where significant investments have and continue to be incurred in refugee higher education scholarship programs, a close examination of the assumptions embedded in the design and delivery of these programs is warranted.
As different stakeholders attempt to level the playing field for refugee learners to access higher education, they must also critically examine if a singular focus on expanding access through scholarships is sufficient. Through its empirical analysis of refugee higher education scholarship programs in Lebanon for Syrian refugees, this article has practical and theoretical contributions.

In integrating both refugee learners’ and global civil society actors’ perspectives, it unearths the dissonances that emerge within organization actors’ enactments and young Syrian refugees’ experiences of refugee higher education. Using Lipsky’s theory on street-level bureaucracy (1980), this inquiry explores the tensions that arise for multilateral organizations and international NGOs (INGOs) when furthering global mandates within nation-state contexts where refugees are situated. Further, through Nancy Fraser’s analytic of redistribution, recognition and representation (2000, 2010), it analyzes how the goals and purposes of refugee higher education are intended, enacted and experienced for different sets of actors – those within organizations seeking to do good on the promise of refugee higher education, and refugee learners as they maneuver the complex web of donor expectations, national policies, local, lived realities, and personal ambitions.

To create a theoretical framework for how U.N. and NGO actors, hereon referred to as organizational actors, design and deliver their refugee higher education scholarship programs, I use Lipsky’s theory of street level bureaucracy (1980). This theory was originally conceived to explain public policy implementation and street-level workers’ influence on citizens. I draw from the field of comparative and international education to elaborate how individuals operating within global institutions and NGOs in host-country national contexts serve as street-level bureaucrats for refugees, noncitizens who lack formal membership within the host nation-state. Although Lipsky’s street level bureaucracy helps us understand
why certain goals and purposes are prioritized and enacted within refugee higher education, Fraser's analytic helps us explore the inequities that emerge when refugee learners avail of these scholarship programs.

**Conceptual Framework**

**Refugee education: A brief background**

Refugees are at the intersection of the global and the national (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Defined as people who have crossed an international border to flee from their country for fear of persecution, war or violence (United Nations, 1951), they leave one nation-state, seeking safety and inclusion in another. Refugees’ rights such as the right to education, among others, are codified within international legal conventions like the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. However, the realization of these rights rests within the purview of the nation-states, or host countries, where refugees seek refuge. As of 2015, 148 of 193 nation-states were party to the 1951 Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol (UNHCR, 2015). There are no mechanisms for enforcement or oversight to ensure state parties guarantee the rights and liberties enshrined in the Convention. States can also make reservations to the articles of the Convention (Costello, 2017; Hathaway, 2005).

Although UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, is mandated with advocating for and upholding refugees’ rights in theory, the very realization of these rights in practice, is contingent on the will of host nation-states.

Supranational organizations, like UNHCR, have fundamentally shaped and dictated the contours of the field of refugee education. However, since 2012, there has been a significant shift in emphasis and direction, signaling the transference of decision-making power from the supranational to the national (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Realizing refugees’ right to education means that large multilaterals can no longer function as a “pseudo-state”
(Waters & LeBlanc, 2005, p. 132); the decision making authority and associated enforcement mechanisms to include refugees within national education systems rests within, not beyond, the nation-states where refugees seek refuge. With this realization, UNHCR’s Global Education Strategy (GES) from 2012-2016 acknowledged that it was “not a specialized education agency” (UNHCR, 2012, p. 31), and therefore needed to expand and strengthen its multi-stakeholder partnerships with national and local governments and other non-state actors like NGOs, entities who possessed technical expertise in education.

Despite UN multilaterals and INGOs remaining beholden to national governments’ policies governing the admission and acknowledgement of refugees within national systems of education, three mechanisms enable them to deepen their influence on refugee education. First, through their membership and convening power within a global civil society, these large multilaterals and INGOs serve the role of policy entrepreneurs who frame education agendas that foreground global and national education policy deliberations (J. L. Campbell, 2002; Kingdon, 2003). Second, over time international organizations have evolved into autonomous institutions able to leverage their soft power through benchmarking, global norm setting, dissemination of best-case practices; mechanisms which influence educational decision-making in middle- and low-income countries (Mundy & Murphy, 2001; Mundy & Verger, 2016), sites where the vast majority of refugees reside. Finally, through their access to high-income member countries, these organizations also advocate, galvanize and redirect funding toward national governments in low- and middle-income countries, consequently influencing the ways educational policies are established, enforced and enacted (Klees, 2011; Menashy, 2017).
Street-level bureaucrats within refugee education

Lipsky (1980) conceptualized street-level bureaucrats as individuals embedded in government institutions—public school teachers, police officers, social workers—who worked on the frontlines and exercised discretionary authority in delivering, dispensing and allocating policy benefits to citizens. This exercise of discretion in delivering public services holds consequences for individuals’ life chances (Gilson, 2015). Citizens experience the state through the actions of these frontline, street-level workers, who while regulated by rules and procedures, are also able to bend or break the rules to deliver public goods to their clients. Therefore, street-level workers’ judgments in applying and adapting policies influence citizens’ access and experiences of public services. In short, street-level workers mediate the quality of state-citizen relationships (Hupe & Hill, 2007).

In examining how the actions of representatives embedded within the country offices of large INGOs and multilateral institutions are similar to street-level bureaucrats, I discuss three defining and central features of Lipsky’s original theory: (1) the delivery of public service goods to citizens; (2) direct, face-to-face, contact with clients; and (3) the exercise of discretion.

Refugee phenomena complicate, but don’t repudiate, Lipsky’s theory for its reliance on the citizen, the client for street-level bureaucrats. Unable to return to their countries of origin as citizens owing to well-founded fears, and as non-members and noncitizens within the host countries where they now reside, refugees are “pushed into the gaps between states” (Haddad, 2008, p. 7). In the absence of an anchor to a defined nation-state and consequently, the lack of formal state-citizen relationships with their host countries, refugees, unlike citizens, confront a unique set of street-level bureaucrats: those within multilateral institutions like UNHCR and other non-state actors including INGOs. In this
instance, the global public good of education as codified in the U.N. SDGs (United Nations, 2016) and the 1951 Refugee Convention, is an example of a public service that refugees may seek claim on. To further the delivery of refugee education, a global public good, individuals within multilateral institutions and INGOs must meticulously balance host-country policies and global mandates. The ongoing decisions they make regarding the design and delivery of refugee education programs significantly shapes refugee learners’ education trajectories.

While not all individuals working within country-offices of INGOs and multilateral organizations like UNHCR and UNESCO have ‘face-to-face’ contact with their refugee clients, extensions of Lipsky’s work (1980) acknowledge the ways technology and subcontractors mediate interactions between street-level bureaucrats and their clients (Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010). First, technology has enabled virtual connections wherein refugee learners applying for higher education scholarships may in fact never meet individuals within large multilaterals when filling out a scholarship application. Second, the power and authority of the state may also be further sanctioned to private contractors to fulfill state obligations, thereby shifting the nature of the encounters between street-level bureaucrats and their clients (Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010). Unable to fulfill the refugees’ diverse education needs alone, individuals within large education multilateral organizations often transmit their authority onward to local, smaller, partner organizations. These partners directly implement education programs on behalf of these larger organizations and come into direct, face-to-face contact with refugee learners. Together, individuals in these large multilaterals and smaller implementing partner organizations—in relationship to refugee learners directly or indirectly—create shared knowledge, collective beliefs, and perceptions about refugee learners’ needs.
Street-level bureaucrats’ discretionary authority differentiates them from other bureaucrats and public servants. However, the discretion they exercise is not boundless. This discretion is paradoxical because it is “nested within the context of routines, practice ideologies, rule following and law” (Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010, p. 254).

Organizational and institutional environments along with cultural and context-bound norms regulate and structure when, where, and how street-level bureaucrats exercise their discretionary authority (Gilson, 2015).

As my findings indicate, individuals nested within large multilaterals and INGOs, simultaneously draw from multiple registers: doctrines enshrined within global rights-based conventions like the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Refugees; financial donors’ demands and expectations; national, host-country governments’ policies surrounding the inclusion of refugees; organizational missions and mandates; and finally, but importantly, the aspirations of their clients, refugee learners. Despite the presence of these multiple, norm-bound structures, individuals’ agency is rarely constricted; their agency can slowly transform the very structures they are embedded within (Gilson, 2015). This set of street-level bureaucrats exercise their discretion in deciding which national-government rules and procedures to bend, circumvent or advocate against, how and to what extent, whilst negotiating perennial tensions within refugee studies—respecting national sovereignty while furthering global mandates.

Street-level bureaucrats’ allocation and distribution decisions in refugee education

In using their street-level discretion towards advancing refugees’ right to education, street-level bureaucrats confront the reality that there are far more refugee learners than they can possibly respond to. Therefore, street-level bureaucrats resort to “creaming,” processes through which they can support a manageable subset of individuals (Lipsky, 1980). In the
process of creaming and efficaciously using a limited set of resources, street-level bureaucrats make allocation-based decisions (Gilson, 2015; Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010).

However, allocation-based decisions are not just about distributing resources. Underlying them are fundamental equity-related considerations of who gets what, why and under what conditions. How do these distributional decisions subsequently shape refugee learners’ aspirations and experiences? To analyze this, I use Nancy Fraser’s analytic of redistribution, recognition and representation (1995, 2010a).

Within Lebanon, refugee higher education for young Syrians has remained missing from national priorities. The government’s official policy response to educating Syrians in Lebanon is outlined in the two versions of its policy document, Reaching All Children with Education (RACE) I and II (Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), 2014, 2016). RACE I and II’s marked absence of post-secondary education opportunities, is notable and salient. Syrian refugee youth in Lebanon must tackle a harsh reality: educational opportunity is not distributed equally; their pathways onward to higher education are limited. Such a context has necessitated the intervention and involvement of large multilateral institutions like UNHCR and UNESCO, and other INGOs in the design and delivery of refugee higher education scholarships programs that attempt to bridge inequalities in Syrians’ access to higher education.

Fraser’s analytic asserts threefold action to build a just society and to enable “parity of participation” (2000, p.115): the material redistribution of resources to reduce economic inequality; the recognition of differences and identity claims by minorities; and minority groups’ representation in decision-making processes, especially within the political domain (1995, 2010a). In short, each of the scales of redistribution, recognition and representation intersect with economic, socio-cultural, and institutional realms respectively.
These scales, or frames, just like any other, are not binaries and require careful balancing. Redressing injustice through one frame necessitates adjustments among others, a theme that resonates in my findings. This framework has been recently applied in examining the dialectics of education and peacebuilding in conflict and post-conflict contexts (See for example, Christie, 2016; Dryden-Peterson & Mulimbi, 2017; Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, & Smith, 2017).

Critics in the field of ethnic studies have described Fraser's notions of representation as reductionist, obfuscating the roles privileged, dominant groups must play in creating an equal footing for minorities' participation in decision-making and in representing and amplifying their voices (Keddie, 2012; Oyarzún, Franco, & McCowan, 2017; Petoukhov, 2013). Despite these valid critiques, Fraser's analytic is useful for it focuses not just on 'affirmative' or temporary remedies, but 'transformative remedies,' which encourage a close examination of the institutional and structural obstacles that limit individuals’ and groups’ participatory parity (Fraser, 1995, 2000). This analytic lens facilitates an investigation of the myriad ways considerations of distribution and equity interact with one another, a focus of this paper in the case of refugee higher education scholarship programs in Lebanon (Fraser, 2010b).

**Context of the Study**

The Syrian conflict is now in its sixth year. As of October 2016, the Government of Lebanon estimated that the country was hosting 1.5 million Syrian refugees (UNICEF, UNHCR, & WFP, 2016). In a country of just 4 million Lebanese citizens, the significant presence of Syrian refugees has had debilitating impacts on Lebanon’s social, political, and economic fabric, thereby inciting tensions and hostility between the two groups. Numerous reports have documented the increase in rents, the depression of daily labor wage rates, the
strained delivery of essential, public social services of electricity and water and sanitation, and, the decline in Lebanon’s GDP (Government of Lebanon and United Nations, 2015, 2017; Migration Policy Centre, 2014). With the Syrian conflict estimated to have cost Lebanon nearly USD 14.5 billion thus far (International Monetary Fund, 2017), the Government of Lebanon has undertaken several steps to regulate and limit the presence of Syrians in the country.

Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or its 1967 protocol. As a consequence, it does not recognize Syrians as refugees and labels them instead as ‘displaced,’ demanding them to follow necessary procedures to remain legal in the country (Human Rights Watch, 2016b). In October 2014, Lebanon’s Council of Ministers adopted a comprehensive policy on Syrian displacement, which sought to decrease Syrian presence in Lebanon. In implementing this policy, the country’s General Security Office (GSO) established a new set of requirements for Syrians seeking entry to Lebanon and those already in the country. It required all Syrians above the age of 15 years in Lebanon to renew their residency at a cost of USD 200 each year (Human Rights Watch, 2016b; Janmyr, 2016). These costs are exorbitant for young Syrians, especially since the average monthly income in refugee households is estimated at $177 (International Monetary Fund, 2017). The residency policy has also given rise to a thriving, illegal market of peddlers who serve as Lebanese sponsors in exchange for exorbitant financial sums and are known to exploit Syrians’ plight and desperation in exchange for their legality in the country (Janmyr, 2016).

Lebanon’s Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) officially licenses the country’s 47 private tertiary education institutions and its one public university. MEHE’s Directorate General of Higher Education is in charge of the 47 private institutions of higher education, while the Lebanese University (LU), the country’s only public higher education
institution is governed autonomously (Ministry of Education and Higher Education & European Commission, n.d.). Furthermore, Law 285/2014 on Higher Education guarantees higher education institutions with autonomy in their governance and operations (El-Ghali, Berjaoui, & DeKnight, 2017). Decentralization and autonomy within Lebanon’s higher education sector has therefore meant that the government cannot mandate or coerce Lebanese higher education institutions in admitting Syrian refugee learners.

The proportion of young Syrians enrolled at Lebanese universities is sparse, in comparison to the Lebanese. As of 2015, Lebanon’s gross enrollment ratio (GER) in tertiary education was 38.48% (UNESCO, 2016b) (higher than the average GER for tertiary education in the Arab world of 28.17% in 2014) (World Bank, 2015). Unpublished data from UNHCR suggest that as of February 2016, there were nearly 115,000 Syrian refugees between the ages of 18-24 years in Lebanon (UNHCR, 2016c). Of this number though, the exact numbers of Syrians who were finally eligible for university education is widely contested, especially since conflict has disrupted Syrian learners’ completion of a full cycle of education and impeded their access to paperwork—necessary pre-requisites to enroll at university (Watenpaugh, Fricke, & King, 2014). In 2016-2017, there were 6,288 Syrians and nearly 190,000 Lebanese enrolled in all universities in Lebanon (El-Ghali et al., 2017). It is plausible that not all of these were refugees, especially since Syrian students attended Lebanon’s universities long before conflict broke out in Syria, in 2011 (Watenpaugh et al., 2014). Reliable statistics on the precise number of Syrian refugees accessing higher education within Lebanon remain unavailable.

As of 2016, to enter university, Syrians were required to submit evidence of their Lebanese secondary certificate (Baccalaureate), if they completed their high school in Lebanon, or an equivalent document (El-Ghali et al., 2017), if they completed their
schooling in Syria. To adjust Syrian learners’ previous academic study in Syria with academic standards in Lebanon, MEHE’s equivalence committee asked Syrian students to demonstrate their legality in country. This meant that Syrians needed to submit proof of their legal residency permits granted by Lebanon’s Ministry of Interior (United Nations & Government of Lebanon, 2017). However, in 2016, nearly two-thirds of Syrians in Lebanon lacked legal residency (Human Rights Watch, 2016a). These regulations surrounding Syrians’ legal status in Lebanon have subsequently influenced why higher education has remained out of reach for the vast majority of young Syrian refugees.

In addition to the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, and universities in Lebanon, other actors engaged in the delivery of refugee higher education in Lebanon include UNHCR, UNESCO and other local and international NGOs offering financial aid to young Syrians to attend university. A sampling of these actors and the services they offer to Syrians is listed in Appendix 2A. Details about how these actors’ make these distribution-based decisions regarding which young Syrians’ higher education to sponsor are elaborated in detail in the findings.

Given the unevenness of the higher education terrain, how do organizational actors or street-level bureaucrats, make critical determinations regarding the distribution of higher education scholarships for Syrian refugees in Lebanon? What do these decisions reveal about the intended goals and purposes embedded within refugee higher education? How are worthiness and merit constructed and how do they condition young Syrians’ education and post-education aspirations? In the following sections, I examine the multiple tensions that emerged within refugee higher education for both organizational actors and Syrian refugee learners.
Methodology

Research approach

This study was not designed to evaluate UN and NGO actors’ accomplishments and shortcomings in their delivery of higher education scholarships for young, displaced Syrians in Lebanon. It does not seek to reify or privilege the perspective of organizational actors or young Syrians. In my data collection, analysis, and interpretation, I draw on principles of “portraiture,” a social science methodology that adopts a vigilant and balanced gaze to capture individuals’ and organizations’ expressions of strength and resilience while being embedded within rapidly evolving contexts and trying circumstances. It is not an approach that occludes and oversees imperfections, but one that recognizes the co-existence of promise and potential with weakness and vulnerability (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

I use a phenomenological approach to guide my investigation of the meanings different sets of participants—organizational actors and young Syrians—attributed to higher education in times of displacement, and the ways global, national, and local contexts and phenomena shaped these attributed meanings. A phenomenological approach focuses on “exploring the meaning of peoples’ experiences in the context of their lives” (Seidman, 2013, p. 20). In asking my participants to illuminate, contextualize, and reflect on their lived experiences (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000), I sought clarity on the pathways—imagined and experienced—young Syrians and organizational actors believed that higher education would enable or impede.

In my approach to this work, I recognized that co-constructing meaning of young Syrians’ complex and tumultuous lived experiences could not take place in the absence of productive, symmetric and reciprocal relationships between my participants and me. I was keenly committed to not just identifying structural challenges and policy barriers that
circumscribed young Syrians’ access to and experiences of higher education, but also the spaces within which organizational actors and young Syrians could endure in their enactments and pursuits of higher education. This therefore implied bearing witness to the personal and public registers that each set of actors tapped into when grappling with murky dilemmas and recognizing the non-linearity of their decision-making. None of this could have occurred in the absence of relationships, which developed over time at different settings, including, accompanying participants to their place of work, meeting university students on their campus, reviewing participants’ job applications, attending official policy meetings I was invited to even if the agenda did not pertain directly to my research, supporting participants’ English learning informally over several weekends, and sustaining regular communication long after I had officially ‘exited’ my field site. These sustained relationships aided my continual contact with participants, allowing us all to pick up from where we had left off, especially when I returned to Lebanon for a second round of brief data-collection.

As a graduate student researcher studying at an elite university in the U.S. who had never personally experienced forced displacement meant there was considerable social distance between my sub-sample of young, Syrian participants and me. However, several commonalities helped reduce this distance. My identity and experiences were a source of connection and identification with my participants. During our conversations, I referenced my early struggles as an international student navigating my pursuits of higher education abroad. Participants were aware that I was a researcher traversing unfamiliar socio-cultural and linguistic terrain in Lebanon, a context I had previously never worked in, and that like them, I, too, experienced discrimination in Lebanon, when mistaken for being a South-Asian, blue-collar immigrant worker of color.
**Data sources**

Data for this study are based on a total of 62 interviews with young displaced Syrians and organizational actors involved in planning and implementing higher education programs for Syrians. I collected data in two phases: Phase I of data collection was undertaken between January – July 2016, when I was living in Lebanon. The second phase was shorter and lasted under two weeks when I returned to Lebanon in December 2016 to conduct follow-up interviews.

To deepen my understanding of the ways global and national policies mediated organizational actors’ spheres of influence over higher education programing for Syrians in Lebanon, I regularly attended the higher education roundtable meetings that UNHCR and UNESCO convened. These meetings were a way for different U.N., NGO and university actors to come together to find coherence in their higher education programing. The launch of this higher education roundtable coincided with the first phase of my data collection in Lebanon in February 2016. Between February and July 2016, this group met thrice. Participants attending these meetings were aware of my role as a researcher and in line with my commitment to establishing symmetric, reciprocal working relationships with actors, I also volunteered my time to facilitate a preliminary scoping exercise examining the landscape of formal, certified higher education opportunities for Syrians in Lebanon. A subset of the findings from this scoping exercise inform Appendix 2A.

I attended one meeting that the Ministry of Education and Higher Education organized for all NGOs working in the delivery of refugee education in the country where the Minister of Education presided, and two additional presentations by NGOs and universities to familiarize myself with the context shaping young Syrians’ education decisions and aspirations. On each of these occasions, I took detailed notes documenting the
deliberations, dilemmas, and decisions of various actors, paying particular attention to the
tone and tenor of the conversations and the implicit and explicit messages communicated to
attendees about where the locus of decision-making power lay and who possessed the
legitimacy to make decisions about young Syrians’ education trajectories. All meetings were
carried out in English.

Finally, I analyzed 24 documents from seven organizations offering higher education
scholarships. These documents included organizations’ program reports and concept notes,
and details of their higher education scholarship programs in the form of brochures and
application forms. These documents were obtained from organizations, either when they
directly shared these documents with me, or when they were publicly available on websites
and social media pages.

**Interview participants**

To constitute my sub-sample of young Syrians, I interviewed 15 young Syrians for an
average of three times over two phases of data collection, which I will describe in the next
sub-section. Details of the number of times each participant was interviewed, in addition to
information about their age, gender, type of university they attended in Lebanon are
provided in Appendix 2B. In total, I conducted 50 interviews with young Syrians. To be
included in my sample of young participants, I applied the following inclusion criteria:
participants needed to be between the ages of 18-30 years; forcibly displaced by conflict in
Syria and self-identified as living in Lebanon’s capital, Beirut, or its surrounding Mount
Lebanon area since 2011 or later (the conflict in Syria first began in 2011); some working
knowledge of English, the language of the interview; and, either currently enrolled in formal,
certified higher education opportunities in Lebanon or had disrupted, temporarily or
indeed, their higher education trajectories owing to conflict. As a non-Arabic speaker, I
was unable to conduct interviews in Arabic, youth participants’ mother tongue. While I recognize this limitation, I was also aware that the presence of a translator would impede and alter relational dynamics that may inhibit participants’ authentic disclosures about their flight and exposure to conflict, their pursuit of education and ideas of inclusion in Lebanon. After our repeated conversations, participants confirmed this proposition when they admitted their discomfort at the thought of sharing personal, sensitive details in the presence of a Syrian or Lebanese translator. To mitigate this shortcoming around the language for the interview, I always provided participants with opportunities to pause to recollect and write their thoughts in Arabic or use an online translation application on my phone.

I constituted this sub-sample of young Syrians through a combination of snowball or referral sampling (Robinson, 2014) and purposeful sampling. I often asked participants to help me identify other individuals in their network of friends and acquaintances that met my inclusion criteria. Instead of making direct contact with any prospective participants at the outset, I used a personal referral strategy and requested my existing participants to introduce me to those in their network instead. “Outsiders” often use this referral strategy for qualitative work with refugees, to gain acceptance, trust and begin developing productive research relationships (Akesson, 2015; Mosselson, 2010). I was introduced to my first participant through a Syrian individual working in an organization I had established contact with during the first month of my time in Lebanon and my last participant was referred to me by another participant I had previously interviewed. When a series of referrals had been exhausted or did not help me identify prospective participants, I also approached organizations granting higher education scholarships to young Syrians for referrals to their pool of scholarship holders. Therefore, at any given time I initiated multiple referral chains, knowing that not all referrals would yield success. Despite these simultaneous referrals, to
protect participant confidentiality, at no point did I share details about my final sample with participants. However, in cases where participants knew each other, they were aware of each other’s participation in this study.

As my initial data collection and preliminary analysis progressed, to ensure my data reflected variation in young Syrians’ perspectives and experiences of the meanings they attached to higher education in the present and for their future, I combined snowball sampling along with purposeful sampling (Maxwell, 2013), paying particular attention to “substantive” and “theoretical considerations” (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 155-156). The substantive and theoretical considerations I applied to diversify my sample included gender (n=7 women, n=8 men) and individuals at different stages of their higher education and life trajectories (n=9 of 15 participants were currently enrolled in some form of formal, certified higher education, while the remainder were working full time and saving for university or had moved recently to Lebanon and were on the lookout for opportunities). I deliberately excluded young Syrians who met the above mentioned inclusion criteria but were enrolled in elite, private universities in Lebanon where the tuition was akin to private U.S. liberal arts colleges (Watenpaugh et al., 2014). My decision for this exclusion was informed by initial conversations with other organizational actors in Lebanon, who suggested that young Syrians in Lebanon’s elite universities had differential access to academic, economic, and social capital and were therefore atypical. All, but one, were enrolled in non-elite, middle-rung universities. The one participant who was enrolled in an elite university was recently funded by a private funder and had therefore transferred from a non-elite university to a top-ranking one.

After interviewing my sub-sample of young Syrians, to gain greater insight into the policies influencing the design and delivery of higher education scholarship programs, I also
interviewed 12 organizational actors from different U.N. agencies and NGOs who were involved in the conceptualization and/or delivery of higher education scholarship programs for young Syrians to study in Lebanon. These actors articulated the goals and purposes of higher education that influenced the design of their scholarship programs. To protect the confidentiality of participants, I am unable to provide additional details about the organizational representatives I interviewed. All interviews in this sub-sample were conducted in English. I learnt of these actors through my early interactions with representatives from UNHCR and UNESCO who informed me of the key actors delivering higher education scholarship programs so Syrian refugees could access formal, certified higher education in Lebanon. All interviews were recorded, except one, after participants provided their consent.

**Interviews**

My interviews with the sub-sample of young Syrians drew from Seidman’s (2013) three-series interviewing structure and in all cases, except one, I interviewed my sub-sample of young Syrian participants at least twice in the first phase of data collection. Interviews took place at settings participants chose and felt comfortable. These settings included university campuses, cafes, and participants’ homes. In the first phase of data collection, the purpose of these in-depth semi-structured interviews with young Syrian refugees was to examine their academic and life experiences in Lebanon. Specifically, in the first interview I asked participants to reconstruct details of their experiences in Syria, their relationships with Syrians and Lebanese, relationships that they believed provided support and sustenance, and details of their goals and ambitions.

Our second conversation focused on their pursuits and experiences of higher education, their recollections of their first days on campus, and the academic and socio-
emotional supports they believed enabled feelings of inclusion and belonging. In our third conversation, I asked participants to reflect on the collective meaning they made of salient experiences that they had previously identified in their education and life trajectories, and how they identified with themselves and their goals in the present – when were the times they felt visible and strong and when were the times they felt diminished and vulnerable?

When I returned to Lebanon, I was able to interview half of my sub-sample of young Syrians (n=7) a fourth time. While I intended to purposefully select the individuals I would interview a fourth time, this was not always possible given participants’ academic and work schedules, and that I was in Lebanon only for a short time. My interviews at this phase focused on understanding and documenting changes in young Syrians’ academic and personal goals and experiences, and the factors that had influenced the shifts in their thinking and enactments towards their goals and aspirations. Across these two phases, each interview with young Syrians lasted for an average of 90 minutes.

In my interviews with representatives from U.N. agencies and NGOs I specifically asked participants to elaborate their roles in the provision of higher education scholarships, bottlenecks they encountered in their work, collaboration among other actors, global and local influences on their work, how they conceptualized success in their work, the imagined goals and purposes of their scholarship programs and their assumptions and reasons for articulating or prioritizing certain sets of goals and purposes. These interviews lasted for an average of 60 minutes and were also conducted in English.

Data analysis

Analysis of the interview data was ongoing and iterative. Following each interview, I listened to the audio recording to document and organize participant’s main ideas into broad analytic categories and themes. These notes included a few verbatim quotes from the
participant, along with my own understanding of what these quotes implied and meant in my participant’s particular context. This organization process, early in the analysis cycle, allowed me to stay grounded to the data while making emergent connections with other participants’ experiences. Creating these listening notes provided opportunities for self-reflexivity to further refine my interview questions and sharpen the focus of the inquiry.

In the case of my sub-sample of young Syrians, once I had written the listening note for the first interview, I returned to interview the same participant a second time. Writing these initial listening notes and sequencing interviews allowed me to: easily reference details that participants had mentioned in previous interviews; identify initial emergent themes that informed later interviews; and, draw connections between young Syrians’ experiences in Syria and Lebanon and trace their current higher education trajectories and aspirations. This process of framing each participant’s narrative profile therefore allowed me to treat each individual as a separate unit of analysis.

I personally transcribed 54 of the 62 interviews that constitute the data for this study; the remaining 8 were transcribed through a paid transcription service. This process allowed me to re-immersse myself in the data and to re-engage with participants’ voices. It allowed me to document not only the interview flow and participants’ verbatim responses, but also facilitated focused attention to participants’ silences, their uncertainty and hesitancy around specific issues. I viewed these conversation fillers not just the absence of talk, but found them to be illuminating for they shone light on what was said, and yielded glimpses of what was implied but not directly stated (Green, Franquiz, & Dixon, 1997; Henderson, 2017).

After completing the listening notes and the interview transcriptions, I used Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis software to code interviews, meeting notes, and scholarship applications and documents that organizations had shared with me. My goal was to examine the ways
different sets of actors—young Syrian refugees and organizational actors—constructed and
negotiated the goals and purposes of refugee higher education within Lebanon. I used a
grounded approach to first develop a set of emic codes (e.g., learning challenges, scholarship
conditions, access barriers, discrimination, imagined futures, policy blocking and enabling
factors) to code all interviews (Charmaz, 2006). I first coded interview transcripts from my
sub-sample of young Syrians and subsequently coded interview data from organizational
actors and scholarship application forms, meeting minutes and reports. After this round of
emic coding, I used axial coding to identify relationships between previously established
codes and the ways these codes, or smaller sub-categories of data related to larger etic
categories and ideas drawn from Nancy Fraser’s scales of justice framework (e.g.,
redistribution, recognition, and representation). At each stage of the coding process, I wrote
brief analytic memos, and eventually, a larger synthetic memo to closely examine the
dissonances between organizational actors’ actions around higher education scholarship
programs, and the meanings young Syrians attached to their pursuit of higher education.

Findings

I begin with an analysis of young Syrians’ future goals and aspirations as attached to
their pursuit of higher education. Subsequently, I use Fraser’s analytic of redistribution,
recognition and representation to examine organizational actors’ intended and enacted goals
and purposes underlying their higher education scholarship programs. In each of these sub-
sections, I integrate young Syrians’ perspectives highlighting how organizational actors’
 enactments influenced young Syrians refugees’ experiences of higher education in Lebanon.

1. Young Syrians’ Imagined Futures

   Young Syrians’ imagined futures were complex, non-linear and bound by
 opportunity, not geography. I analytically distinguish between young Syrians’ imagined
futures and plausible futures. I refer to their imagined futures as those ideas or concepts that young Syrians held in their long-run imaginings but had not taken concrete steps in the present toward realizing those futures. Plausible futures on the other hand are futures that young Syrians viewed as realistic, short-term, manageable, and malleable; futures for which they had taken concrete, even if small, steps toward realizing.

Regardless of the amount of time participants had spent living in Lebanon, participants recalled their experiences of isolation and the slow, difficult process of coming to terms with their current reality. Several participants spoke of Lebanon as a place where they could not feel at home, or feel “comfortable” or “relaxed.” Other participants tried to make sense of the negative coping strategies of excessive substance abuse that other young Syrians had adopted. Yasmeen described her state in Lebanon as “confused,” and believed that young Syrians like her lacked “the power to fight their reality.” She explained: “When they miss their family or can’t change their life here [Lebanon], they go to weed or drinking.” Participants like Waadi, believed the need for counselors, “those who hold their hands and tell them this is the future, this is the right way…Syrians need support.” Echoed in these descriptions were participants’ lone struggles to not just make meaning of their past and present, but also to chart a pathway through their current uncertainties in the hopes of a more stable future.

Even amidst this murkiness of the past, present and future, participants undertook definitive steps. They believed that one way to overcome any uncertainty surrounding their future was through decisive and concrete action in the present—the here and now. Amal recalled her move to Lebanon and the uncertainty of not knowing whether to study for her Syrian secondary exams or the Lebanese ones. Amal, who was barely in her second year of university when we met the fourth and last time, was planning her academic pursuits several
steps ahead. In her summer vacations, she started teaching herself German, in the hopes of standing out to scholarship committees when applying to a Master’s program two years later. Rita, who had been arrested four times by the Syrian regime, knew that she could not return to Syria until there was a regime change. She considered leaving but was also aware of her friends’ boredom and banal routines as they waited endlessly for asylum in Sweden after crossing into Europe by boat. Rita’s imaginings of the future—onward in Europe or back in Syria—were informed by her past and her friends’ experiences in the present. Migrating to Europe illegally was not an option, neither was a return to Syria. Despite believing that “life s%^*[ed]” in Lebanon, Rita was well aware that her plausible future would be one based in Lebanon.

In other instances, young participants plausible futures entailed multi-step processes. Nasser who worked at a fruit stall in Lebanon fled Syria before he completed his university-leaving final exams. His eventual, imagined future was returning to Syria “someday”. However, his “first goal” was to “finish studies in Syria.” Being in Lebanon allowed Nasser the possibility of achieving his immediate, plausible future goal. Nasser had already shuttled between Lebanon and Syria to re-take his university exams twice. Once he had graduated, Nasser’s next immediate goal entailed “thinking about traveling [away from Lebanon] or scholarships.”

Similarly, Shereen’s parents were considering immigrating to Malaysia through a private organization because her siblings were depressed and not learning in Lebanese public schools. Shereen, who was currently enrolled in university, felt “scared” when considering the possibility of leaving with her family. “I’m hesitating if I go with them or not because I can’t leave everything and go. I can’t continue there [in Malaysia]. I would start from zero if I went there, right?” Like Nasser, Shereen too, imagined an eventual return to Syria, but only
once peace prevailed. In the interim though, both wanted nothing more than completing their university degrees. Only then, would they consider moving onward from Lebanon. In each of these cases, their goals and ambitions were opportunity-bound: Shereen needed to complete her education in Lebanon, and Nasser needed to graduate from his university in Syria. For both, the promise of leaving Lebanon dangled in the horizon.

While not a dominant theme, two female participants viewed returning to Syria as a developmental regression in their lives. They believed displacement was an opportunity to learn, grow and discover one’s self. Yasmeen exemplified this thinking: “If I’m moving to some place, I will never get back here. I will just be back for a visit because I think it’s a station in your life and you can’t be back. You can visit, but you can’t be back.” Yasmeen’s imagined future did not entail a physical return to Syria because she saw Syria as one phase in her life, as a temporary ‘station.’ For her moving beyond Syria was a chance to “see different things in countries…new things, new traditions, new culture.”

In other instances, participants shared their trepidation when considering the social dynamics they would encounter if return were to become a reality. “The lifestyle is different now…five years of war was enough to change us and to change them [those in Syria]…I don’t know about return,” said Tarek as he sighed loudly expressing sadness at the situation. Both Tarek and Yasmeen, spoke of Syria with nostalgia and awe, and imagined contributing to the country from afar. Their attachment to Syria and their Syrian identity was visible in their discourses. However, neither their plausible, near-term futures, nor their imagined, long-term futures entailed traces of physical return to Syria.

Nearly all participants expressed attachments to extended family in Syria and recognized the need for them and other Syrians to “help” or “rebuild” the country. However, unlike the organizational actors I interviewed, not all young participants saw
physical return to Syria as the only mechanism to facilitate rebuilding Syria. In contrast to the organizational actors who anticipated Syrians’ eventually returning, young Syrians’ imaginings and hopes for the future were simultaneously embedded transnationally, across multiple geographic settings. All the men in my sample knew that their return to Syria was elusive, until threats of persecution and conscription within the military had faded.

Young Syrians’ calculus of the future therefore entailed a multitude of factors: their education in Syria; their work, life and learning experiences in Lebanon; their identifications with themselves and with their family and friends in Syria and beyond; current geo-political shifts; and the availability of academic and economic opportunities within Lebanon. While I analytically distinguish between plausible and imagined futures, they are in fact intricately enmeshed and intertwined with each other, guiding young Syrian’s simultaneous and multiple imaginings of their futures. These imaginings not just complicated facile binaries of staying in Lebanon versus leaving the country or returning to Syria, but also stood in stark contrast to the reductionist and geographical-bound notions of physical return that emerged in organizational actors’ discourses.

Equipped with this understanding of how young Syrians viewed their futures, I subsequently turn to examining the organizational actors’ intended goals and purposes of higher educational scholarships for young Syrians.

2. Redistribution: Accessing Higher Education

Fraser (2000) conceptualizes redistribution or the material distribution of financial and economic resources to minority and marginalized groups as a way to redress social inequalities. Similarly, organizational actors used scholarships as a tool to reduce the financial barriers associated with accessing higher education for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. These actors turned their attention to higher education in 2015 for the first time. I first trace the
mechanisms that enabled this increased attention to higher education and the subsequent impacts of organizations’ redistribution efforts on young Syrian refugees’ access to higher education in Lebanon.

2.1 Expanding access to refugee higher education for Syrians through scholarships

At the country’s only public university, the Lebanese University (LU), Syrian students must pay USD 700 each year, twice the figure their Lebanese counterparts pay. Enrollment and tuition costs in the private university ranges between USD 1000, at middle-rung private universities, to upward of USD 15000 at the country’s elite private universities (El-Ghali et al., 2017). Estimates suggest that more than 70% of displaced Syrians live below the poverty line (Government of Lebanon and United Nations, 2017). In the face of such dire poverty, scholarships have been the primary response to support young Syrians in defraying the exorbitant costs of higher education.

The advantages of these scholarships were particularly salient for young Syrian women, who confronted tradeoffs between higher education, part-time work, and social pressures for early marriages. Mahfam, a 23-year old Syrian woman with a scholarship noted, “If it wasn’t for the scholarship, I wouldn’t be here now.” In the absence of financial support, her alternate plan was to work full time in Lebanon to save money for university. Just as Haani turned 30 years, he was accepted at the American University of Beirut (AUB), one of the Arab region’s most prestigious and renowned universities. With no access to scholarships, he decided to fundraise over the Internet. “I cannot achieve my dreams without a scholarship,” his online fundraising page stated. Unable to raise the $15,000 in tuition he needed for AUB, Haani placed his hopes of studying on hold, waiting instead for other opportunities. For scores of young Syrians in Lebanon, scholarships that covered their
university tuition costs, fully or partially, created pathways to higher education that might have previously seemed out of reach.

There was great diversity in the number and kinds of scholarships available to young Syrians and consequently, the kinds of universities they were able to access. In 2014, UNHCR’s Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI), offered scholarships only to 58 displaced Syrian students in Lebanon between 18-28 years. The program grew in the 2016-17 academic year and now targeted 315 Syrians (Terre des Hommes, 2017). Corresponding figures for scholarships by other organizations across time are unavailable, but by March 2016, several domestic and international NGOs offered a wide range of scholarships (each supporting between 7 to 450 Syrian students), for formal, certified higher education in Lebanon.

In some instances, these scholarships fully covered students’ tuition expenses, ancillary costs and provided them with a small stipend. In other instances, scholarships only partially covered students’ tuition expenses with students expected to pay the rest (United Nations Inter-Agency Coordination: Lebanon, 2016). More details about the diversity of scholarship programs is available in Appendix 2A. This variation in practice limited the kinds of universities students were able to access. Only UNHCR’s DAFI scholarship facilitated Syrians access to Lebanon’s public university. With the exception of two organizations facilitating young Syrians’ access to the country’s most elite, private universities, scholarships mostly enabled young Syrians’ access to middle-rung, private universities in Lebanon.

This spurt in scholarships was a consequence of commensurate growth in the number and kinds of organizations involved in the delivery of these scholarships. In February 2016, for the first time in five years after the influx of Syrian refugees to Lebanon, NGO and UN organizations came together at a higher education roundtable convened by
UNESCO and UNHCR. Six organizations were represented at that first convening: half were UN agencies and the remaining were INGOs and Lebanese universities. The circulated minutes of the meeting framed the purposes of the roundtable as a way to, “gather more information on the higher education activities and initiatives…and to establish stronger communication and coordination mechanisms between all relevant actors” (UNESCO, 2016a). By March 2016, the roundtable’s attendees had grown to ten actors and now included representatives from the European Union and other organizations funded by the German Federal Foreign Office. The roundtable’s meeting minutes were now circulated to a new set of actors—renowned international foundations and philanthropic organizations based in the U.S. and Europe who were interested in developments in higher education for Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

While there was growing interest in refugee higher education among organizations, the demand for scholarships severely outstripped its supply. In the 2015-2016 academic year, LASER, a Lebanese NGO involved in partially funding Syrian students’ tuition at two Lebanese private universities received 2,500 applications for roughly 220 spots. For the same year, UNHCR’s DAFI program received 377 applications for 104 spots; by 2016-2017, it faced exponential growth in its applicant pool with 1183 applications for just 227 spots (Terre des Hommes, 2017). Maysa, a staff member at a university recalled the time when her organization advertised its scholarship application over social media and was “swamped” with hundreds of inquiries within a weekend. For young Syrians, this under-supply made receiving a scholarship extremely competitive and coveted.

In my analysis, I find three main mechanisms that supported the rising interest among NGOs, universities and U.N. organizations in creating higher education scholarship opportunities for Syrian refugees in Lebanon and in their thinking about the distribution of
this resource: (1) a burgeoning migration crisis in Europe in 2015 and 2016; (2) a largely self-governed higher education sector in Lebanon with little government involvement; and (3) forecasts of demographic shifts in the refugee population.

2.1.1 Migration Crisis in Europe

The demographics underlying the migration crisis in Europe in 2015 and 2016 drew donors’ attention to refugee higher education in Lebanon and other countries neighboring Syria. In 2015, slightly more than a million refugees and migrants reached Europe by sea, half of whom were Syrian males escaping war and persecution in Syria (Clayton & Holland, 2015; UNHCR, 2016a). Of those applying for asylum in Europe in 2015, 42% constituted young adult men between 18-34 years (Pew Research Center, 2016). These migration demographics divided Europe’s polity, forcing policy makers and donors to invest in higher education in countries neighboring Syria and hosting Syrian refugees. These strategies served to stymie young Syrians from crossing into Europe’s borders. As one U.N. official admitted, “the EU wants to keep refugees as far as possible from own countries.”

When asked about their decision to begin a higher education scholarship program in Lebanon, Ferwa, whose organization was funded by the EU, revealed that the scholarships were meant to be an “anti-immigration measure” that appeased European electorates. She further elaborated: “They [EU] doesn’t want them all to come to Europe and this is like an assistance for this region. And this goes together with the foreign policy of the EU…Last year we had an influx of 1.1 million refugees…we expect their family members also to come afterwards… We saw a bit of resistance from some parts of the population.” As donors’ attention shifted to the intersections of migration and education, greater investments in higher education for Syrians in Lebanon became visible.
2.1.2 Higher education: an overlooked sector in refugee education in Lebanon

Higher education for displaced Syrians remained overlooked in the government of Lebanon’s policy priorities. The marked absence of any mention of post-secondary education opportunities in policy documents pertaining to refugee education remains notable. Haleema, an organizational actor from the U.N. rationalized this approach: “They [MEHE] are being strategic with their time and resources, and I think also trying to see where they can have the most impact. For now, they don’t have that much impact in terms of higher education.” Describing the autonomy that Lebanese universities held, she continued, “They [MEHE] don’t have much influence on the universities and the big cohort of the population that they’re targeting is not in the higher education level.”

For Syrian learners between the ages of 3-18 years, MEHE has created pathways to access a full cycle of primary and secondary school-based education (See for example, Mendenhall, Russell, & Buckner, 2017). However this level of technical and policy oversight by MEHE has not yet transferred to the higher education sector. Actors speculated the reasons for MEHE’s lack of involvement in refugee higher education. Those like Khaleel, a NGO representative, believed MEHE possessed “neither the human capability, nor the financial capability” to facilitate higher education opportunities for displaced Syrians. Khoury, a U.N. agency representative, on the other hand viewed MEHE as a “capable and firm standing ministry that gets what it wants,” an agency with a “clear agenda and a structured vision”, even if that vision did not yet include higher education.

The scant policy attention to higher education for Syrians, under whatever rationales, created new opportunities. Foremost, it enabled previously missing, informal coordination structures among U.N. and NGO actors to emerge in the realm of higher education. Unlike the case of primary and secondary education where MEHE had taken charge and civil
society had “no voice, representation, or formal mechanism through which to coordinate” (Mendenhall et al., 2017, p. 26), the situation was reversed in the case of refugee higher education. MEHE was aware of this nascent coordination mechanism for refugee higher education and was invited to its meetings. However, its absence allowed actors to openly discuss emerging challenges in their work and coordinate action steps when possible, avoiding excessive government oversight and intervention.

The higher education coordination roundtable deliberately stayed small in its operation so as to not undermine MEHE’s authority and sovereignty in education. MEHE had previously intervened and disbanded official NGO coordination mechanisms within basic education (Buckner & Spencer, 2016). To avoid a similar situation within higher education, Khadija, an organization actor, explained: “It’s not about becoming so massive. That’s also I think the success of the roundtable [that] the Ministry of Education for the moment, are not scared from our reaction because it’s still relatively low scale.”

Conversations among organizations that were previously hushed and behind closed doors, could now occur openly across a table.

At these meetings, despite diverse organizational mandates and agendas, organizational representatives tried to find synergies in the design and delivery of their higher education scholarship programs. “When we work together, life is better,” said Khadija, demonstrating the motto that had emerged among organizational actors in the coordination roundtable. As had previously occurred with actors working within primary education, UNHCR and UNESCO remained apprehensive about this coordination body being disbanded. They therefore regularly notified MEHE of the roundtables’ developments, deliberations and decisions. Despite all actors’ shared interests in, and commitments to, higher education, a lack of clarity about the goals, purposes, end objectives and sustainability
of the roundtable lingered. Eventually actors decided to place the onus on the donors in justifying its existence. When anyone external to the roundtable’s current members inquired about its operations, the agreed-upon official response was: “There is more donor interest in [higher] education.” Donors, in the form of bilateral government agencies represented an interest group that would seem less likely contestable or controversial to MEHE.

2.1.3 Forecasting changing demographics among Syrian refugees

While actors accepted that refugee higher education was not a current policy priority, they worked with the assumption that eventually it would become one. Haleema believed that with increased donor attention and aid for scholarship programs, the government would soon take notice of refugee higher education. “Eventually higher education will become sexy and everyone’s going to want a piece of the pie,” she noted. “Then the government’s going to say, ‘Wait a minute! What is all this [donor] money going to? Why don’t we have any idea about this? And then they’re going to want to get more involved.’

In the 2016 school year, there were 131,194 non-Lebanese students enrolled in Lebanese primary schools and only 3,075 non-Lebanese students enrolled in Lebanese secondary schools1 (UNICEF, 2017). Khadija, an organizational actor, cognizant of this collapsing pipeline of Syrian learners eligible for higher education in the future, hoped the situation would change with time. She knew that during a refugee influx, “basic education is the first response,” with a focus on secondary and higher education following later. Referencing the five years of the Syrian crisis that had already passed, she recognized the need for organizations to “grow up with our community,” because “any student that you supported in grade 6, in grade 7, 8 at the beginning of the crisis, now he is in secondary

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1 Official MEHE statistics differentiate only between Lebanese and non-Lebanese students. It is safe to assume that non-Lebanese predominantly refer to Syrian students.
education and in a few years he should go to tertiary education.” In her perspective, the education community could no longer ignore higher education. Learners in secondary were beginning to come of age and would soon require pathways to higher education.

2.2 Restricting or expanding access to higher education?

In leveling opportunities for refugee higher education, organization actors confronted the perennial question related to the equitable and efficient distributions of scarce scholarship resources. To maximize efficiency and equity, actors chose to target the most worthy and vulnerable, and attached conditions to their scholarships to restrict mobility and assess vulnerability.

2.2.1 Higher education scholarship conditions: Tools to restrict mobility

Continual, widespread mobility among young Syrians frustrated organizations granting scholarships. Displaced, young Syrians in Lebanon largely viewed Europe as a pathway to a brighter future outside Lebanon. When migrating away from Lebanon, young Syrians could avail two options, outlined subsequently.

Each of the participants in my sample had either considered moving to Europe at some point, or noted the pressure that their Syrian friends and relatives in Europe exerted in coaxing them to also move, even if illegally by boat. In August 2015, 28,000 people, mainly Syrians, left Lebanon for Turkey, the migratory pathway to Europe (Westall, 2015). Waleed, a 27 year old young Syrian male, explained the dilemma that many young Syrians like him encountered: “We have two choices, just two choices: either die in Syria, or die in sea…When you get to Germany, Sweden or Spain or France, you start the beginning of your new life.”

As the intensity of the Syrian conflict and displacement from Syria increased over time, the international community concurrently expanded resettlement opportunities for
Syrians in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. Resettlement to a third country is the process through which refugees from a country where they have already sought protection are ‘resettled’ to a third country, usually in the West. Through resettlement, refugees can usually access legal pathways to citizenship and support for socio-economic integration (Costello, 2017; Hathaway, 2005). In 2015, UNHCR helped resettle 6,547 Syrians from Lebanon; in 2016, this number increased to 18,279 Syrians (UNHCR, 2017b), the largest number of refugees who left from a single country that year (UNHCR, 2016b). “Long ago it used to take years to be resettled. Now within a few months, the application can go into the pipeline of resettlement and people in fact could leave the country,” explained Khadija, an organization representative.

This mobility away and onward from Lebanon, whether through illegal human smugglers or legal resettlement opportunities, exasperated higher education scholarship providers. Organizational actors often referred to young Syrians as “a mobile community,” a population that was continually on the move. In 2015, 27 of the 58 DAFI students who had received scholarships the previous year dropped out from the program and migrated away from Lebanon. Previously, organizations paid students directly their scholarship awards. However, when organizations realized that some awardees were using scarce scholarship money to fund their migration-related expenses, scholarship awards were now re-directed and channeled through universities. “We struggled a lot just to know where our students are!” highlighted one organization actor when referencing their scholarship awardees’ whereabouts.

To restrict this mobility, organizations placed several restrictions on students applying for resettlement programs. For instance, the student sponsorship agreement signed by 2015-2016 DAFI awardees prohibited them from “apply[ing] for any resettlement
program implemented by UNHCR or other partner organizations during the term of this agreement.” Violation of this clause was grounds for revoking students’ scholarships. In other instances, organizations used their interviews and selection processes to inquire about students’ resettlement and migration considerations, and were less likely to award scholarships to young Syrians who aspired for global mobility.

Khadija, an organization actor, was aware that, in theory, these clauses were nothing more than a “moral contract” to encourage students to not leave Lebanon in the middle of their academic degrees. In practice though, she knew that none of these clauses were legally binding and could never fully prevent students from applying to resettlement programs. Based on their past experiences of losing scholarship awardees to onward migration, organizations involved in the higher education roundtable now came to informal understandings with UNHCR. These informal understandings enabled organizations to cross-verify their lists of short-listed, prospective scholarship holders with UNHCR’s resettlement unit and ensure that students had not filled out any resettlement applications.

Recognizing the tenuous position that street-level bureaucrats like her and others continually confronted in simultaneously balancing donor standards and student expectations, Khadija echoed a finding found across all other organizational actors: “We’re not a bank just providing support…[we] cannot sanction students if they will end up being on a resettlement pipeline.” As she smacked her hands in the air to indicate money vanishing or being wasted, she explained, “It’s just to ensure that the money is not being just dumped. We have some accountability also versus our donor.”

2.2.2. Higher education scholarship conditions: Tools to assess vulnerability

Organizational actors widely debated whether they were attracting the right kinds of young Syrians—financially vulnerable Syrians, whose claims to a refugee status were valid,
and who were worthy of receiving already scarce financial aid. To assess young Syrians’ financial vulnerability, organizational actors asked young Syrians’ to provide documentation attesting their financial status when applying for scholarships. One such document was UNHCR’s registration certificate. As a part of its mandate to protect refugees’ rights, UNHCR regularly records, verifies and updates information on refugees, which it then shares with host country governments to support the provision of humanitarian assistance (UNHCR, 2017a).

Earlier in 2015, the government of Lebanon demanded UNHCR Lebanon to suspend all its registration activities by May 2015 (United Nations & Government of Lebanon, 2015). This move further strained relationships between the organization and the government of Lebanon. To work around this restrictive policy shift, UNHCR decided to ‘record,’ but not register, details of Syrians in the country, but was not mandated to share this information with the government. This made the precise number of young Syrian refugees in Lebanon at any given time unknown, calling into question organizations’ targeting efforts, and if they were indeed reaching the kinds of young, vulnerable Syrians their donors wanted to fund.

Irrespective of whether UNHCR registered or recorded young Syrians’ private details, young Syrians remained skeptical of personal data confidentiality. Young, male Syrians’ mistrust of the Lebanese and Syrian governments, and UNHCR was particularly high. They believed these data could be relayed to the current Syrian regime, increasing their likelihood of persecution or forced conscription. Waleed, a young Syrian male participant, emphatically stated, “I want to tell you the truth that Syrians are scared from the U.N., that the U.N. [will] tell the government that this man is a refugee in Lebanon.” A NGO staff member outlined the level of apprehension among young Syrians: “Sometimes even if we
ask them for a photo and they were signing the consent form, they are very afraid.” Of the 14 young Syrians whom I asked about their registration status, an issue approached with trepidation, 8 had deliberately not registered themselves with UNHCR and preferred staying off the organization’s radar. For them, the risks were far too high and not worth taking.

To further verify the veracity of claims pertaining to vulnerability and need, organizations often asked applicants to provide details of their financial standing. In addition to demanding UNHCR registration or recording, two prestigious scholarship applications asked its Syrian refugee applicants to list their parents’ “real estate holdings and securities (stocks and bonds).” Furthermore, it asked its applicants, “How many cars does your family own?” and asked them to “list each car’s brand, model and year of manufacture.”

In the absence of precise data, increased donor expectations and ongoing migration, these street-level bureaucrats collectively deliberated the best way to distribute scarce financial resources in the form of scholarships. They remained split in mandating their applicants to furnish proof of their UNHCR registration or recording. Haleema, a U.N. representative noted their partner organization’s decision against mandating UNHCR documentation. “Not everyone registers with UNHCR. Not everyone will claim refugee status, so we’re not in a position to deny [scholarships]. We’re looking at Syrians and Syrian nationals who are vulnerable.”

On the other hand, a staff member working for the DAFI program explained that they were not in a position to bend these rules because DAFI was a global program with guidelines set by UNHCR’s headquarters in Geneva. Since UNHCR in Lebanon had continued recording Syrians’ details despite government restrictions, it was expected that young Syrians “need[ed] to approach UNHCR at some point to declare some bio data.” This seemingly innocuous approach became problematic when other organizations followed
UNHCR’s lead on these issues without fully examining the consequences of their decisions. Most often, UNHCR’s convening power and authority as an agenda-setter within refugee education in Lebanon led other organizations to adhere to precisely the same guidelines and practices that the organization followed, even when miscalculated. Ferwa, a representative of an organization initiating its scholarship program in Lebanon in 2016, justified following UNHCR’s guidelines in forcing prospective applicants to record themselves with UNHCR. Aware of young Syrians’ hesitations, she stuck her ground and rationalized her decision aloud, “We believe that UNHCR has really contributed and they are the experts in this field.”

2.2.3. The combined consequences of restricting mobility and assessing vulnerability

Both NGOs and young Syrians stood on shaky grounds as they balanced multiple, but seemingly irreconcilable interests. On the one hand, street-level bureaucrats within organizations remained acutely aware of their largely Western donors’ vested interests in using Lebanon as a containment site to curtail Syrians’ onward migration. Concurrently, they were also expected to demonstrate fiscal prudence and impactful programing to their donors, evidence that their programs were targeting worthy, young Syrians: talented, vulnerable and poor. However these requirements were to be fulfilled in a context where there was a void in data surrounding the exact number of Syrians in the country, let alone details of their vulnerability. Layered on to this was the need for programing to occur in accordance with national policies and regulations, at the behest of a host country government whose patience and appetite to host Syrians was quickly dwindling and had yet demonstrated little commitment in extending higher education opportunities to Syrian youth.
Well-intended efforts to level the playing field by redistributing scholarship funds had unanticipated and contradictory distributional consequences. The simultaneity of these conditions—restricting mobility and assessing vulnerability—resulted in far fewer young Syrians applying for higher education scholarships than street-level bureaucrats originally hoped. In 2014-15, 7,072 Syrian students were enrolled in Lebanese public and private universities. The corresponding figure fell to 5,860 students in 2015-16 (El-Ghali et al., 2017). Similar estimates from the Lebanese University revealed that in 2010-2011, the period just before the Syrian crisis, Syrian students represented 8.5% of the university’s total enrollment. In 2013-2014, this proportion dwindled to just 3.5% (Chamli, 2017). One plausible explanation for this decline may be associated with the restrictive conditions that organizational actors placed on scholarship applicants; a finding that was antithetical to the very purposes that organizational actors sought to achieve—expanding access to university and enabling greater opportunity for young, displaced Syrians in Lebanon.

3. Recognition: Experiencing Higher Education

Recognition, per Fraser (2000), refers to marginalized, minority groups’ identity-based claims for acknowledgment and respect within society. Haddad (2008), refers to refugees as “misfits whose identity fails to correspond to that of any established nation-state” (p. 7). I argue that the numerous challenges that young Syrians encountered—legality, language, limited academic and psycho-social supports, and severely circumscribed futures—were a consequence of their forced displacement. These challenges became salient for young Syrians when they became refugees in Lebanon and mediated their experiences of higher education.
3.1. Recognition: Legality & higher education

Young Syrians’ legal status placed them in precarious positions as they attempted to enroll in higher education institutions. Unrecognized by the Lebanese state as ‘refugees,’ all Syrians in Lebanon were supposed to legally record their stay with the country’s Ministry of Interior. This proof of legality, or residency, as it is commonly known, directly influenced young Syrians’ access to higher education.

First, to apply to higher education scholarships, Syrian refugees needed their legal residency permits. Second, legal residency was a necessary prerequisite for Syrian students to equate their academic study in Syria with academic study in Lebanon. A NGO staff member explained the relationship between legal residency and academic equivalence between the two countries, “You need [legal] residency to get the equivalency…We can ask the university to register the student if they have equivalency even if their [legal] residency has expired. But to get the equivalency without the residency, it’s impossible.” To renew their legal residency annually, young Syrians spent $200 and made multiple trips to Lebanon’s Ministry of Interior’s General Security Offices, notorious for its grinding bureaucracy and frequent harassment of Syrians. These rules and regulations, determined by a Ministry other than the Ministry of Education, meant that young Syrians confronted another layer of street-level bureaucrats, those who reviewed their cases and provided them with the necessary documentation marking their legal status in the country.

Though one set of street-level bureaucrats within Lebanon’s Ministry of Interior narrowed the spaces for young Syrians to assert their legality and legitimacy, another set of street-level bureaucrats—higher education administration at universities—chipped away at these boundaries to instead create viable opportunities for higher education. At the time of enrollment, university guidelines required Syrian students to provide proof of their legal
residency in Lebanon. However, universities did not implement this uniformly, even if the policy on paper suggested otherwise. Young Syrian participants recalled instances where their universities provided them with extensions and did not verify if the youth applicants had renewed their legal residency papers. In other instances, organizational actors in NGOs providing scholarships to young Syrians reached out to partner universities and requested extensions for their Syrian scholarship awardees.

Both sets of street-level bureaucrats in the form of Lebanese university officials and global organizational actors, played important roles in enabling university access for young Syrians without valid legal residency. Though organizations like Khaleel’s negotiated for extensions with their partner universities, in more complex cases, they recognized that there was little that they could do as international NGOs to intervene. Khaleel admitted, “We can do nothing. It’s considered as a drop out from our pool. It’s a big loss because we’re investing in one student over one year and then having no residency, it’s a big loss.” To safeguard against such situations, organizations typically required legal residency as a pre-condition for students applying to their scholarship programs. While actors attempted to further higher education access in financially prudent ways, they, too, confronted the stark reality that their actions were equally circumscribed by Lebanon’s national policies and regulations.

Given these restrictive national policies surrounding young Syrians’ legal status, organizational actors reconciled with the limits of what was within the realms of their possibility. Reflective of the pragmatism that guided her actions, Khadija explained, “We’re not going to change the whole system to meet the needs of refugees. It’s a fragile system, and yes, there’s elitism, but we can’t go to the American University of Beirut and ask them to change.” Similarly, Haleema, attributed the limits of her organization’s interventions to the
political economy of higher education in Lebanon. “The problem for higher education is that not only is it a policy issue, [but one] that deals with different line ministries that don’t talk to each other.”

3.2. Recognition: Language

Language of instruction emerged as one of the most salient factors that shaped young Syrians’ university experiences. English was the dominant language of instruction in Lebanon’s universities, particularly private ones, and in some instances, French was also used. This was a marked shift for young Syrians who had completed their education in Syria in Arabic. At the Lebanese public university though, there were a few select majors such as Arabic literature, history, law and political science, where most classes were taught in Arabic, and English was a foreign language elective. Of the 1,454 Syrians enrolled in the Lebanese, public university after the crisis, (exact academic year unknown), 986 young Syrians were enrolled in the faculty of literature, humanities, law and political science, indicating their preference for majors taught in Arabic (Chamli, 2017).

Young Syrians’ language skills moderated their sense of self-worth. I found that participants in my sample enrolled at private universities, retold their first semester experiences as particularly tumultuous times. Describing his first semester, Masood, a 21-year old Syrian male, enrolled in an engineering program at a private university, shared, “My language was weak at that time. It was not [just] about English, it was about scientific English.” Masood recalled how his limited academic English language skills hindered his sense of familiarity with concepts. “Inside the class I saw this thing that I learnt in Arabic. Our courses were in English, so you have this feeling [that] I know it, but I don’t know how to do it.” Waleema, a young Syrian woman reflected on the ways language undermined young Syrians’ confidence and potential. “So when we come here [Lebanon], we don’t have
the language. People think that we are idiots and they really treat us like that…So we get shy, we lose our confidence, and sometimes we really lose our abilities.”

Cognizant of the language struggles that young Syrians confronted, organizations experimented with several language support strategies. Some organizations developed their own English language curricula and taught students the summer before university commenced. Others institutionalized formal partnerships with the British Council and American Language Center, allowing their scholarship awardees to learn English at these institutions for free for a limited time.

However, these wide range of strategies yielded limited success. In an informal conversation, an organizational actor shared the dissonance students reported in the English skills learnt through language classes and the academic language skills needed to succeed at university. With this understanding, organizations undertook some course corrections. One organization representative shared the pragmatism underlying their new language strategy: “Master students will teach only what is required for their colleagues [in the Bachelors program] to pass the exam…Somebody who is doing law, he doesn’t need to speak English, he just needs to pass the [English] exam…It’s not part our project to make the students speak fluent English, but it’s part of the project to help students succeed and graduate.”

However, entangled amidst organizational actors’ pragmatism were young Syrians’ ambitions of learning English, which they viewed as a mechanism and pathway to success and inclusion in the short and long term. Becoming proficient in academic English was a mechanism that facilitated young Syrians’ comprehension and learning at university. Simultaneously, English fluency represented a pathway to inclusion within Lebanon and beyond. It enabled young Syrians to acquire the language of power and to sustain their aspirations for global mobility. Echoing these ideas, Haani, a young Syrian male participant,
noted the encouragement he and his peers needed to learn English: “Syrian people don’t have the English level to speak or to apply [to scholarships] because every scholarship needs TOEFL, IETLS…So we need encouragement in this and training and courses – English courses. As English is not another language. English is globalization!” Khaleel’s NGO did not yet have any official programs that supported his scholarship holders’ English learning. Instead, his team requested professors at his organization’s partner universities to switch between English and Arabic in their classroom teaching. These quick fix improvisations were means to larger ends of ensuring students graduated from their programs, but paid little heed to the potential language held in facilitating young Syrians’ integration and belonging, local and global.

3.3. Recognition: Psychosocial & academic struggles

Layered onto these language barriers were young Syrians’ experiences of conflict. Participants were still coming to terms with the reality of their displacement and had not fully reconciled with the scars of conflict. This in turn directly influenced their socio-emotional wellbeing in university. Rita, a young Syrian woman who had been imprisoned and tortured multiple times when inside Syria, was weighed down by her past. To find the light beyond the darkness of the atrocities she had experienced and witnessed when imprisoned, Rita prioritized working in Lebanon. Any paid work was a productive opportunity to pay for university and her retired parents’ medical expenses, as well as a way to fill her day with time and to avoid any time dwelling about the past. “When I came to Lebanon, I had no work, I had no job and I had no university to go to, so I was staying alone…I couldn’t stay at home. I couldn’t stay by myself all the time because I was driving myself crazy, thinking about everything,” she remembered. “My life sucks,” she said, giggling awkwardly at first almost as if to obscure her reality. Her tone then shifted to one of grave
concern, “I am so worried about this year because university is so hard and I don’t have the
time to read books, to learn more English, or to study. So I’m really worried that I’m not
going to pass my exams and I’m not going to have my degree.” Like Rita, Yasmeen, believed
that young Syrians needed defined supports to transition into life in Lebanon. She noted, “I
think someone needs to make an organization for Syrians who move anywhere new. And to
explain, how this country is different than your country…I think we need social workers to
help us make good choices.”

And yet, despite young Syrian refugees’ repeated pleas for psychosocial support,
organizations granting higher education scholarships remained oblivious to these struggles.
When asked about the challenges they thought their scholarship holders faced, only two of
the 10 organization actors I interviewed, acknowledged students’ psychosocial struggles.
Michelle, a staff member of a U.N. agency viewed young Syrians as “living in chaos” with
“no notion of space and time.” At several points, she recalled young Syrians telling her, “We
don’t always want to be lost.”

To foster traces of inclusion and belonging, her agency was funding a program that
would pair young Syrians with older mentors from the community. Maysa’s university
offered just seven scholarships to young Syrians for their higher education. She described
these scholarships as “comprehensive,” for they included language supports and designated
counselors to support students’ psychosocial wellbeing. Maysa believed that her program’s
small scale enabled these additional supports. In the past, her university had already
institutionalized these supports for its Lebanese and Palestinian students; this institutional
commitment would now be extended onward to seven, young Syrians.

Young Syrians’ past, unexpectedly, but quickly, caught up with them in the present.
Their academic experiences at university, in addition to their socio-emotional challenges,
were fundamentally shaped by the ways they had learnt in the past, inside Syria. When in Syria, Amal’s school was open just for a month in an entire academic year. In our conversation, she revisited the learning strategies she adopted for her grade 9 Syrian secondary school examinations that she had taken amidst active conflict inside Syria, right before she fled to Lebanon. “Actually if there was something I didn’t understand, I used to memorize it, not understand it.” Now, a Science major at university, she connected her past learning strategies with her present academic experiences at university. In a hushed tone, as if overcome with self-blame and regret, Amal explained, “I have a lot of problems in Physics and Chemistry, in the basics. My professor was doing something related to the periodic table. I asked him what is the periodic table to know what it is. Just imagine! My basics are very bad because I don’t understand. I just memorized everything [in the past].”

For the most part, organizations remained disconnected with the ways past experiences shaped their scholarship awardees’ present learning. In the hopes of supporting students’ academic struggles, they adopted piecemeal strategies. Two NGOs in particular, partnered with universities their scholarship awardees attended to periodically receive details of their academic performance. They hoped to use these data as ways to identify students struggling academically.

In centering the focus on students’ academic outcomes, organizational actors failed to acknowledge the root causes that engendered these very outcomes. Khaleel’s organization followed up with partner universities to received details on their scholarship awardees’ “attendance, on the [student] commitment, on grading, on quizzes.” His organization received “multiple reports during semesters” from partner universities. He rationalized this approach aloud: “Donors cannot fund a failed student, he is taking tuition [from the donor] at the cost of another person who might be willing to commit and achieve.” Once again,
donor accountability-based discourses shaped organizations’ notions of the ideal Syrian student, worthy of funding—refugee learners willing to overcome their academic struggles to succeed sans any support from their scholarship providers.

3.4. Recognition: Scripting young Syrians’ short and long-term futures

Prospective candidates who expressed a desire to return to Syria were more attractive and suitable contenders for scholarships. Across all organizational actors interviewed, and application materials analyzed, a discourse of ‘return’ was pervasive. The DAFI scholarship application, for example, asked applicants: “Please write about your personal and professional motivations and how you imagine your selection of majors will contribute to the reconstruction and development of your country of origin.” Furthermore, its student contract asked its awardees to consent that they had selected a major “most likely to lead to employment back in Syria (e.g. sciences and health related studies, social and behavioral sciences, commerce and business administration, education sciences and teacher training).”

An organizational actor acknowledged that such clauses were intended to implicitly communicate to young Syrians that “the donor perception of you getting the scholarship is to stay in Syria, or to return back to Syria and to rebuild your Syria.” Organizational actors’ redistribution and recognition efforts intersected in unanticipated ways. The perception of a suitable and worthy candidate was therefore one who would not migrate onward to Europe, study in Lebanon, and become a capable and well-educated Syrian, willing to eventually return to Syria.

A NGO representative framed one of their selection criteria as students’ “social responsibility and awareness of the crisis.” When I further probed about the purposes of their scholarship program, I was told that their goal was, “to build capacities for returning once the war is over.” A staff member from another NGO that received EU funding shared
this sentiment. “The EU is focusing on keeping Syrians in the region, in somewhat relevant educational systems that they [Syrians] are familiar with as it will increase their likelihood of moving back.” Most organizations’ programs were budgeted and funded annually, not for multiple years at once, which made long-term planning impossible. Ferwa, whose organization was initiating its scholarship program in Lebanon, hoped that “in one, two, three years, maybe there will be a peace settlement and they [Syrians] can even start working from scratch and from the beginning we [will] have graduates who can build up their country…this program is not built up as a long-term program.” Among organizational actors, the perceived long-term future that they scripted for young Syrians was one that entailed physical return to Syria, not staying in Lebanon or moving onward to Europe.

Despite this return-based discourse that guided organizational actors’ messaging to young Syrians, they also confronted the reality of a no near-term resolution to the Syrian crisis in the near future. When funding students, Khaleel hoped that they would eventually return to Syria and that it was better for his NGO to “benefit the maximum number of students than do nothing.” Cognizant of the larger geopolitical factors that influenced young Syrian’s physical return to Syria, he admitted, “This is a political issue. Nobody knows [about return]. This is related to the compromise in the full region.”

Others framed return as a “wish list,” one not realizable in the immediate future because they were “working in uncertainty.” Khoury, another organization actor placed the onus on the Lebanese government for facilitating a long-term solution. “Everyone knows that [only] the Government of Lebanon and no one else can provide the long-term solution. The only long-term solution is for refugees to go back and to use the skills they acquired here to rebuild the country.” Organizations’ idealized scripts of young Syrians’ long-term futures were geographically bound to Syria. These scripts were in stark contrast to the non-
linearity of young Syrians’ imagined and plausible futures, futures that were instead linked to opportunity, not geography.

4. Representation: Making Use of Higher Education

Fraser conceptualizes representation as parity of participation among minority groups, especially within political realms. Given Syrian refugees’ noncitizen status, which precludes their participation from political life in Lebanon, I instead examine Syrian refugees’ participation within economic life in Lebanon. Specifically, I focus on the pathways to the labor market that young, educated Syrians can or cannot chart after university. I examine these pathways from higher education onward to the labor market because I believe participation in the formal labor market can serve as an important lever for enabling Syrian refugees’ inclusion and belonging in Lebanon.

4.1 Representation in Lebanon

National laws and policies severely circumscribed young Syrians’ economic participation, integration and representation within Lebanon’s labor market. In December 2014, to ease tensions between Lebanese and Syrians, the Ministry of Labor disqualified Syrians from Lebanon’s formal labor market, restricting their participation to only three sectors: agriculture, construction and cleaning (International Monetary Fund, 2017). This resulted in an influx of young Syrians entering Lebanon’s exploitative, informal labor market, eventually competing for daily wages and jobs with Lebanese workers, which further exacerbated tensions between the two groups. As of January 2015, Syrians who did not possess legal residency as granted by Lebanon’s Ministry of Interior, but were willing to work in agriculture, construction or cleaning, were required to find a Lebanese sponsor. This sponsor would then sign a “pledge of responsibility” and was accountable for their sponsee’s legal and criminal acts. In addition, Syrians registered with UNHCR before 2015 were
obligated to sign a pledge to not work and were therefore entirely excluded by the Lebanese formal labor market (Lebanon Support, 2016). In 2012, one of three Lebanese citizens between 15-24 years was unemployed (World Bank, 2012). Although labor market restrictions further pushed young Syrians away from mainstream Lebanese society, these barriers were erected to protect Lebanese citizens from an already shrinking labor market.

These policy bottlenecks called into question the very goals and purposes of higher education scholarships programs. To what ends was a higher education scholarship any good if Syrian learners’ post-graduation employment options looked so bleak? A policy maker from the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education was invited to attend one of the meetings of the higher education roundtable in May 2016. After much discussion among different representatives about the political sensitivities of his presence, it was decided that one of the presentations would raise attention to the dead end that young, educated Syrians confronted after their higher education. The recommendation following the presentation suggested, “conduct[ing] a market needs assessment to prevent mismatches between market needs and student qualifications.” The slide deliberately did not address which market—Syrian or Lebanese—actors should focus their labor market assessments on. There was much discussion and debate among attendees if this was viable, or even desired. After much deliberation, the policy maker intervened, gently, but evidently disagreeing with the recommendation: “It is more important to focus not on specialty but about leadership and how [higher education] prepare[s] students for conflict resolution, to be humanitarian and non-violent.” His ostensibly innocuous comment sent a loud and clear message to everyone present at the roundtable—formal labor market integration for Syrians in Lebanon was not on the table for any discussion.
In the wake of limited labor market integration, organization actors remained aware that they could not circumvent or flout national rules and policies. While some were willing advocates, prepared to exert their soft power on the government, others chose to dutifully adhere to established policies. Ferwa, whose organization was funded by the EU hoped Lebanon would “not be a black hole” for young Syrians pursuing their higher education in the country. Speaking of the 340 million dollars worth of EU foreign aid to Lebanon “bound to certain criteria,” she noted, “If this investment is for Lebanese companies, half of the personnel should be Syrian refugees for example…If they [Lebanon] have aid, they have to meet some criteria.”

To continue keeping young Syrians productively engaged in Lebanon, actors managing the DAFI program adopted a short to medium-term approach instead. In 2016, to protect young Syrians failed attempts at entering the Lebanese formal labor market, the DAFI program linked itself with another scholarship program providing financial support to a few Syrians for Masters programs. An organizational actor explained, “At least they [Syrian students] have six years of something to do. Three-four years to finish [their Bachelors] and then two years to finish the Masters, so six years. From now till six years, if the problem in Syria was not solved, then this is something else. Then I think finding a solution after six years is somebody else’s responsibility.” Organizational actors referred to this dead-end that young Syrians encountered after their higher education as a “policy issue,” an issue they had little control over to change for the better.

As with street level bureaucrats who exert their agency to change the structures they find themselves embedded within, organizational actors attempted maneuvering this myriad of restrictive labor market laws and policies that young Syrians confronted. Organizational actors with institutional capital and convening power were willing to find slivers of
opportunity that opened the spaces for young Syrians’ participation in Lebanon. Maysa, a staff member at a university was experienced in working with Palestinian students and the restrictions they, too, faced in entering Lebanon’s work force. Drawing from years of that experience, she recognized the need to “be very creative.” “We have our ways,” she noted, remaining firm in her conviction that her university would support all students—Lebanese, Palestinians, and Syrians—with job readiness skills on “how to write a CV, how to behave in an interview.” Recognizing her organization’s heft in the education sector in Lebanon, Khadija believed that her team would try to “encourage entities to provide some internship courses” for the Syrian scholarship holders her organization sponsored.

Concurrently, other organizations adopted a more deferential approach, refusing to circumvent or contradict established national policies. Haleema, an organizational actor, underscored the complexity underlying these dynamics. “The Ministry of Labor doesn’t give a shit to the Ministry of Education. They don’t care, they don’t want to necessarily cooperate, it’s not in their interests to do so.”

4.2 Representation elsewhere, other than Lebanon

Cognizant of Lebanon’s current labor-market policies restricting Syrian refugees’ gainful employment, two organizational actors in particular, imagined their higher education scholarship programs as potential pathways for young Syrians’ virtual participation in a global labor market. They described their early considerations of training and developing young Syrians’ skills for participation within a virtual labor workforce. They hoped that these skills, in addition to those acquired through university education, would facilitate “online opportunities for refugees.” One of these actors explained her organization’s plans of creating an online platform for employers outside Lebanon to place work requests, simultaneously providing young Syrians with computers, physical space and the skills to
complete these work requests. This organizational actor justified the decision aloud: “Really there are not enough jobs in the country [Lebanon]. This [virtual work] is the future...[When] they go back to Syria, they will do this there.” Both actors saw this approach as a way to “experiment,” even though they remained uncertain of its legality.

The question that lingered was whether refugee higher education scholarships could be re-conceptualized to be flexible enough to allow young Syrians to imagine and create multiple pathways to their future. Alice, a representative of an organization exploring higher education opportunities in Lebanon, wondered if her organization’s higher education program could “take people different places.” She explained, “If someone repatriates [to the country of origin] or resettles [to a third country], do we have credits that transfer?...Our goal and commitment is that they [refugees] have transferable knowledge and credit wherever possible.”

Echoing this idea of higher education taking people different places, Khadija, an organizational actor viewed higher education as a pathway to a future in a third country. Reflecting on the criteria that Western countries used to resettle refugees, she noted, “Resettlement countries seek vulnerabilities. But if they will see higher education within a vulnerable family, these are the profiles that they want. They want people with education that can also integrate in their countries.” Referring to the “paranoia about the refugee situation” in the West, she knew that countries not only sought vulnerable refugees but also ‘worthy refugees’: “people that will be able to learn the language fast” and “study easily to become role models in the community.”

In the face of an “unknowable future” (Dryden-Peterson, 2017), just like the young Syrians they sought to assist, organizational actors, a particular set of institutional bureaucrats in the case of refugees, remained acutely uncertain of the goals and purposes of
higher education. This uncertainty prompted great variation in the enactments of these institutional bureaucrats’ intended goals and purposes.

Following largely Western donors’ guidelines, higher education scholarships were meant to serve as an anti-immigration measure, tethering young Syrians to Lebanon. Simultaneously, these scholarships were also expected to propel young Syrians to become capable, productive and agentic citizens, propelling them to return swiftly to a post-conflict Syria. However, current political scenarios and the lack of employment opportunities in Lebanon, lead organizational actors to grapple with the impossibility of an enduring and sustainable future in Lebanon for young Syrians. Given the occurrence of these simultaneously binding, but conflicting and shifting, constraints, they questioned which future their programs and scholarships should prepare young Syrians for: An immediate, but not long-lasting future in Lebanon, a future back in Syria if and when peace were to be realized, or a future as global, cosmopolitan citizens in other contexts altogether? Khadija’s response reflected this ambiguity as she articulated her imaginings of higher education as a pathway to “become a good member of community, wherever community will be at the end.”

Discussion

As with university-aged refugees globally, young Syrian refugees in my sample faced enormous barriers in traversing their education trajectories and in accessing higher education opportunities in Lebanon. Institutional bureaucrats within multilateral organizations such as the U.N. and other INGOs in Lebanon singularly focused on expanding access to higher education through the provision of scholarships. However, in their quest to reduce Syrian refugees’ financial barriers to access higher education, they did not systematically examine or resolve young Syrians’ impediments for learning at university. Neither did they address the
paucity in productive and inclusive opportunities available to young Syrians as connected to this learning and its purposes, but also beyond university itself.

Using Lipsky’s theory on street-level bureaucracy (1980) and Nancy Fraser’s analytic of redistribution, recognition and representation (2000, 2005) to examine the ways young Syrians access, experience and make use of their higher education, this study finds three main dissonances that emerged in the design, delivery, and experiences of higher education scholarship programs targeting refugees. These three dissonances were in imagination, influence, and inclusion, and are discussed subsequently. Details regarding how these dissonances came to be and suggested strategies to remedy these dissonances are presented in Appendix 2C.

The first and foremost was a dissonance in imagination. Fraser’s analytic asserts that transformative remedies to redress social injustices must enable participatory parity for minority groups. However, when imagining young Syrians’ futures and the sets of priorities to emphasize for determining the goals and purposes of their higher education scholarships, organizational actors conceptualized young Syrians’ participation as confined only to post-conflict Syria. Based on donors’ interests, they hoped that their scholarships would create agentic and socially responsible Syrians willing to return to Syria and readily commit themselves to the arduous and complex task of peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. This singular idealization adopted by organizations stood in tension to the non-linear and oftentimes, multiple pathways that young Syrians perceived and imagined to chart their own futures. In contrast to organizations that believed educating young Syrians for their eventual, physical return was the end goal, young Syrians viewed the fulfillment of their learning and career aspirations as the end goal of their higher education. Young Syrians’ imagined and plausible futures were connected to opportunity, not geography, and they pursued different strategies to realize those opportunities.
The second dissonance that emerged was a *dissonance in influence*, specifically in street-level bureaucrats’ spheres of influence. While conceptualizing the purposes of their scholarship programs for Syrian refugees, street-level bureaucrats within multilateral organizations and INGOs simultaneously drew from multiple registers. In advancing refugee learners’ right to education and furthering their organizational impact based on international human rights frameworks, they also needed to simultaneously manage Western donors’ demands of using scholarships as a mechanism to curtail onward migration to the West.

Additionally, the government of Lebanon’s policies and regulations also circumscribed street-level bureaucrats’ influence. National policies, within and beyond the domain of education, coalesced to reiterate to young Syrians that their stay in Lebanon was temporary; hopes of an enduring, stable future would always be fleeting and ephemeral. In the midst of these countervailing forces, which direction could refugee higher education scholarship programs then pivot toward? The dissonances in imagination and influence were deeply intertwined: street-level bureaucrats’ constricted sphere of influence also meant limited imaginings of the purpose and potential of refugee higher education. Yet, both street-level bureaucrats and young Syrians made ongoing decisions—not always aligned with each other—in the hopes that higher education might enable pathways to a future, even if the contours of that future were yet undefined and entirely sketched out.

The third and final *dissonance was in inclusion*. While Syrian refugees held refugee rights, those enshrined within global conventions, their claims on the global public good of education were contingent on fulfilling several conditions: legality in Lebanon, financial vulnerability, academic commitment, and social responsibility toward rebuilding Syria. Demonstrating their claims of being ‘worthy,’ but ‘needy’ were indeed legitimate, meant simultaneously tackling an intricate web of dire poverty, limited legality, and continual
academic and psychosocial challenges in the absence of formal supports. Even those that fulfilled these conditions and were successful in their endeavors of accessing higher education experienced the dissonance between the promise of higher education and the post-education reality it afforded. Refugee higher education was unable to widen the very narrow spaces for economic participation and social inclusion in Lebanon. The boundaries for inclusion were boldly marked and young Syrians could not transgress these boundaries.

Using Nancy Fraser’s analytic of redistribution, recognition and representation, the findings from this study raise larger normative questions around the design and delivery of refugee higher education programs: What should be the promise of refugee higher education in contexts like Lebanon and can it be fundamentally transformed, if its current forms are deeply flawed? How should multilateral organizations and INGOs work toward fulfilling those promises and to providing comprehensive and holistic supports needed for refugee students to succeed and realize their personal ambitions? Whose needs should be centered and emphasized in the design and delivery of these programs: Western donors, host-country governments, or refugee learners themselves?

Moving forward, the design and delivery of higher education scholarship programs stand to benefit from examining the larger political economy within which higher education actors are embedded and the laws, policies and structures—within the host-country education sector and beyond—that influence young refugees’ pathways to the future. Moreover, in the context of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, higher education interventions would be greatly strengthened if instead of centering donor-imposed ideas of physical return to rebuild post-conflict Syria, programs centered young refugees’ educational goals and life aspirations. In the absence of structured and easily accessible support systems that facilitate young Syrian refugees’ transitions through and beyond university, refugee higher education
will struggle to balance the tilted scales of redistribution, recognition and representation for
the scores of young refugee learners.
Appendices

Appendix 2A: Landscape of actors providing higher education scholarships for (formal) refugee higher education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S. No.</th>
<th>Organization Name</th>
<th>Scope of organization (International or National)</th>
<th>Target age group (in yrs.)</th>
<th>Target population (PRL = Palestinian Refugees from Lebanon; PRS = Palestinian Refugees from Syria)</th>
<th>Number of scholarships</th>
<th>Financial aid package</th>
<th>Additional support provided</th>
<th>Primary language of instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>American University of Beirut - The Master Card Foundation Scholars Program</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>Syrian, (Lebanese, PRL, PRS)</td>
<td>Around 20</td>
<td>Full tuition, stipend, support for housing, support for books and stationary, a laptop upon admission, health care coverage</td>
<td>English language support, leadership training, community service and volunteerism, entrepreneurship training</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>18-30</td>
<td>Syrian, (Lebanese, PRL, PRS)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Full scholarships covering tuition fees and living allowances</td>
<td>English language training, community services</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Age Range</td>
<td>Eligibility</td>
<td>Funding Offered</td>
<td>Additional Offered</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>SPARK</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>18-28</td>
<td>Syrian and PRS</td>
<td>Full tuition, some stipend</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>18-28</td>
<td>Syrian</td>
<td>Full tuition at the Lebanese University, monthly stipend</td>
<td>Mentoring and follow up workshops for work preparation; field visits and meetings with the student representatives; volunteering activities; ad-hoc English classes with British Council and American Center</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>United Lebanon Youth Project (ULYP)</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>17-23</td>
<td>PRL, PRS, handful of Lebanese</td>
<td>Full or partial tuition fees, stipends, dorms, travel costs</td>
<td>Workshops for students around college applications and college readiness skills, mentorship on goal setting, Volunteering</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>Syrian and Lebanese</td>
<td>Tuition fees</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
<td>Program Name</td>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>Eligibility</td>
<td>Tuition fees</td>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Jusoor</td>
<td>Syrian, PRS</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Tuition fees</td>
<td>Language Training, Volunteering</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Lebanese Association for Scientific Research (LASer)</td>
<td>Syrian, PRS</td>
<td>18-30</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>Tuition fees</td>
<td>English language, Community work, Social entrepreneurship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>University of Balamand</td>
<td>All Nationalities</td>
<td>18 and above</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Tuition fees</td>
<td>Activities available to all students through Office of Student Affairs and Career Service Center</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>AMIDEAST: Tomorrow's Leaders Scholarship Program for Syrians</td>
<td>Syrian</td>
<td>17-20</td>
<td>Tuition fees, stipends, insurance</td>
<td>Capacity building activities through the partner university</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>EU HOPES Maddad Fund</td>
<td>Syrians; other nationalities who lived before 04/2011 in Syria; Lebanese</td>
<td>18-32</td>
<td>Tuition fees &amp; living allowance</td>
<td>Supervision &amp; support during studies by the local HOPES Syria desk</td>
<td>No restrictions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 2B: Youth participant details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial No.</th>
<th>Participant name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age (in years)</th>
<th>Details of arrival in Lebanon</th>
<th>Primary occupation at time of first interview</th>
<th>Level of study</th>
<th>Number of times interviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Nisreen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Waadi</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Student &amp; working</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Haani</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>September 2013</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ali</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>October 2012</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Masood</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>January 2013</td>
<td>Student &amp; working</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Nasser</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Amal</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>October 2012</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Yasmeen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Tarek</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Mahfam</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>June 2014</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Basel</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>February 2016</td>
<td>Recently arrived &amp; looking for opportunities</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Fares</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>July 2012</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Shereen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>March 2012</td>
<td>Student &amp; working</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Azaa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>December 2013</td>
<td>Student &amp; working</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total sample average</strong></td>
<td>7 women, 8 men</td>
<td></td>
<td>23.7 years</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Three Rs or scales per Fraser</td>
<td>Scholarship providers’ actions</td>
<td>Impacts on young Syrians</td>
<td>Potential strategies</td>
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</table>
| **Redistribution** | o Increased attention to refugee higher education, previously neglected  
o Financial aid packages of varying amounts (See Appendix 2A for details)  
o Restrictions on Syrians applying for resettlement programs  
o Assessing claims of refugeehood: Demands for proof of registration with UNHCR and legal residency issued by Government of Lebanon  
o Assessing claims of financial vulnerability: questions and standards that do not meet young Syrians’ current realities | o Increases competition among students for highly coveted scholarships  
o Engenders opportunities to access higher education: “If it wasn’t for the scholarship, I wouldn’t be here.”  
o Circumscribes young Syrians’ mobility aspirations – forced decision between migrating OR studying  
o Restricts young Syrians from applying to scholarships owing to data-sharing apprehensions and not knowing how to respond to questions that seem unrealistic and removed from current reality | o Collect disaggregated statistics of the numbers of university-aged, and university-eligible Syrians in Lebanon  
o Allocate funding toward higher education based on disaggregated statistics and forecasted demographic shifts in Syrian population  
o Design and offer a vast array of education and skills-based programs that can face multiple directions based on the futures youth conceive of for themselves  
o Remove conditions to apply to scholarships as related to UNHCR’s registration and legal residency in Lebanon.  
²  
o Design and offer a university transitions program that provides information about scholarships and admission requirements |

² As of 17 August, 2017, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education removed the condition for legal residency for Syrians to equate their past academic credentials in Syria with those in Lebanon. It is, however, unknown if scholarship providers continue asking for proof of legal residency to apply for scholarships.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recognition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>o Assessing claims of legality for scholarships and university enrollment through proof of legal residency issued by the Government of Lebanon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Uneven language supports for Syrians to learn in English at university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Absolute lack of acknowledgment of young Syrians’ past and their psychosocial struggles</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Requiring Syrians to demonstrate in scholarship applications of their desires to “reconstruct”/“rebuild” Syria through physical return to the country</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Uneven implementation of this regulation at universities paving the way for Syrians to enroll at universities</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Struggles at learning quickly and meaningfully, students are often left to their own devices and some pick majors based on language and not interest or goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Adverse impacts of psychosocial duress on students’ current learning and mental wellbeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Students’ future aspirations are opportunity-based, not geographically-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Creating ways to assess legality that are not at odds with young Syrians’ realities and experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Design and provide comprehensive supports, before and during students’ enrollment in university, including:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Language training and support that enables familiarity with English, the language of instruction AND the language of power in Lebanon</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Psychosocial supports for students to feel safe, welcome, and to learn well</td>
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<tr>
<td>- University transitions program that teaches concrete academic and professional skills required for success at university (e.g. note-taking, reading academic texts, goal setting, time management, leadership and initiative)</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Remove unreasonable conditions on scholarships mandating students</td>
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Representation | ○ Representation in Lebanon: Bound by Government of Lebanon’s labor market regulations, unable to articulate goals and purposes of higher education for young Syrians’ immediate future in Lebanon  
○ Representation in Lebanon: Some actors willing to negotiate for hiring Syrians in their organizations, provide informal internships  
○ Representation outside Lebanon: Creating small-scale opportunities for participation in the virtual work force | ○ Employment in an exploitative, informal labor market disconnected with students’ career goals and ambitions; Holds consequences for motivation, degree completion and financial efficacy of scarce donor money funding scholarships  
○ Impacts of participation in virtual labor force are unclear and if legally permissible for Syrians in Lebanon | ○ Undertake high-level advocacy for spurring economic growth and if not entirely lifting restrictions on labor market, expanding the number of formal, economic sectors in which Syrians are able to be legally employed  
○ Great collaboration and policy deliberation with different Ministries beyond the Ministry of Education (e.g. Ministry of Labor and Ministry of Interior)  
○ Further explore potentials of participation in virtual labor force and skills necessary for gainful and steady employment that is equally aligned with young Syrians’ career goals and aspirations
References


UNICEF (2017, January 24). [Inter-agency coordination for education communication].


Building bridges over troubled waters: Young Syrians refugees’ social supports in navigating their education and life pursuits

Introduction

“The first year I came to Lebanon, I felt completely lost,” said Shereen, a 21-year old, female Syrian refugee in Lebanon. Shereen recalled her life in Syria as “simple and innocent,” but forced displacement to Lebanon meant she needed to learn a different way of life in Lebanon. Echoing her tumultuous transitions, Shereen chronicled the differences in lifestyle that she observed at her university and outside: “They [Lebanese] care a lot about the look…the way you talk, the way you dress.” No one had told Shereen what her life in Lebanon as a Syrian would entail. She had learnt some English in her high school in Syria, but it was barely enough to get her by in a country where English was the language of power. Instead, she felt that the Lebanese treated other Syrians and her like “idiots”; value judgments that as per Shereen, had long lasting consequences on young Syrian’s sense of self-worth: “So we get shy, we lose our confidence, and sometimes, we really lose our abilities.”

In the face of these challenges, Shereen’s mother “encouraged” her to continue learning, to “work hard,” continually reminding Shereen that she was “not born to be average.” Her father though, “hate[d] education.” In addition to gaining familiarity with Lebanon’s way of life, Shereen needed to balance these conflicting messages around the value of education in her family. In pursuit of her purpose, Shereen volunteered her time teaching other Syrian children for free, encouraging them study even though her own family implicitly communicated mixed messages about the value of education for a Syrian, refugee female. However, as Shereen herself confronted structural exclusion and xenophobia,
experiences Syrians in Lebanon experience on an ongoing basis, she realized that encouraging others had its limits, too: “When you encourage someone and the surrounding is pushing him down, down, down, you can’t encourage anyone alone…You can’t because society is not encouraging them!” Nonetheless, despite the social worlds she occupies and confronts at university, home, and in urban Beirut, Shereen has not given up and has relentlessly continued charting her own education trajectory. What has enabled young, Syrian refugees like Shereen to fluidly navigate these different social worlds?

Young refugees like Shereen mark the confluence of multiple, overlapping vulnerabilities created as a consequence of their forced displacement. First, just under 1% of the global, university-aged refugee population of 18-24 year-olds are able to access higher education (UNESCO & UNHCR, 2016). For young refugees, the chances of successfully accessing and completing higher education remain acutely slim. Second, refugees now increasingly live in urban settings.

In 2017, 69% of the world’s 22.5 million refugees lived in urban settings (UNHCR, 2017). Residing in poor shantytowns and host communities, urban refugees often experience xenophobia, forced evictions, and organized crime (Crisp, Morris, & Refstie, 2012). Coupled with these structural transitions are human developmental transitions that young refugees experience. Conflict and displacement forever transform the ways young people relate to themselves and those around them (Dryden-Peterson, Bellino, & Chopra, 2015). As young refugees come of age in settings of forced displacement, they must grapple with the realities of what their forced displacement entails, while simultaneously grasping how to successfully navigate and overcome the challenges brought about as a result of this forced displacement.

Tackling these multiple challenges alone is no easy feat and requires social support from individuals and institutions. Refugees are known to sustain and leverage their social
relationships to receive and share the social supports they lack when displaced. These social relationships can be locally situated in host-country contexts, or can span geography, taking the form of transnational, diasporic relations with those displaced elsewhere (Horst, 2006; Lindley, 2009; Van Hear, 2009).

Yet, to date, little research has examined how young refugees identify and sustain the social supports that emerge through their social relationships. Are these social supports largely unorganized and organic, fulfilling needs as and when they arise, or are they mediated systematically through the everyday policies and practices of formal institutions that intersect the lives of young, urban refugees? Only recently, has emergent research begun to examine the ways that these locally, and globally, or transnationally, situated social supports interact to enable refugees’ education pursuits (Dryden-Peterson, Dahya, & Adelman, 2017).

When the odds of accessing higher education are so low and the vulnerabilities accompanying forced displacement to urban settings so plentiful, how do young refugees identify, mobilize, and share supports to navigate the multiple challenges they confront in the host-countries they seek refuge in? In the context of young, Syrian refugees in Lebanon, this study begins to respond to calls for research regarding urban refugees that decenter international, and national host-country, laws and policies, to instead examine the ways urban refugees’ social relations fill the gaps that formal humanitarian organizations are largely been unable to fill (See, Crisp et al., 2012; Landau & Amit, 2014).

This study investigates the motley social supports that young Syrians identify, use, and share as they navigate their education and life trajectories in Lebanon. Specifically, I examine the form and function of young Syrians’ locally and globally situated social supports. I find that like refugees elsewhere, young Syrians locate and share social supports in local and transnational spaces, imbricating them to meet defined needs. Furthermore, in
the marked absence of formal, institutionalized academic and psychosocial supports, transnational supports enable young Syrians in Lebanon to address the concurrent challenges accompanying forced displacement and coming of age as young adults. Identifying the social supports that have taken on salience for them, young Syrians also share these social supports with other Syrians, those known and unknown to them.

To create a conceptual framework to examine the nature and content of young Syrians’ social supports, I draw on literature from community psychology on the importance of social supports in human development. I then situate these supports within a sociological literature on the social and institutional structures that influence the development of these social supports, especially for marginalized populations like newly arrived immigrants and refugees.

**Conceptual Framework**

**Social supports**

Social support refers to the functional content of social relationships, sustained and recurring inter-personal relationships between individuals, through which emotional concerns, tangible aid and information flow (House, 1987). By engendering feelings of belonging, self-esteem, and a sense of self-control over unpredictable events in individuals’ lives, social supports are an important ingredient for healthy human development (Cohen & Syme, 1985; Heaney & Israel, 2008). Always intended to be helpful and consciously provided, social supports originate within inter-personal contexts of care and trust (Heaney & Israel, 2008). Based on their functions, social supports can been categorized into three broad types: 1) Emotional support in the form of empathy, love, trust, and caring; 2) Instrumental support as helping behaviors through tangible aid and services, or information; and, 3) Appraisal support such as affirmation and constructive feedback (House (1981) in
This study focuses on the amalgamation of these three broad types of social support.

Disputes abound in the fields of health and community psychology on the direct and indirect effects of social supports on individual wellbeing (See Barrera, 2000 for a comprehensive review). Through their direct effects, social relationships fulfill basic human needs and render meaning and purpose to individuals’ lives; their presence reduces individuals’ social isolation and anxiety (Cohen & Syme, 1985). Indirectly, when unforeseen, stressful situations and circumstances arise, social supports, or even individuals’ perceptions of their existence, can buffer against the deleterious impacts of unexpected stressors. When social support—material or information resources and/or emotional affirmations—flows to individuals confronting stressors in their environments, these supports enable them to reinterpret their current circumstances and persevere through adversity (Barrera, 1986; Heaney & Israel, 2008).

Migration and forced displacement are inherently stressful experiences, particularly for children and young people (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009). Several stressors including experiences of armed conflict, ruptured attachments with family members and communities, and social and economic challenges in host country contexts, confront newly arrived refugees and immigrants. Social supports are consequently pivotal in resolving and buffering against these stressors. Though much literature has examined the role of these social supports in facilitating newly arrived immigrant and refugees’ transitions and eventual integration within host countries, this literature has largely remained focused on developed country contexts such as the U.S., Canada, and Western Europe (Ryan, Sales, Tilki, & Siara, 2008; Yu, Ouellet, & Warmington, 2007). The literature therefore overlooks or deprioritizes contexts where the vast majority of refugees live; 86% of
the world’s refugees live in countries neighboring their conflict-affected countries of origin, also sites with fragile political, social, and economic institutions (UNHCR, 2016).

For the pursuit of education too, social supports are particularly important for learners from minority groups, including refugee youth. To enable learning and academic success, social supports emerge in different forms: tutoring or targeted support for language acquisition; time and space for writing and completing homework in time; or guidance and mentoring for academic goal setting. Whether these social supports emerge through familial relationships, close friends, or acquaintances, they are pivotal in minority youths’ successful navigation of their complex academic and social lives (Enriquez, 2011; Gonzales, 2010; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005).

Studies on social support often examine structural or functional properties of individuals’ networks of inter-personal relationships, also known as their social networks. Structural investigations focus on the ‘what’ of these networks: their size, diversity, density, and frequency of contact with different members in the network. In contrast, functional examinations, the focus of this study, explore the ‘how’ dimension: the specific ways in which individuals leverage their networks to aid each other with social support (Barrera, 1986; Ruiz, Prather, & Kauffman, 2013; Saegert & Carpiano, 2017).

Psychologists examining social supports have questioned if personality-related factors such as social confidence or social anxiety influence individuals to marshal and maintain differentiated levels of social support (Cohen & Syme, 1985; Thoits, 1995). Persistent in these examinations have been calls to bridge the individual and social; to closely investigate the “macrosocial structures and processes that give rise to these microsocial relationships and supports” (House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988, p. 301).
Social support is an inherently relational endeavor, a resource rendering valued psychological benefits and emanating from individuals’ inter-personal, or social relationships (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). Given the organic and dynamic nature of these relationships through which social supports emerge, community psychologists and sociologists have questioned whether social support can be institutionalized to maximize positive benefits for all (Heaney & Israel, 2008; House et al., 1988; Tardy, 1985). How can the quantity and quality of social supports be increased and improved?

Social supports as mediated through structures and institutions

Small (2009), asserts that research on social networks have reified individual agency, undermining the influence social institutions wield in shaping individuals’ social relationships and networks. Consequently, the quantity and quality of social support is mediated through the everyday practices of the very institutions that permeate individuals’ lives and experiences. The routine practices of these institutions that individuals come into contact with on a sustained basis - schools and universities, childcare centers, workplaces, and sites of worship, broker relationships and information, especially for those with fragmented and constricted social networks.

Like other marginalized and minority groups, refugees, too, experience several structural challenges in fostering social relationships and in expanding their social networks within host country contexts. Individuals establish their social relationships on the basis of homophily, or with those most like them (Granovetter, 1983). When newcomer refugees are residentially segregated and economically disadvantaged within ethnic enclaves, to facilitate they swift adaptation to a new context, they tend to develop and sustain strong relationships exclusively with other co-ethnics. Limited or minimal relationships with non-co-ethnics impede their access to social supports—information, material, and emotional resources—
that can facilitate their integration and social mobility within host country contexts (Palmgren, 2017; Ryan et al., 2008).

Furthermore, though social relationships are developed through recurring interactions, these interactions occur within the context of established mores shaped and guided by host country institutional values and practices. These social mores or ‘rules of the game,’ are usually different than those that refugees have internalized and mastered within their own countries of origin. To even begin developing social relationships within their host country, relationships that are necessary for social support to accrue, they must negotiate and familiarize themselves with a new and different set of social mores; mores that can oftentimes be invisible or unknown, especially when the only social relationships they have formed are with other refugees most like them (Menjivar, 2000; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). This phenomenon becomes a vicious cycle that severely restricts refugees’ integration within their host country. The very absence of relationships with others different than them, non co-ethnics, further constricts refugees’ already narrowly bounded social networks, and subsequently, the quantity and quality of social support they are able to galvanize.

The social supports that immigrants receive and render are uneven, dynamic, and contingent on immigration laws, labor market conditions, and social acceptability among host-country citizens surrounding their presence (Gleeson & Gonzales, 2012; Menjivar, 2000). In her ethnography of Salvadoran immigrants in San Francisco, Menjivar (2000), describes the fluidity and fragmentation of her participants’ social networks with time and the ways their liminal legal status shaped their choice of jobs and residence, eventually constricting their already sparse social networks. In a shrinking labor market, Salvadoran participants deliberately withheld key information about jobs and resources. The paucity in
resources to sustain recurring, reciprocal exchanges limited the social supports Salvadoran immigrants in Menjivar's study were able to access and share with one another.

Similarly, institutions of learning such as schools and universities can also play important roles in the development and sustenance of social supports for refugee learners. When enrolled, young refugee learners spend substantial time within schools and universities. These institutions hold enormous potential in creating opportunities for refugee students to develop deep and productive social relationships with different kinds of people in the host country: other refugee and minority students like them, host country national students, and most importantly, with institutional agents or administrators and teachers.

Relationships with institutional agents have been proven to be pivotal for minority students’ education pursuits. These relationships draw minority students’ attention to the structural inequities they encounter on an ongoing basis. More importantly, when effective, these relationships provide vital information regarding the socio-cultural scripts needed to navigate and transcend these unequal opportunity sets that so often circumscribe refugee and minority students’ education and life chances (Dryden-Peterson & Reddick, 2017; Gonzales, 2010; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003). Relationships with institutional agents thus enable refugee and minority students to chart their educational trajectories, even when otherwise interrupted by conflict and displacement.

The reciprocity inherent within social relationships through which supports emanate implies that social support is not only received, but also provided, and shared onward with others (Heaney & Israel, 2008). In the case of undocumented immigrant college students in Southern California, Enriquez (2011), finds that her participants shared the support they received to advance the undocumented immigrant community as a whole. Social support was therefore not governed by reciprocity between two individuals, but was instead shared
and passed on to deepen solidarity and social justice beliefs in service of other undocumented students, individuals that Enriquez’s participants did not even personally know. Furthermore, social relationships are not bound by physical location or geography. They often take on a transnational form, with support often being received and shared among those who have migrated, those staying behind in the country of origin (Levitt, 2001; Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011), and those in intermediate locations as in the case of Palmgren’s study of Burmese refugees’ social networks that spanned Kuala Lumpur and Los Angeles (2017).

Examining how these supports are passed and shared onward particularly by young refugees is pivotal for several reasons. Young refugees’ experiences of displacement and forced migration overlap with their developmental transitions to emergent adulthood, a stage of human development marked by “feeling in between,” where young people assert their autonomy but also seek support (Arnett, 2000). UNHCR, the UN organization mandated with protecting the rights of all refugees globally, has documented the lacunae of formal supports available to young refugees. Young refugees have thus been rendered as an “invisible majority” (p. 9) in the policies and practices adopted by UNHCR and its partners (Evans, La Forte, & Fraser, 2013). Given the fluidity of refugees’ social networks, and the existing gap in humanitarian organizations’ service provision, how do young Syrian refugees in Lebanon develop, sustain, and share social supports in pursuits of their education and life aspirations?

**Background and Context**

Lebanon and Syria’s histories are deeply intertwined. Both countries gained independence from French control in 1946. In its history, Lebanon has hosted refugees from several countries, including those from Armenia and Iraq, and Palestinians after the
Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967. The increased number of Palestinians in Lebanon created a demographic shift, tipping a precarious balance between its many Christian and Muslim sects. The country erupted into a civil war in 1975 with members from its Christian, Druzi, Sunni, and Shi’a groups joining non-state militias (Sozer, 2016). Lebanon and Syria’s close relationship made it possible for Syria to send its armed troops to strengthen the then ruling Lebanese government. Syria’s intentions soon flipped and tensions between Lebanon, Syria, Israel, and Iran prolonged the civil war that lasted until 1990. During this period, scores of Lebanese sought refuge in Syria eventually returning once peace reigned. Syria withdrew all its troops from Lebanon in 2005, and only recently, in 2008, did diplomatic relations between the two countries resume (Council on Foreign Relations, 2005; Seeberg, 2013).

Despite the political tensions that marked the relationships between Lebanon and Syria, people-to-people contact between the two countries continued. Inter-marriages between communities on either side of the border; porous and fluid borders owing to a visa-free policy for Lebanese and Syrian citizens; and the presence of nearly half-million Syrian workers in Lebanon meant that Lebanese and Syrian people were integrated in each other’s social and economic lives (Chatty, 2017; Seeberg, 2013). When conflict broke out in 2011 in Syria, Lebanon’s fragile peace was threatened. Living memory of the not so distant bloody, civil war among its population has stoked apprehensions that once again, as in the case of Palestinian refugees, history would repeat itself, and an influx of Syrians could potentially tilt the country’s delicate sectarian and demographic balance. Since the first Syrian refugees came to Lebanon in 2012, there has been a rise in virulent social media campaigns vilifying Syrian refugees in Lebanon, illegal curfews imposed by local municipalities where Syrians live, and severe measures to restrict their physical and social mobility (Chatty, 2017).
As of October 2016, the Government of Lebanon estimated that it was hosting 1.5 million refugees (UNICEF, UNHCR, & WFP, 2016). The Government viewed establishing refugee camps for Syrians as a security threat (Turner, 2015). Therefore most Syrian refugees in Lebanon live in urban areas, within the boundaries of Lebanon’s two largest cities, Beirut and Tripoli. Given this geographical integration of Syrians with Lebanese in urban neighborhoods, one might expect conditions for both groups to develop social ties between one another.

In reality though, the presence of over a million Syrians in a country of 4 million Lebanese has had debilitating consequences on Lebanon’s social, political and economic fabric and strained relationships among Syrians and Lebanese. Numerous reports have documented the increase in rents; the depression of daily labor wage rates; the strained delivery of essential public social services of electricity, water and sanitation facilities; and a decline in Lebanon’s GDP (Government of Lebanon and United Nations, 2015, 2017; Migration Policy Centre, 2014). With the Syrian conflict estimated to have cost Lebanon nearly 14.5 billion dollars thus far (International Monetary Fund, 2017), the Government of Lebanon has taken several measures to regulate and restrict Syrians’ presence within its boundaries. A 2014 survey of 985 Syrian youth in the ages of 15-24 years, found that 68% of those surveyed reported having no Lebanese friends (Chahine, Al-Masri, Samra, & Abla, 2014)

Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or its 1967 protocol. As a result, it does not recognize Syrians as refugees and instead labels them as ‘displaced,’ marking their presence in the country as ‘temporary guests’ (Chatty, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2016b). All Syrians above the age of 15 years in Lebanon must obtain a temporary visa, renewed annually, to maintain their legal residency in the country (Human Rights
Watch, 2016b; Janmyr, 2016). However, given the exorbitant costs of this visa, nearly two-thirds of Syrians in Lebanon in 2016 lacked legal residency (Human Rights Watch, 2016a). Moreover, at the behest of the Government of Lebanon, in May 2015, UNHCR Lebanon suspended registering Syrians (United Nations & Government of Lebanon, 2015). Registration with UNHCR typically enables refugees to access essential humanitarian services that accompany a refugee crisis in other conflict contexts. However, these legal circumscriptions imposed by the Government of Lebanon meant that the vast majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon could avail little or severely constricted formal humanitarian assistance, leaving them to locate support systems by themselves.

This paradoxical duality entailing a lack of formal humanitarian supports coupled with limited legality, but shared socio-cultural pasts means that access to social support is simultaneously restricted through formal mechanisms, yet, potentially available and realizable through organic relationships. How then do young Syrians locate and mobilize social supports across these conflicting contexts in their lives? What are the boundaries of these supports and when are they received and subsequently shared onward?

**Methodology**

**Research approach**

In my data collection, analysis, and interpretation of young Syrians’ supports, I draw from principles of “portraiture,” a social science methodology that adopts a vigilant and balanced gaze to capture individuals’ expressions of strength and resilience. It is not an approach that occludes or oversees imperfections. Instead it recognizes the duality and co-existence of promise and potential with weakness and vulnerability (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).
I use a phenomenological approach to guide my investigation of the different supports young Syrians received and provided when displaced, and the salience these supports took on as the socio-economic contexts in Europe, Lebanon, and Syria evolved. A phenomenological approach focuses on “exploring the meaning of peoples’ experiences in the context of their lives” (Seidman, 2013, p. 20). Specifically, I sought to explore the meaning underlying participants’ salient supports that aided their transitions as young, urban refugees living in Lebanon. I asked my participants to illuminate and reflect on how, when, where, why, and from whom supports were received and to whom they extended these supports.

Understanding the meanings underlying young Syrians’ personal, professional, and academic decisions as they came of age and navigated life in Lebanon necessitated the development of productive, symmetric, and reciprocal relationships between my participants and me. I was keenly committed to not just identifying participants’ ongoing challenges, and the uncertainty and structural barriers that circumscribed their decisions and aspirations, but also sought to examine the relationships and the spaces that uplifted and nourished them amidst uncertainty. Developing relationships where participants could recognize and admit their strengths and vulnerabilities often meant accompanying them to their place of work, meeting university students on their campus, reviewing participants’ job applications, providing study tips, and sustaining regular communication long after I had officially ‘exited’ my field site. These sustained relationships aided my continual contact with participants, allowing us all to pick off from where we had left off, especially when I returned to Lebanon for a second round of brief data-collection.

My identity as a graduate student researcher from a U.S.-based elite university, who had never personally experienced forced displacement, meant there was considerable social
distance between my young, Syrian participants and me. However, several commonalities helped bridge this distance. During our conversations, I referenced my early struggles as an international student navigating my pursuits of higher education abroad and my relationships with my family. Some other factors that served as a source of connection and identification between my participants and me included: my experiences working with youth in cross-cultural contexts; the visible challenges participants saw me confront as I navigated unfamiliar socio-cultural and linguistic terrain in Lebanon, a new context for me; and, my accounts of personal discrimination when mistaken for being a South-Asian, blue-collar immigrant worker in Lebanon.

Data sources
Data for this study are based on a total of 50 repeat interviews with 15 young, displaced Syrians. I collected these data in two phases: Phase I of data collection was undertaken between January and July 2016, when I was living in Lebanon. The second phase was shorter and lasted under two weeks when I returned to Lebanon in December 2016 to conduct follow-up interviews.

To be included in my sample of young participants, I applied the following inclusion criteria: Participants needed to be between the ages of 18 and 30 years; forcibly displaced by conflict in Syria and self-identified as living in Lebanon’s capital, Beirut, or its surrounding Mount Lebanon area, since 2011 when the conflict in Syria first began; some working knowledge of English, the language of the interview; and, either currently enrolled in formal, certified higher education opportunities in Lebanon or had disrupted, temporarily or indefinitely, their higher education trajectories owing to conflict.

As a non-Arabic speaker, I was unable to conduct interviews in Arabic, the research participants’ mother tongue. I recognize the limitations this bears on the data.
Simultaneously though, I was also aware that the presence of a translator would impede or alter relational dynamics that would limit our interviews. After our repeated conversations, participants confirmed this proposition when they admitted their discomfort at the thought of sharing personal, sensitive details in the presence of a Syrian or Lebanese translator. To mitigate this shortcoming around the language for the interview, I always provided participants with opportunities to pause to recollect and write their thoughts in Arabic, or use an online translation application on my phone. All interviews were recorded, except one, after participants provided their consent.

I constituted this sample of young Syrians through a combination of snowball or referral sampling (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000) and purposeful sampling. I often asked participants to help me identify other individuals in their network of Syrians who met my inclusion criteria. Instead of me making direct contact with other prospective participants at the outset, I used a personal referral strategy, requesting my existing participants to introduce me to those in their network instead. “Outsiders” often use this referral strategy for qualitative work with refugees, to gain acceptance, build trust and begin developing productive research relationships (Akesson, 2015; Mosselson, 2010).

I was introduced to my first participant through a Syrian individual working in an organization I had established contact with during the first month of my time in Lebanon. I was referred to my last participant by another participant I had previously interviewed. When a series of referrals had been exhausted or did not help me identify prospective participants, I also approached organizations working with young Syrians for referrals. At any given time I initiated multiple referral chains, knowing well that not all referrals would yield success. Despite these simultaneous referrals, to protect participant confidentiality, at no point did I share details about my final sample with participants. However in cases where a few
participants were referred by one another, they were aware of the other’s participation in this study (Chopra, 2018).

To capture variation in young Syrians’ experiences of different formal and informal networks and support structures, I combined snowball sampling along with purposeful sampling, paying particular attention to “substantive” and “theoretical considerations” (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 155-156). The substantive and theoretical considerations I applied to diversify my sample included gender (n=7 women, n=8 men) and individuals at different stages of their higher education and life trajectories (n=9 of 15 participants were currently enrolled in some form of formal, certified higher education, while the remainder were working full time and saving for university or had moved recently to Lebanon and were on the lookout for opportunities).

I deliberately excluded young Syrians enrolled in elite, private universities in Lebanon where the tuition was akin to private U.S. liberal arts colleges. My decision for this exclusion was informed by initial conversations with other organizational actors in Lebanon, who suggested that young Syrians in Lebanon’s elite universities had differential access to academic, economic, and social capital, and were therefore atypical. Except one, all my participants were enrolled in non-elite, middle-rung universities. The one participant who was enrolled in an elite university was recently funded by a private funder and had therefore transferred from a non-elite university to a top-ranking one. In Appendix 3A, I present further details of my final sample (Chopra, 2018).

**Interviews**

My interviews with young Syrians drew from Seidman’s (2013) three-series interviewing structure. Over the two phases of data collection, my goal was to interview participants thrice. I interviewed 13 of the 15 participants in my sample at least thrice (See
Appendix 3A). In one case, I could only interview one participant a single time owing to their health. Interviews took place at settings participants chose and felt comfortable in, and ranged from university campuses to cafes to participants’ homes.

In the first phase of data collection, the purpose of these in-depth semi-structured interviews with young Syrian refugees was to examine their academic and life experiences in Lebanon and the relationships that provided them with support and sustenance. Specifically, in the first interview, I asked participants to create sociograms that represented five people they knew and considered themselves close to in Syria, Lebanon and abroad. These representations were a starting point for participants to provide details of their relationships with these individuals, what they believed these relationships provided, and why they had sustained contact with these individuals, even when displaced. Our second conversation focused on participants’ education and work pursuits and the academic and socio-emotional supports that helped them navigate life in Lebanon, as well as the supports they shared onward with other young Syrians. In our third conversation, I asked participants to reflect on the collective meaning they made of previously identified, salient supports in their education and life trajectories, the timing and sequence of some of these supports, and how the consequences of the presence or lack of supports strengthened or diminished their sense of self.

When I returned to Lebanon for a brief, second time, I was able to interview half my sub-sample of young Syrians (n=7) a fourth time. While I intended to purposefully select the individuals I would interview a fourth time, this purposeful selection was not always possible given participants’ academic and work schedules, and that I was in Lebanon only for a short time (Chopra, 2018). My interviews in this phase focused on understanding and documenting changes in young Syrians’ experiences. I was able to follow up about changes
in previous supports and details of emergent supports. In a few cases I was also able to
document and explore the ways some supports had resulted in tangible changes in
participants’ lives, including access to jobs and/or university scholarships. Across these two
phases, each interview with young Syrians lasted for an average of 90 minutes.

**Data analysis**

Analysis of the interview data was ongoing and iterative. Following each interview, I
listened to the audio recording to document and organize the participant’s main ideas into
broad analytic categories and themes. These notes included a few verbatim quotes from the
participant, along with my own understanding of what these quotes implied and meant in my
participant’s particular context. This organization process, early in the analysis cycle, allowed
me to stay grounded to the data while making emergent connections with other participants’
experiences. Creating these listening notes provided opportunities for self-reflexivity to
further refine my interview questions and sharpen the focus of the inquiry.

Once I had written the listening note for the first interview, I returned to interview
the same participant a second time over. Writing these initial listening notes and sequencing
interviews allowed me to: easily reference details that participants had mentioned in previous
interviews; identify initial emergent themes that informed later interviews; and, draw
connections between young Syrians’ experiences in Syria and Lebanon and trace their
current higher education trajectories and aspirations. This process of framing each
participant’s narrative profile therefore allowed me to treat each individual as a separate unit
of analysis (Chopra, 2018).

I personally transcribed 42 of the 50 interviews that constitute the data for this study;
the remaining 8 were transcribed through a paid transcription service. This process allowed
me to re-immerses myself in the data and to re-engage with participants’ voices. The
transcription process allowed me to document not only the interview flow and participants’ verbatim responses, but also facilitated focused attention to participants’ silences, their uncertainty and hesitancy around specific issues (Chopra, 2018). I viewed these conversation fillers not just the absence of talk, but found them to be illuminating for they shone light on what was said, and yielded glimpses of what was implied but not directly stated (Maxwell, 2013).

After completing the listening notes and the interview transcriptions, I used Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis software, to analyze a sub-set of interview data. In this first-stage—rough coding—I used a grounded approach to develop a set of emic codes that classified the different supports (academic, economic, and social), and whether participants received these supports and/or transmitted them onward. This allowed me to create a codebook that I built on as I analyzed additional interview data. My codebook included definitions, examples, and exclusions for each code. In my formal coding process, I sought to code specific examples of the supports participants described and whether these supports were local or globally and transnationally situated.

As I familiarized myself with more literature about social supports for different sets of marginalized groups—refugees, immigrant students, undocumented students—I returned to re-code previously coded segments of the data. At this stage, I particularly focused my attention on the specific functions of different supports. For example, did social supports provide information, money, or emotional and psychosocial solace, or a combination of any of these? At this stage, I also looked for co-occurrences and for patterns in the ways participants leveraged their networks for receiving and sharing social supports. I therefore divided my sample into two sets: the first set consisted of those who lived in Lebanon with or without their parents; the second set consisted of those who were enrolled at university
versus those who were not. Once initial patterns emerged, I returned to my listening notes and interview transcripts to integrate these different pieces together, looking for inter-relationships between different supports. Specifically, I sought to understand why certain participants seemed to rely more on some kinds of supports than others, the meanings they attached to these supports, and when and why certain supports appeared to be sequenced and timed in particular ways. At each stage of the coding process, I wrote brief analytic memos that eventually led me to understand the inter-relationships between different supports.

Findings

In its exploration of locally, and globally, situated social supports, the findings are organized into four sections. In the first section, I examine the nature and content of social supports that young Syrians used for navigating life in Lebanon, in non-academic contexts. In the second section, I do the same, but focus specifically on social supports in the pursuit of education and within institutional contexts of high school and university. In the third section, I synthesize across these two contexts to investigate the interactions among different kinds of supports, paying specific attention to when social supports are marshaled, by whom, and for what purposes. In the fourth and final section, I elaborate on the supports that young Syrians shared onward with other Syrians.

1. Social supports for navigating non-academic contexts

Participants’ social relationships provided them with emotional and instrumental support. These relationships were locally, and globally (transnationally), situated. Young Syrians’ futures were unsteady and uncertain. With little knowledge of where they would be in the long-term—in Syria, Lebanon, or elsewhere—these social relationships provided young Syrians with solace and stability. I first explain why these supports are particularly
important for young Syrians and then elaborate on the sources and functions of young 
Syrians’ emotional and instrumental supports.

1.1 Emotional support

“I can’t live life without talking to my parents every day,” said Mahfam, the day after 
her 21st birthday. On a cold, grey Beirut winter morning at an outdoor coffee shop, even a 
tepid sun made Mahfam’s frizzy, copper hair glisten brightly. Mahfam’s parents were 
currently in Syria and her siblings spread out in Europe. Erratic telecommunication signals 
within conflict-affected Syria necessitated the family’s use of Whatsapp, a mobile phone 
application, to exchange daily text messages, voice notes, and calls. As she described her 
family, she clasped her fingers together, accentuating the imperial purple nail polish 
glimmering off her fingers. Sounding out the click of joints interlocking, she said, “My 
gamily, it’s my puzzle. No matter where you put us we will settle.” Central to Mahfam’s 
metaphor of her family as a puzzle was her expression of the ways regular communication 
enabled them to come together as a family unit, whole and cohesive, even when dispersed 
across multiple geographies by conflict.

During the course of our second conversation, Mahfam told me of her two Syrian, 
best friends, one currently in Lebanon and the other in Syria. She elaborated the importance 
of sustaining these friendships and communicating regularly as a trio: “Each one of us is 
having difficult situations…All of us are in the same situation, so it’s been nice to work 
through a situation. It’s more comfortable than [being] alone in something. It’s somehow a 
way that keeps us together. It’s not [about] the talking of hope or giving words.”

In this instance, the three friends decided that hope was too important for it to be 
vacuous or abstract. Instead, it was received and provided through concrete action and
camaraderie. These reciprocal interactions, however minute, are particularly poignant in a context where hopelessness has pervaded among Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

All participants in my study shared multiple accounts of their social isolation, structural exclusion and the associated despair that punctuated their experiences in Lebanon. They recalled the times the found themselves caught in the tangles of an intractable conflict in Syria and the experience of concurrently coming of age as young adults. Inside Syria, they sought clarity and meaning about themselves, their identities as young adults, the purpose of revolution, and their relationships with the Syrian nation-state. In the hopes of finding answers to these larger questions and to seek safety and stability, participants imagined a Lebanon where their lives could perhaps seamlessly continue from where they left off. Instead, young Syrians found themselves precipitated into a context that exacerbated the dissonances between their expectations of what Lebanon could offer and the reality of what it actually offered.

“Confusing,” was how Yasmeen described her life in Lebanon. Verbalizing her observations of young Syrians’ current coping mechanisms in Lebanon, she said:

Most [Syrian] people between 20-26 years, I don’t know why anything makes them sad. Any problem they have, they go to drink. It’s not good, all day, all night, drunk, drunk, drunk….Syrians don’t have the power to fight the reality….When they miss their family or can’t change their life here [Lebanon], they go to weed or drinking.

A different coping mechanism, as in Tarek’s case, was an attempt to consciously block out the past. He explained, “I don’t think [of] how I lived in Aleppo…It’s not easy. You leave your relations, you leave your house, you leave your city, you leave everything beautiful.” Tarek reflected on his mental wellbeing when he moved to Lebanon: “The situation broke my heart. For one or two months I didn’t speak. After that I was just crying, crying, crying.” Similarly, when Haani imagined looking back at this time in the future, he
wanted to erase all memory of Lebanon. As a 30-year old with a Master’s degree and no productive work, Haani described “not feeling strong or relaxed” in Lebanon. As participants relived their accounts of pursuing safety and inclusion in Lebanon, the psychosocial and emotional tolls of their flight and adjustments became increasingly apparent.

In their pursuits for meaning making and reflection of their current experiences, young Syrians turned to their social relationships. My analysis reveals that participants’ described their emotional supports as playing three functions: 1) Sustaining previous relationships; 2) Soothing the self; and, 3) Subverting reality. Though they are presented as distinct for analytic purposes, these supports often served multiple functions at once.

All participants described the many ways they purposefully sustained close relationships with their Syrian friends and family. Several of these individuals were either inside Syria or dispersed elsewhere. Regular Skype calls, Whatsapp voice notes, and a steady stream of messages and posts on Facebook were ubiquitous in the ways that young Syrians sustained their relationships. Ensconced in the warmth of these relationships was a sense of familiarity and stability.

Nostalgia inducing, they were a stark reminder of the memories that participants and their families and friends had intricately woven together. Though time had progressed, the memories had not faded. They provided a source of permanence amidst the flux and chaos that young Syrians were now embedded within. Tarek, originally from Aleppo, attempted verbalizing the emotions that flooded him each time he spoke to his friend in Syria: “When I speak with him, he speaks in an Aleppo accent that’s very beautiful.” His effusive, baby blue eyes lit up, widening with wonderment: “It’s a feeling of wow! It makes you remember your
country. I’m here now since four years. Four years is enough to forget your city. You forget some details of your life. It’s very bad.”

A second function that these emotional supports served was of psychosocial support. Though participants did not label this function as psychosocial explicitly, in their rendering of the function of these relationships, it became evident that these social relationships were a balm and buffer to soothe participants’ inner turmoil. Specifically, they offered young Syrians with perspective, purpose and clarity; support that young Syrians sought but were unable to find given the lack of formal, institutionally provided psychosocial supports for refugee youth. Each midnight, as Nasser wound down the grocery store he worked at, his friend in Germany would wake at the crack of dawn. This was the one time that Internet signals were easily accessible and stable, allowing both friends the opportunity to connect virtually. Nasser used the time to vent his frustrations at his current job working late night shifts. The final time when we met at 1 a.m. after his work shift had finished, he expressed being “angry” at himself and his job. This sentiment led him to smoke incessantly, a habit that until a year ago had not yet developed. “I want to talk to someone so when I talk with him about something I’m angry about, he will listen to me, advise me,” Nasser said. He hoped, “Maybe someone who is outside the problem can see better than me.”

To examine differences in the ways participants’ experienced psychosocial support, I divided my sample into two groups: those who had moved to Lebanon with their parents (n=7), and those whose parents were still in Syria (n=8). Contrary to expectation, I find that these social relationships rendered psychological benefits equally to both groups. “I feel like [there is] a wrap on my chest,” said Ali, whose parents were in Lebanon, but not in Beirut, where Ali lived. This constriction that Ali described as his current, mental state in Lebanon was metaphorical, a consequence of the structural barriers preventing young Syrians, like Ali,
from accessing productive work or opportunities for social mobility and a life of “dignity,” as he described it. Rationalizing his decision to maintain ongoing contact with his friends in Europe and extended family in Syria, he shared, “When you talk with someone you know and you have nice memories with him, that makes you feel more comfortable.”

A third and final emotional function of participants’ social relationships were to subvert reality and the current circumstances in which they found themselves. Forced displacement had accelerated young Syrians’ emergent transitions to adulthood. All participants in my sample recounted the ways they simultaneously juggled myriad responsibilities: working part- or full-time jobs, saving money to send home to friends and family in Syria, pursuing their university studies, and navigating the labyrinth of Lebanese government institutions to maintain their legal status within the country.

Participants’ purposeful subversion of this present allowed them to imaginarily pause these responsibilities and to focus instead on the mundane and banal aspects of their lives that they had left behind in Syria. Despite being physically apart, these exchanges were an important way for young Syrians to remain relationally close. As a consequence of forced migration, these relationships spanned between Europe, Lebanon, and Syria with participants often updating each other about intimate and important developments in their lives. Rita chuckled awkwardly when I asked her to share an example of a conversation she had recently had with her friend inside Syria, a friend she spoke with weekly. “We discuss a lot of silly things. Like how was my day, how was her day, what is going on with her boyfriend. If I bought new shoes or something, I always tell her. I feel like we are running from our reality just to have this silly space that we feel happy [in].”
1.2 Instrumental Support

Though participants’ emotional supports served a variety of functions, instrumental supports were necessary to problem-solve and to circumvent the ongoing challenges they confronted as Syrian refugees in Lebanon. In several instances, participants’ recollections of instrumental support took on two forms: informational support and economic support.

While there was general skepticism around developing social relationships with Lebanese peers, a finding discussed in the next section, Shereen and Yasmeen offered a contrasting perspective. They justified their deliberate cultivation of working relationships, even if not close, with their Lebanese counterparts. These relationships provided them with information to better understand the socio-cultural scripts of living in Lebanon, cues and norms that would not have been particularly transparent or accessible to them as Syrians. In Shereen’s perspective, “the Lebanese knew more,” whereas the Syrians were “sitting” and “not working on themselves enough.” Echoing this rationale, Yasmeen, too, reached out to Lebanese more frequently than Syrians because they “know more about Beirut than me.” She continued, “Sometimes I ask if this job is good or not, if this place is good to live in.”

Participant’s social relationships with both Syrians and Lebanese proved to be an important conduit of information. Through these relationships, they received information about scholarships, university admissions, part-time vocational courses, job openings, and housing opportunities.

Specifically with Syrians inside Syria or those abroad, participants exchanged information about their day-to-day experiences in each of these contexts. Depending on their friends’ or family members’ experiences in Europe, these ongoing informational exchanges either stoked or shattered participants’ imaginaries of life in Europe. Participants received real-time, first-hand information about shifting contexts, asylum regulations, and subsequently tempered their aspirations for onward migration, beyond Lebanon. Each
participant named at least two Syrian family members and/or friends who had migrated to Europe, and with whom they were in periodic touch. Referring to his friend in Germany working overtime on the shop floor for a less than minimal wage, Basel smirked, revealing his smoke-tarred teeth and with an undertone of sarcasm said, “What is the future in Germany? Making cars?” Similarly, a few participants knew other Syrians who were stuck in detention centers without legal paperwork in Europe—or worse, those who were severely depressed and dejected by their current state of affairs in Europe. In contrast, participants like Nasser and Waadi remained firm in their aspirations to leave Lebanon, but only if they could leave legally. They believed Europe offered greener pastures; Syrians in Nasser and Waadi’s networks had found gainful employment and near-free university education in Europe.

With those in Syria, Shereen intentionally shared detailed information about her current situation in Lebanon. Her reason for doing so was exclusively to dispel myths that those inside Syria held about Syrians in Lebanon living a “comfortable” life. She wanted them to know that she, too, was enduring significant challenges in starting her life anew. Frustrated at the repeated clarifications she had to make to friends and family, she shared, “Sometimes they feel like I’m comfortable in Lebanon. They mean that you went out, so you ran away from the situation [in Syria]!” Shereen provided an important counter-perspective to the remaining sample and was the only participant who described this intentionality.

One-third of the participants had volunteered with small-scale, local NGOs in Lebanon. Through these organizations, each of these participants had developed social relationships with other Syrians. Masood recalled “doing nothing,” when he moved to Lebanon and volunteered as a “way to meet people.” He volunteered for three different NGOs, until one turned into a full-time job. It was through this job that he met a private
sponsor who eventually funded his university education in Lebanon. When Basel and I first met, he had just spent a month in Lebanon. With free time at hand, Basel volunteered with a local organization supporting Syrians in Lebanon. In the other Syrian volunteers, he found friendship and support. To help him find a job, Basel’s new friends at his volunteer site inquired within their own networks. “They came four years ago to Lebanon…We talk about how I can live here in Lebanon” he explained. It is unknown if the institutional norms within these voluntary associations, whether structured or hidden, shaped the development of these relationships, or if these relationships were unintentional outcomes of participants’ volunteering activities.

Economic support was critical for all participants’ immediate adaptation and was experienced in different forms. For some, economic support emerged as monetary remittances from families inside Syria. These remittances, when possible, were in the range of 50-100 dollars and were an added bonus for participants. Participants also cited examples of piecing together 600-700 dollars from different Syrian friends to cover their rent or university tuition. Participants often used this borrowed money to renew their Syrian or Lebanese legal documents.

Each of the participants living in Lebanon without their parents, recalled frequently receiving some monetary support from their friends in or outside Lebanon, but rarely, if ever, through their social relationships with those within Syria. This sub-set of participants recalled how the declining exchange rate of the Syrian Pound had adversely impacted their families’ abilities to send large amounts of money from Syria. Mahfam’s sister, who was also living in Lebanon and working multiple jobs, supported Mahfam financially. Mahfam acknowledged, “If it wasn’t my sister here, I dunno what I would be doing.” She added, “My dad can’t handle it. Like if he wants to send money it will be a lot in Syria, really a lot. We
don’t have that much of money…So my sister is here [Lebanon] until I finish [my studies].”

In March 2011, the Syrian pound (LS) traded at 47 against the U.S. dollar. By 2015, the exchange rate depreciated severely and the Syrian pound now traded at LS 260 for the U.S. dollar (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). This deadly confluence of a rapidly depreciating Syrian pound, heightened inflation and a severe shortage of jobs inside Syria, led participants to increasingly rely on their network of friends outside Syria for economic support.

Additionally, participants living without their parents in Lebanon received economic support through their Syrian friends in Lebanon who had offered them rent-free or reduced-rent housing, especially during their first few months in Lebanon. Basel’s move to Lebanon was sudden and unexpected. As a student without any savings to pay a deposit on an apartment in Lebanon, his Syrian friend in France came to his rescue. This friend requested one of her Syrian friends in Lebanon to host Basel for a few weeks before he could source any income. She also paid her friend for Basel’s share of the rent. Similarly, when Yasmeen was in between part-time jobs, her Syrian friends who had settled in Dubai long before the Syrian conflict, sent 300 dollars to cover her rent. A day after being forcibly evicted by his Lebanese landlord, Ali was angry, but not anxious. His Syrian friend invited him to stay in his apartment until Ali found a more permanent solution. These social relationships buffered participants from unanticipated financial downturns, allowing them to sustain a form of steadiness, even if temporary, in their day-to-day rhythms of life in Lebanon.

2. Social supports for navigating academic contexts

2.1 Developing social relationships at high school and university

Young Syrian participants’ experiences of developing and deepening social relationships with their Lebanese peers at university were variegated and far from optimal. Of all the ten participants who were enrolled at university, only two recalled having “close”
Lebanese friends. There were several reasons that influenced these limited interactions between the two groups. Participants often spoke about a shortage of time. Young Syrians who were working while simultaneously enrolled at university described the difficulties in balancing work with study, and the ways these constraints tugged at their already stretched time. Participants repeatedly described prioritizing their work over attending university for the economic safety it afforded. A stable monthly income, however small, allowed young Syrians to provide economic support and supplement their families’ budget, a finding I explore in a subsequent section. Limited time therefore meant far fewer opportunities for young Syrians to invest in developing organic and productive social relationships with their Lebanese peers.

Beyond time, participants articulated other rationales for deliberately limiting their social relationships with their Lebanese peers.

Tarek: Yaani (like) I don’t really have friends, real Lebanese friends. I don’t know. I cannot make...
Me: Why do you think that’s the case?
Tarek: Because maybe I don’t have the time. I will tell you something. Here in Lebanon, if you have close friends, you should go out with him and do something to enjoy. This activity needs spending money, so I don’t … I cannot go with him every, every week to a restaurant, every week for example to Faraya (skiing), every week to Hamra (downtown Beirut). I cannot be doing this. So, I cannot have close friends. I have a friend, a formal friend in university, in class.

Tarek’s decision to avoid spending money and time beyond his means was shaped by his circumstances; an intentional strategy that prevented him from developing relationships with his Lebanese peers. In his eyes, friendships with Lebanese peers could not be nurtured with conviviality and were instead measured in economic worth. Most participants recalled the boundaries they had marked in their nascent friendships with the Lebanese. For example, despite Nisreen’s Lebanese friends at university helping her with translating class materials, she recalled their relationships as confined to “only in study.” Although they were all friends
on Facebook and spent 10 minutes of their break time in the university cafeteria together, she never met them outside university. It was unclear if like Tarek, Nisreen’s decision was governed by economic factors. Nonetheless, it was telling that the very friends she turned to for language support during class were not friends she considered close; they were exclusively meant for “study” purposes.

Nearly all participants used the words “formal,” or “weak” to convey the nature of their relationships with their Lebanese peers at university. Among a small subset of the sample, participants’ perceptions of their Lebanese peers’ political beliefs precluded the development of deep relationships. Masood was among the few who could name two close Lebanese friends at university. Yet, he did not trust one entirely because “he [Lebanese friend] is with the [Syrian] regime and I am against it.” Both of them knew that their debates would “not reach any point,” and they therefore no longer discussed politics. It was evident that for the most part, young Syrians’ relationships with their Lebanese peers at university were shallow, and at best, tenuous.

Two participants, Shereen and Sana, young Syrian women, had completed their high school in Lebanon. They reminisced the times spent together outside school with their Lebanese “best friends,” and the informal, unorganized academic supports that had ensued as a consequence of these friendships. Shereen chronicled the ebbs and flows of her relationships with her Lebanese friends: “The first three months I couldn’t get any friends…I was very smart [in Syria] and when I came here [Lebanon] to school, they treated me as a stupid girl...Some of my friends really helped me. They tried their best to help me. Sometimes they couldn’t explain it in Arabic for me, but they tried their best.” For our third conversation, we met at the toyshop where Shereen worked. She spoke of the time when she had encouraged her Lebanese, best friend to work toward her education goals. “I helped her,
I pushed her up,” recalled Shereen. Perched high on the stool she sat on, she looked down at me, almost to add effect to her next comment: “They [Lebanese] just reduce their expectations when evaluating us.” Shereen believed that the Lebanese held young Syrians’ abilities in low regard and used a lower set of standards to evaluate them.

Examining the origin of young Syrians’ social relationships with Lebanese within different institutional contexts is important. Shereen and Amal recalled forming strong relationships with their friends and teachers at high school who encouraged them to learn, and aided them in charting their paths to university. In Sana’s case, her Grade 11 English teacher encouraged Amal to read aloud in English in the class even when she was not fully fluent. This teacher told her class, “If anyone here laughs at her language, I will deduct five points from your grade.” In doing so, she shaped her class norms to accommodate Sana’s struggles in learning English. Yet, in no instance, could Amal or Shereen recall analogous social relationships at university. Why might have this been the case?

Though high school and university are different institutional contexts, with students spending varying amounts of time within these institutions, one may hypothesize that the fundamentally different structures and norms guiding the design, form and delivery of education within the two institutions, possibly molded the ways young Syrians and Lebanese were able to nurture and kindle social relationships. Another potential underlying mechanism is inherently developmental, wherein adolescents’ transitions from high school to university are generally tumultuous, and are inexorably marked with differences in their social relationships (Wilcox et al., 2005).

2.2 Accessing university: An interplay of social support from individuals and institutions

Conflict in Syria had disrupted and altered participants’ education trajectories. On their move to Lebanon, participants were unable to immediately resume their education and
recalled the ways both, individuals and institutions, shaped their subsequent education trajectories. Twenty-three-year old Ali, who had been in Lebanon for nearly two years without any education was slowly beginning to consider the possibilities of enrolling at university, compelled by the encouragement of one of his Syrian friends. With precision, Ali recalled the words his friend had used to persuade him: “If you want to study, you have to sacrifice…Even if you have to sleep in the street, you have to continue your studying.” The words resounded deeply for Ali, impelling him to move from semi-urban Lebanon to its capital city, Beirut, in his quest for university. This same friend pointed Ali to the university with the least restrictive rules and regulations for Syrian students, a university Ali was finally admitted to.

Similarly, Mahfam moved to Lebanon temporarily for the course of a summer, “to study the situation.” Her brother, with whom she was living, brought her a scholarship application, and coaxed her to apply. Persuasively, he said, “Maybe you will get it. See your luck!” Mahfam was at a loss because she did not “know what to write, what to say,” and had “not learn[ed] that in Syria” but nevertheless, applied. Two months later, Mahfam was awarded an NGO-funded scholarship. Though Mahfam’s brother initially brought her the scholarship application and encouraged her to apply, without the NGO-funded scholarship, she would not have been able to enroll at university. “If it wasn’t for the scholarship, I wouldn’t be here now,” she noted.

Though friends and family members contributed to shaping participants’ educational aspirations, their social relationships inside Syria played a pivotal role in actualizing these aspirations. One of the main institutional barriers participants confronted in accessing education in Lebanon was the lack of educational documentation certifying their past learning inside Syria. Without proper documentation, Lebanese institutional regulations
restricted enrollment at university, but social support mediated through individuals inside Syria, allowed participants to overcome these hurdles. The sudden onset of conflict had led most participants to flee Syria hurriedly, leaving no time for them to retrieve any paperwork certifying their past learning. Numerous family members and friends inside Syria imperiled themselves, repeatedly requesting officious Syrian bureaucrats to release participants’ education certificates and other paperwork necessary for university access in Lebanon. Once in hand, these friends and family would then deliver these papers to taxi drivers who in exchange for a small commission ferried the documents across the porous Lebanese-Syrian border.

Twenty-six-year old Fares had lost a year in this process and could not enroll himself at university in Lebanon. Frustrated at his predicament, he reached out to a friend’s friend inside Syria, hoping to re-initiate the arduous process a second time over. Fares explained: “You have to know someone in Syria to go to the university and to send you back the documents. Even if you pay them, you have to find someone trusted. You can’t trust anybody to put your documents and then give it to you.” Similarly, Tarek outlined the institutional barriers that Syrian males encountered in accessing their previous learning certificates from Syria: “If someone has a problem with the regime, I don’t know if they can take it.” These social relationships with those still inside Syria were therefore pivotal to navigate Syrian bureaucracy and to retrieve essential documentation, without which young Syrians would forever remain unable to open the gates to learning at university.

Additional social supports for participants to access university education emerged exclusively through institutions. First, with an influx of refugees in Lebanon, previously unavailable, NGO-funded scholarships for higher education were now increasingly available to young Syrians. These scholarships covered the steep costs of higher education in
Lebanon, and therefore allowed young Syrian refugees the chance to continue their education unfettered. All seven participants who were awarded NGO-funded scholarships in my sample stressed the importance of these formal, financial supports in enabling them to pursue their education goals. For 11 months, Nisreen and her family of nine lived in a cramped, single room in a mosque when they first moved to Lebanon. Nisreen stayed at home, caring for her younger siblings, first, and later worked illegally, as a cashier to augment her family’s income. Only when she was awarded a UNHCR-funded scholarship, was she able to transition to university. “If I didn’t have the scholarship, I would have stopped my studies,” she said.

Once enrolled at university, the origin of some social supports became more blurred, making it indistinguishable whether supports became available exclusively as a consequence of institutional policies, the uneven practices of individuals embedded within institutions, or a combination of both. Participants recalled the ways institutional agents, or staff members within institutions, made concessions for them.

These concessions were not institutionalized or applied to all Syrians uniformly, and participants saw the emergence of these social supports as a matter of chance. Different participants noted how some university officials registered them at university despite them lacking necessary documentation, even though the university had communicated otherwise. Participants attributed some of this to *wasta* or “Vitamin W,” as it is known in the Arab world. Wasta refers to a culture of nepotism, connections, or clout, widely used in Lebanon and the rest of the Arab world as an inter-personal, social debt that may need to be repaid through favors in the future (Cunningham, Sarayrah, & Sarayrah, 1994). Three male participants in particular, remembered the different institutional agents that had helped relieve the financial burden of university. In Tarek and Ali’s case, once they had paid the
initial enrollment fees, they met with the university Director, who offered them financial aid and made concessions for them to defer their university tuition payments. Tarek and Ali did not know if this concession was made for other Syrian students too, or if the Director was simply benevolent, or if he expected a favor in return at a later point. Given this ambiguity, Tarek and Ali took the additional financial aid, but did not question the Director or his motivations.

2.3 Social supports to learn at university

When participants began university, they confronted a new challenge: little to no familiarity with English, the language of instruction at most Lebanese universities. High school instruction in Syria was in Arabic and entailed little exposure to English. Participants remembered sitting for hours at end in classrooms where they understood little and felt weighed down by this pressure. Recalling her first semester at university, Nisreen spoke of the two hours she spent trying to comprehend two pages of her textbook: “First, I translate and then I learn and study.” Though an English language center was available at her university, Nisreen did not know of it until much later. In the absence of supports to learn English, Nisreen aided her understanding of university classes through English translation applications on her phone. Similarly, Tarek also spent the near entirety of his first semester translating his English microeconomics textbook into Arabic through a mobile application. “I didn’t understand anything. I just listened,” recalled Tarek of his initial days at university.

Seven of the ten participants in my sample who were currently enrolled at university described the social relationships they leveraged to support their language learning. By the second year of her university in her information technology major, Nisreen had developed friendships with her Lebanese peers. When she encountered difficulties, she would approach these friends to summarize the instructor’s lesson into Arabic. Simultaneously, she realized
that her only, two other Syrian friends at university, similarly struggled with English. Together, the three of them signed up for extra help at the university’s English language center. All three studied and completed their English language homework collectively, to “help each other” with written assignments. Social supports to learn language at university, for Nisreen, emerged through distinct, but overlapping groups: her Lebanese friends for translating technical content taught in the classroom; and the university language center and her Syrian friends, for learning English. In contrast to these multiple avenues of support, Waadi’s social support to learn language at university came from a single source, a Lebanese friend he met by “coincidence” when sharing a bench in class. Waadi outlined the support this friend rendered, “He was helping me in many things like writing projects, sending me lectures and studying together…he translated many things for me in Arabic, many things I didn’t understand very well.”

Though social support to acquire language skills emerged mostly through organic, nascent relationships and newly forged friendships, in the case of two participants, their teachers went beyond their call of duty. None of these teachers were enacting mandated university policies targeted to help Syrian students, but embedded these practices within relationships they had developed with their students. After Tarek’s Statistics professor had completed her lecture in English, she would take Tarek to her office and then “repeat all the session [in Arabic].” This professor also taught Tarek basic email etiquette, often proofreading and correcting his emails written in English. Another professor, served as a conversational partner and helped Tarek practice his English speaking skills, twice a week. “The class was from 8 to 9.30 a.m. He would come from 7 to 8 a.m. and we would speak in English…He taught me how to use ‘he’ and ‘she’. He told me about the past, the future [tense].” Though these teachers were institutional agents, hired officially by the university,
their practices deviated from institutional norms. Beyond being concrete and tangible, their support was also symbolic, communicating to young Syrian participants that individuals willing to help them learn and succeed were close. These practices were anomalies in the data, but were important to substantiate for the potential they presented.

Social support to learn English, the language of power in Lebanon, also emerged from outside the university. Even before he enrolled himself at university, Ali began brushing up his English through a free, month-long, informal English language-training program implemented by a NGO in his neighborhood. To continue building his English language skills, he soon befriended one of the program’s volunteer teachers who taught him long after the program had terminated. Shereen described her first year in Lebanon as akin to being “unsafe in a wide forest.” Shy and with limited English language skills, she “felt completely lost.” Shereen’s mother who was Lebanese by birth but married to her Syrian father still had extended family in Lebanon. Her mother’s sisters, Shereen’s Lebanese aunts, pooled money to enroll her at a private English language center. For four months, Shereen attended English language classes regularly where her Lebanese teachers developed and boosted her confidence to master English. Shereen’s now perfectly fluent English was a fruit of her labor, demonstrating how far she had come from those first few months in Lebanon, where she had once felt lost.

3. The nature and context of supports

To navigate their education and life trajectories, participants leveraged different kinds of social supports. Though details surrounding each form were previously presented as somewhat analytically distinct strands or types, participants carefully weaved these strands of supports together, paying attention to their specific needs of the hour. Subsequently, I elaborate four overarching observations that can help us better examine the underlying
nature of these different social supports and how, when, and why participants use of them varied. These include: 1) inter-woven and bounded supports; 2) the differential salience of supports; 3) timing and sequence of supports; and, 4) source of supports

3.1 A bounded tapestry of support: Inter-weaving supports

Although there was diversity in how young Syrian participants used social supports for their academic and non-academic purposes, they experienced these supports as a collective and not as individual strands or types of support. Though each type of social support served a particular function, participants interwove these strands, creating a larger tapestry of social support. This tapestry of social support was a guidepost as young, displaced Syrians navigated their educational and life pursuits in Lebanon. For example, Sana’s supports to reach university came from multiple sources. First, when she was finishing high school in Lebanon, her English teacher set class norms that allowed Amal to struggle openly, but succeed, ultimately. When the time came to enroll at university, Sana’s father, who had previously worked in Lebanon, borrowed money from a friend to pay her university tuition fees. Amal simultaneously applied for a NGO-funded scholarship, which she ultimately received and that allowed her to remain enrolled at university.

There were of course boundaries to the tapestry of social supports participants received. As a result, some social supports were more readily available than others. For example, Waadi’s Lebanese manager at work made exceptions so Waadi could attend a NGO-managed vocational education program. Even though the program was entirely unrelated to his work as a server, his manager allowed him to leave work mid-day and return later. However, when Waadi requested the same manager to legally sponsor his residence permit so he could work and study at university simultaneously, his manager declined. Any Lebanese who sponsored a Syrian for residency in Lebanon meant that they could be legally
held responsible for their sponsee’s actions (Janmyr, 2016), a risk Waadi’s manager was unwilling to take.

3.2 Differential salience of social supports: All supports are not equal

Given the heterogeneity among participants in my sample, I find variation in how participants used, and experienced, different supports. Different forms of support emerged as salient for different kinds of Syrians.

I compared the nature of supports between the two groups of Syrians: those with their parents in Lebanon and those living in the country alone. Participants in the former group used their social supports to fulfill their academic needs, more so than any economic or informational needs. In contrast, social supports in the form of financial, and informational resources emerged as more salient for young Syrians living without their parents in Lebanon.

One plausible reason for this difference is that young Syrians who lived with their families did not have to undertake complete responsibility of managing their household, paying monthly rents, and ensuring that their legal residency in Lebanon was valid. They could rely on their parents and extended families to help take care of these issues. Young Syrians in this group therefore had more time available to them to navigate their academic pursuits and more pooled financial resources from which to draw. In contrast, Syrians without their parents increasingly used their social supports to seek information and material resources needed to adapt to life in Lebanon. Despite these differences in the two groups, both groups equally referred to using their social supports to fulfill their emotional and psychosocial needs.

I also examined differences in the ways supports were leveraged for a different group. Unsurprisingly perhaps, young Syrians currently enrolled at university availed greater
social support targeting their academics than those not enrolled at university. For this group, social supports emerged in the form of language and homework support, financial aid, and motivational affirmations targeted at encouraging academic persistence and success. I do not attempt to draw causal inferences, but find these broad patterns noteworthy of further exploration.

The finding above is accompanied with two caveats. First, given the study’s small sample (N=15), there were more participants who were enrolled at university (N=10), than those who were not (N=5), which could be associated with these patterns in the data. Furthermore, institutions, like universities, are known to be sites for developing social ties and accumulating social capital (Small, 2009). Given the cross-sectional nature of the data, it is unknown if these social supports targeting participants’ academic experiences guided them to enroll at university, or if they leveraged these supports through the networks they had developed, once enrolled at university. Five of the six young women enrolled at university shared the importance of social support that emerged in the form of motivational affirmations from their parents. These affirmations to continue their studies were poignant for young women participants, especially in a context where young Syrian women were marrying early and dropping out of university. As she saw her female friends getting married, Nisreen described her father as “different from other people.” When she struggled at university and doubted if she would succeed, he told her, “You should study. Studying is the best for you.”

3.3 Timing and sequence: The shifting nature of supports

As participants chronicled the supports they utilized in their acculturation to life in Lebanon, different supports took on salience. As participants spent more time in Lebanon, the timeliness of supports shifted, and was often based on what participants believed they
needed the most at a particular time. Regardless of the amount of time participants had spent in Lebanon, all participants recounted the importance of instrumental social supports that came in the form of information and financial resources.

These supports were important for all participants, irrespective of whether they lived alone or with their parents in Lebanon. Participants who moved to Lebanon with their parents also placed their education on hold to enhance their families’ income. During this time, social supports emerged in the form of information specifically regarding job opportunities. With the passage of time, participants’ aspirations to continue their education were reshaped. The information participants now sought was different; details about university admission procedures and scholarships took precedence.

In our third conversation, Basel fidgeted with the black and white string of beads looped around his left wrist. He was one week short of approaching the three-month mark of his stay in Lebanon without his mother, who was in Syria. Resuming his university education had not yet emerged in any of our previous conversations. When I probed, he noted, “Study here? Without work? No! Because I don’t have a home and I don’t have money. I need work and [then] with work I will go to university and study.” Six months later, when we met a fourth time, Basel was now working full time and studying part-time at university. A Syrian friend had not only helped him find a job, but had also filled his scholarship application for university, a scholarship Basel was eventually awarded.

In some situations, participants explained they had not fled Syria suddenly, but instead had been aware of their imminent departures amidst a deteriorating socio-political climate. In these circumstances, participants activated their networks swiftly, seeking information regarding jobs and housing even before their actual move to Lebanon. For example, Haani’s brother and Maya’s friend, both of who were already in Lebanon, found
Haani and Maya jobs in Lebanon’s informal economy. These individuals already in Lebanon served the role of “urban anchors” (Landau & Amit, 2014, p. 538), providing information and guidance about life in Lebanon and its regulatory environment, while Haani and Maya were still in Syria.

It became increasingly evident that participants did not seek social supports of an academic nature right at the outset. Instead, they prioritized on first laying a foundation from which they could resume and rebuild their lives. Instrumental supports that enabled periodic income, even if small; legality, when possible; and, information to navigate Lebanese society’s socio-cultural scripts, coalesced in undergirding this foundation. As time progressed, Syrian participants became increasingly familiar with Lebanon but also confronted new and ongoing challenges. They simultaneously layered these foundational supports fulfilling instrumental needs with additional social supports that fulfilled different needs: academic, emotional, and psychosocial.

3.4 Examining the sources of social support: Individuals and institutions

For the most part, participants’ social supports were embedded in the context of individual, social relationships, mostly with Syrian friends and family members—people they already knew. Therefore the social support they received was also largely informal, organic and loosely organized. Specifically, I elaborate on three features relating to the sources of social support that participants described.

First, though social supports were both locally and globally (transnationally) situated, spanning across geography and physical borders, social supports serving academic functions were all based locally, in Lebanon. Social supports such as translation assistance and peer collaboration for assignments all emanated through relationships with individuals—Lebanese or Syrian—already present in Lebanon. Within a global or transnational space, there were no
instances where participants recalled receiving social supports that served academic functions, through relationships with those outside Lebanon or Syria. While not entirely impossible to receive these supports of language learning, translation assistance, homework completion etc. virtually, they often entail far more time, effort and coordination on both sides—those rendering the support and those receiving it.

Second, there were several crossovers in the origins of social supports and the interplays between them. Social relationships developed at university, aided participants not just with their academic needs, but also provided support that was useful in non-academic contexts. This is most clearly evident in Waadi’s case. When Waadi’s Lebanese manager refused to sign-off as his legal sponsor, his Lebanese classmate at university came to his rescue. This classmate not only helped Waadi with English – Arabic translations of course materials, but also served as Waadi’s legal sponsor. This sponsorship was imperative for Waadi to simultaneously work and study.

As I analyzed participants’ descriptions of how they first became aware of different supports, I found traces of chance, surprise and coincidental encounters. In several instances, participants were usually unsure of who could provide support, when, and where it might originate from. Often times, to manage this uncertainty, participants sought out opportunities through multiple avenues, any one of which could unlock social supports, which they had not yet conceived. Masood echoed this perspective as he reflected on the three NGOs he had volunteered at and the chance encounters that got him a scholarship: “There are opportunities but you should look for them. They will not look for you…Even if you don’t have work, go volunteer. You’re not losing anything.” During his final volunteering experience, Masood unexpectedly encountered Syrian expatriates who
eventually funded his university education. “Because I volunteered, I got a scholarship,” he noted.

Finally, in nearly all cases, social supports emerged through individuals, not institutions. The absence of social support emerging from institutions on a recurring basis was marked and telling. For one-third of the participants in my sample, financial supports for university took the form of institutional scholarships managed by universities and NGOs. Apart from this, none of the participants identified humanitarian organizations as sources of social support they continually relied on. Despite the plethora of organizations assisting Syrian refugees in Lebanon, why were young Syrians in urban areas not actively availing of these supports?

Beyond apprehensions around revealing private data about themselves, particularly among young, Syrian males, a key factor constraining uptake of services was young Syrians’ rejection of the refugee label. For many participants, receiving humanitarian aid from an NGO meant reconciling with the notion of *becoming and being refugees* (Malkki, 1995), a label and experience that young Syrian participants actively contested. The label necessitated a shift in the ways participants self-identified. Coming to terms with being a refugee compelled young Syrians to reconcile their emergent sense of self with the circumstances in which they found themselves snarled. When I asked Yasmeen if she was registered with UNHCR, the refugee agency that referred refugees to humanitarian services, she explained, “This is for people who can’t work and can’t buy [things] for their children, not for us. We are young, we can work, we can do anything.” Young Syrians drew figurative boundaries, marking whom they categorized as a refugee. For them, refugees were always *other* Syrians, far more needy of external assistance and support. This incongruence in self-perception and external reality meant that only refugees—not them—could seek humanitarian support, a group to which
they did not desire membership. Consequently, participants continued seeking and rendering social supports within the contexts of largely unorganized, naturally occurring and informal relationships.

4. Shaping and sharing social supports

Participants not only received social support, but also shared and passed it onward to other Syrians. In so doing, their actions challenged facile, media discourses of young refugees as hopeless and helpless, void of agency and autonomy. Unlike the social supports that participants received in the form of academic, emotional and instrumental support, all from known individuals, the supports they passed onward targeted both, individuals they already knew and those unknown to them. These individuals were mostly Syrians based in Syria, Lebanon, or abroad. The social supports that participants passed and shared onward were supports participants had once found critical for themselves and believed others, too, could benefit from similar social supports. I present details of the three kinds of supports participants shared with other Syrians.

4.1 Sharing economic support

Most often participants recounted sending between 30 to 200 US dollars nearly every alternate month to their friends and families inside Syria. In all but two instances, as the conflict intensified, monetary remittances exclusively targeted family members who were inside Syria. These family members confronted the adverse consequences of the declining value of the Syrian pound, paucity in jobs and volatility in commodity prices. However, before sending any money home, participants first meticulously budgeted their personal education and subsistence expenses. Any remaining amounts were sent home through taxis crossing between the two countries. Waadi’s monetary remittance decisions were based on his monthly income, the majority of which he made in tips as a server at a juice shop. As the
number of juice drinking customers increased in the winter, so did Waadi’s earnings from customers’ tips. Winters therefore, marked a time when he could send more money home. He outlined his budgeting procedure: “My first consideration is university because it costs a lot and then house rental and transportation. This costs me a lot in Lebanon, the rest I send to Syria.” As the semester progressed, Waadi knew his personal expenses would also rise. Semester-end was a time for printing notes for final papers and examinations; the amount of money he could now send home commensurately decreased.

Similarly, when 26-year old Maya moved to Lebanon with a Bachelors degree, she made 550 U.S. dollars each month at an ice-cream parlor. After paying her monthly rent of 200 U.S. dollars, she sent home an equal amount. Left with 150 U.S. dollars for herself, an amount of little significance in an ever-expensive Beirut, Maya was intentionally frugal. “I went nowhere! Only to the church because the church was so close and I could walk. And food (eating out), I can’t.” During this time, Maya kept a close eye on Facebook, looking out for any friends and acquaintances traveling between Lebanon and Syria. Any time she found a friend traveling between the two countries, she sent money through them. Referencing her family, Maya emphatically said, “If there is war, you can’t say I have nothing to do with them, they can solve their problem alone...This is family, you keep thinking about your family.”

Few participants chronicled the ways they financially supported their friends’ and family members’ migrations, helping them defray exorbitant payments to illegal and exploitative human smugglers. To aid her 15-year old brother escape recruitment by rebel groups in Syria, Yasmeen contributed a thousand dollars for his illegal, and perilous journey to Germany, across the Mediterranean. Saving this amount of money, large by any standards for a 22-year old, displaced Syrian like Yasmeen, entailed its own costs: Yasmeen borrowed
money from other friends and worked multiple jobs, ultimately missing her own university classes for almost two semesters. In their desires and sense of responsibility to aid their friends and family inside Syria, particularly in the case of young males, participants confronted a persistent tension. Lebanon was an expensive city and they needed to account for their own needs first. However, the small amounts of money that were leftover were only a drop in the ocean given the vast needs confronting family and friends in conflict-torn Syria.

One way participants negotiated this tension was to limit their financial remittances only to “close friends,” people whom they knew and trusted. Masood had not yet asked any of his friends in Syria to repay the money he had loaned them. “For my friends in Syria, I don’t ask them, never! Because they don’t have [it],” he said. This same expectation though, did not transfer to friends leaving Syria: “For my friends who need money to go outside, when they’re outside and they have money, they [can] give it back to me.” Participants retold several examples of minimizing friends and acquaintances’ migration expenses by opening their homes to those using Lebanon as a transit point for onward migrations. Waadi remembered the time when his one-room apartment already cramped with him and three other Syrian roommates, accommodated a fifth individual, a roommate’s relative who lived with them for a month as a guest. “He didn’t have any money. We didn’t even take one dollar [for rent],” he shared.

Although not a phenomenon representative of everyone in the sample, Rita and Ali in particular, were involved in collecting money to buy medicines for Syrians they did not know. Both participants had protested inside Syria during the revolution and had been arrested for voicing their political opinions. Rita had collected a thousand dollars, a combination of donations from her family and friends along with her personal savings, to
send medicines to a Syrian friend volunteering with a NGO in Syria. She found a savvy taxi driver well versed with the “illegal roads,” to escape the “checkpoints from the Lebanese government and the Syrian regime.” Rita had not fully come to terms with being in Lebanon. “I can’t deal with the fact that I’m outside of Syria,” she acknowledged. Her guilt was wedging her already limited reconcilability with the current reality of being forcibly displaced: “I can’t go back to Syria. I feel guilty because I left this huge thing [revolution] that I believed in.”

Similarly, when Ali learnt of a Syrian who needed immediate, but expensive, medical treatment in Lebanon, he collected money for this Syrian patient’s medications for three months. “He needs help! And no one is giving him any help,” he explained. Ali twisted his flat mates’ arms and coaxed them to contribute six dollars each. “There’s a guy who needs help, I will give it to him, so don’t think I’m going to give it back to you,” he remembered telling them, chuckling naughtily. In these instances, providing economic support was not just a means to assuage the hardships that other Syrians confronted, but allowed Rita and Ali to maintain connection with a larger cause that impelled them to action.

4.2 Sharing academic support
With other young Syrians, participants shared details of scholarship opportunities and Lebanese universities with easy admission procedures for Syrians. This academic support targeted friends, and other Syrians who they did not know and had reached out to them through networks of friend and acquaintances. Young Syrian participants were now conduits of information, relaying the same kinds of information that had once helped them. As a scholarship holder at an esteemed private university, Masood was often inundated with Facebook messages from other young Syrians desperate for a scholarship. Although many individuals were unknown to him, he responded to each message. Leaned back against the
Arabic-motif imprinted couch we shared at a local restaurant, sipping on his can of coke, he reminisced how far he had come: “At one time, I was like them – lost…Three years ago, I was looking for a mentor to advise me, to give me a start of how to apply to a scholarship. I lived their case.”

For Syrians they did not know, social media was one of the main channels through which participants disseminated information about scholarships and education opportunities. Platforms like Facebook, allowed participants to widely share status updates, messages and other information that they too, had come across online. Low in effort, cost and time, these acts were important for the information they relayed onward to the scores of Syrians, in and beyond Syria, desperately seeking education opportunities.

Shereen who had finished her last year of high school in Lebanon, often shared study and exam tips that had been useful in her pursuit of education, with other Syrian students finishing their Lebanese high school. At the mosque she attended, she encountered Syrian parents who had deliberately not enrolled their young children in Lebanese schools because their parents did “not know English” and “thought if they put their children in Lebanese schools, they can’t help them and they will lose them.” The only example of its kind in the data, Shereen taught some of these children at their homes for free for two months. She clarified that this was not just about the children being Syrian. “Maybe they are from Syria and I love them more, but it’s not the real thing,” she said. “If I have the ability, I have to help them because it is not acceptable to see [Lebanese or Syrian] kids without education.”

In contrast, the academic supports participants shared with Syrians they already knew were of a different kind. Examples of academic support to this group included advising friends about reading lists, helping them with typing, or final projects, and finally,
“convincing” friends “to apply to university,” as Ali described. Mahfam remembered speaking with officials at the Lebanese university, a university different from the one she was enrolled at, to find out details about an academic program for a friend inside Syria who was contemplating moving to Lebanon to continue her studies.

4.3 Sharing emotional support: “Hope is everything”

Participants’ motivations for remaining connected with Syrian friends and family members were to provide “hope” and “encouragement,” words echoed by many participants. This support often took the form of encouraging family and friends to undertake defined, goal-directed behavior to meet their objectives. Shereen spoke of her brother who was depressed because he could neither find a respectful job in Lebanon nor continue his studies further. To help him, Shereen made him a plan of action, “I gave him a ready plan. If you do this, you will get that…He says we’re poor, we can’t do anything, nothing will change.” Her response was one of calm and composure, “We will try. It takes time.” Similarly, Fares motivated his Syrian friend in Lebanon by helping him choose which major to study at university. Like Fares, this friend also did not have his academic documents and had placed his education on hold in Lebanon. “People in a crisis need more motivation to have what they’re looking for,” Fares believed.

For their friends and family in Europe, emotional support took on the form of providing solace to persist in the face of challenges that emerged while adapting to life in Europe. Yasmeen spoke of her 15-year brother who was in Germany and often complained “all the time” about being unable to overcome his challenges as an unaccompanied minor. “You have to change your mind,” she told him. “You have to study, you have to learn the language.” Similarly, Maya described her Syrian friend in Sweden who had deliberately estranged herself: “She refuses to keep in touch with anyone…she wants to go back, is all
the time afraid.” Cognizant of her friend’s situation, Maya was adamant about connecting with her periodically. “Listen, if you don’t want to talk to me, I [still] want to talk to you,” Maya insisted. “I want to explain to her that life is going to go on, don’t worry! We are next to you.” Providing this solace was particularly important in the context of newly arrived Syrian refugees in Europe who found themselves socially alienated as they began their lives anew.

Even though participants’ generosity of spirit enabled them to render hope despite being engulfed in uncertainty and instability themselves, providing hope had its limits and changed its form with time. The third time Mahfam and I met she laughed aloud while saying, “When life is kicking me from all sides, I’m still giving hope to people.” As a 21-year old, Mahfam had internalized the idea that “hope is everything. The chance that we are living is hope itself.” Mahfam’s exuberant optimism faded when we met six months later. Now in her final year of university, ensuring she graduated and had a stable future in the immediate term, post her university education, was a serious concern. Graduating from university meant she no longer had a scholarship to rely on and necessitated her finding a respectable and decent-paying job in Lebanon. “Everyone I knew [in Syria], left…everyone went in different directions,” she described. As she observed Syrians “settling” elsewhere, Mahfam was less certain of the value of hope. “In this situation you can’t know if you can provide hope. If someone wants to talk to you, you just listen and be a listener, instead of a talker.” Short on time and grappling with the reality of a bleak, post-education future as a young Syrian in Lebanon, the hope that represented “everything” six months ago, was now ephemeral.
Discussion and Conclusion

This study examines the nature and content of the social supports young Syrians’ receive and share when displaced by conflict to Lebanon. It investigates the timing, sequence and sources of different social supports and the salience they acquire in young Syrians’ education and life trajectories. Like young adults everywhere, young Syrians, despite their forced displacement to Lebanon, seek the strength, safety and steadiness of social relationships. The social support that emerges from these relationships serve academic, emotional, economic and informational functions, and are critical in the ways they bolster young Syrians’ capacities to navigate their lives in Lebanon, a context whose socio-legal structures and cultural scripts they are largely unfamiliar with.

As participants demonstrated, conflict and displacement necessitate a reconfiguration—not a cessation—of social relationships. Participants’ social relationships spanned multiple spaces: Lebanon, Syria, and Europe. Through these social relationships spanning geographies, participants described the centrality of the emotional support they received and shared, support critical to maintaining a semblance of stability in their lives. Irrespective of where young Syrians were displaced to—Lebanon, within Syria, or abroad—participants described the centrality of this emotional support in helping themselves and other young Syrians make meaning of their lives and new contexts. These ongoing interactions with close friends and family members invoked memories of the past, sustained previous relationships and helped participants buffer against the uncertainty and chaos that marked their time and experience as young Syrians in Lebanon.

Instrumental support in the form of information and financial resources facilitated participants’ transitions to life in Lebanon. Information regarding legality, the Lebanese government’s regulations for Syrians, and housing, and job openings were prime examples
participants described. Financial support emerged not just in the form of monetary remittances but also in-kind, through reduced- or free-rent housing, and loans from friends that allayed expenses. Recognizing the importance of these material and financial resources, participants also shared these supports onward with other Syrians, especially those inside Syria experiencing soaring inflation and in dire need of material resources. However, participants drew boundaries on whom they provided monetary support to; financial remittances only targeted those they considered “close” and trusted.

As young Syrians adapted to life in Lebanon, they applied their social supports differently. With the passage of time, they sought social supports that would aid their pursuits of education. In these instances, social supports served an academic function, providing young Syrians with information regarding university rules and regulations, and scholarship opportunities to fund their academic tuition. As with the case of other social supports, these too, were shared onward with other Syrians—those known and unknown to them. To assist those in the latter category, participants often shared social support in the form of information about scholarships via social media. In cases where participants knew the individuals seeking academic support, the supports were more targeted and included assistance for language translation and homework completion. Beyond motivating others to continue their education pursuits, participants also provided their friends with concrete information about where and how to locate academic opportunities.

To chart their pathways to higher education, these social supports allowed participants to access previous education certificates from Syria: documentation critical to resume their education in Lebanon, but that had been left behind in Syria. Particularly in the case of young Syrian women, family members’ encouragement and positive affirmations were essential in enabling their education pursuits. This was critical in a context where young
women were marrying early, thereby halting and taming their education aspirations. These findings are collectively summarized in Table 1 (See Appendix 3B), and add to emergent literature that notes the critical roles these minutiae of social supports in the forms of encouragement and affirmations serve, to support refugee learners’ pursuits of education (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2017). When opportunities to access education for refugee learners are scarce and unevenly distributed—indirectly communicating to refugee learners that they must tame their learning aspirations—encouragement and motivational affirmations taken on renewed salience in these contexts.

This study’s central contribution is in examining the interplay of individually and institutionally mediated social supports in the context of forced displacement, as with young, Syrian refugees in Lebanon. This interplay of supports is demonstrated in Figure 1 (See Appendix 3C). Much of the social supports described above emerged through individual, one-on-one relationships that young Syrians mobilized, as visible through the strong and firm strands in the strong, bold strands visible in the upper half of Figure 1. In a few instances, these relationships predated conflict and consequently supports were marshaled through networks of friends and extended family that had moved to Lebanon several years before conflict in Syria broke out. In other instances, social support through relationships emerged in the context of friendships—old and new—with other Syrians, like them, who had also experienced forced displacement.

Missing from young Syrians’ relationships were deep, meaningful and productive relationships with fellow Lebanese peers. Limited time, money and perceptions of political beliefs hindered the development of these relationships. Even participants who were successful in developing social relationships with other Lebanese students, described their relationships as “formal” or confined “only in study.” This was particularly disconcerting
given the frequent contact between Lebanese and Syrian students at university. Social relationships at university between the two groups were fragmented and tenuous. The absence of these relationships can constrict young Syrians’ already sparse social supports, further exacerbating their vulnerabilities.

Additionally, I find that institutionally mediated social supports that fulfill emotional or instrumental functions within university contexts specifically, were largely absent. This is represented through the weak or faded set of strands in the lower half of Figure 1. Though some supports emerged in the context of institutions, especially when participants volunteered and met other Syrians like them, further research is required to examine the norms and practices of these institutions that may hold promise in deepening refugee youths’ relationships. Specifically for participants’ academic pursuits, the only institutionally mediated social support that emerged was in the form of NGO-funded scholarships. These funding opportunities were important in allowing participants to cover the exorbitant costs of tertiary education in Lebanon. However, within university, participants were unable to recall any other institutional supports that they used on a recurring and continual basis to facilitate their learning.

Institutional agents in the form of teachers and university directors made concessions for Syrian participants, allowing them to pay their university tuition late and by providing additional academic and language supports. However, none of these agents seemed to act on mandated university policies. Instead, these actions were ensconced within the relationships they had developed with Syrian students, or the cultural concept of wasta, a social currency made of connections and favors. Given the blurring of lines between individual and institutionally mediated relationships, these relationships are represented through a mix of faded and bold strands in the bottom half of Figure 1.
Akin to marginalized youth such as undocumented or minority students, participants carefully interwove these strands to experience these supports collectively, as in Figure 1, and to meet their needs when they arose (Enriquez, 2011; Gonzales, 2010). The origin of each support could be traced to locally or globally situated relationships. Similar locally and globally situated supports have been documented for enhancing refugee students’ “navigational capacities” (p. 41) to succeed in high school (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2017).

Finally, social relationships cannot be devoid of the social contexts in which they are embedded. Institutions that touch the lives of both refugees and host-country nationals, like schools, universities, and places of worship, hold immense potential in brokering relationships and connecting refugees with other people, organizations and resources (material and informational) (Small, 2009). Unlike camp-based refugees who are deliberately, isolated geographically from host-nationals, urban refugees are spatially integrated with host-country nationals. This integration facilitates refugees’ ongoing contact with a new set of social institutions, thereby engendering productive opportunities for social cohesion and for the exchange of information and ideas between refugees and host-country nationals (UNHCR, 2014).

Though these institutions can structure practices that allow refugees and host-country nationals alike, to collaborate and work together toward achieving commonly defined goals, this study finds otherwise. Nearly all the social supports that participants described as salient emerged through individual, self-sustaining and naturally occurring relationships and were not mediated through institutional policies or practices, except in the case of NGO-funded scholarships. Much of the potential for social cohesion between refugee and host-country nationals are unrealized despite Syrians and Lebanese attending the same universities and living in the same urban neighborhoods. The findings thus reflect
previous sociological work that has found immigrants social relationships with non co-ethnics to be weak and fragmented (Menjivar, 2000; Ryan et al., 2008).

Moving forward, programs targeting young refugees would benefit from institutionalizing some of the social supports that young Syrians in this study identified as critical to enhancing their navigational capacities. For instance, academic support that was locally situated and emergent through relationships with those in Lebanon was concrete, targeted, and action-oriented in the form of homework and language support. Globally situated support emerged in the form of motivational affirmations and encouragement. Though these supports are relevant and important, they are often small in scale, organic and uneven, focusing on the immediate, the here and now. They do little to expand young refugees’ worldviews, to consider weighing different career goals and objectives, or enhance skills like time management, budgeting, and goal-setting; skills critical for academic success and self-autonomy for all young adults. It is here that globally situated supports, mediated through technology, can hold potential in connecting young refugees with others, like them and different than them.

Similarly, the marked absence of formally institutionalized, emotional and psychosocial support for young Syrians that was locally situated in Lebanon was salient. Social supports fulfilling these functions instead emerged through naturally occurring relationships that were globally situated. In the case of refugees, these locally and globally situated supports serving different functions do indeed intersect (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2017), but are largely dependent on how and where individuals are able to locate them. Most often participants stumbled upon some of these supports in unsystematic, organic and coincidental ways. Could these local and global supports be intentionally designed to intersect and to help refugees like Shereen not feel “lost”? Could their intersections engender
productive potential to bolster refugee learners’ navigational capacities to address the many academic and emotional challenges resulting from their forced displacement?

This, however, is not to say that the development of social relationships and the flow of social support between host-country nationals and urban refugees should be solely reliant on artificially engineering these relationships. Programs designed to facilitate social supports for young, urban refugees should pay careful attention to both, structure and substance. Over-structuring and heavily institutionalizing social relationships and social support that I find to be so important for the young Syrians in my study, can severely undermine and undercut the substance and quality of these naturally occurring, organic social relationships.
### Appendix 3A: Youth participant details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serial No.</th>
<th>Participant name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age (in years)</th>
<th>Details of arrival in Lebanon</th>
<th>Primary occupation at time of first interview</th>
<th>Level of study</th>
<th>Number of times interviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Nisreen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Waadi</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Student &amp; working</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Haani</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>September 2013</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ali</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>October 2012</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Masood</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>January 2013</td>
<td>Student &amp; working</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Nasser</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Amal</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>October 2012</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Yasmeen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Tarek</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Mahfam</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>June 2014</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Basel</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>February 2016</td>
<td>Recently arrived &amp; looking for opportunities</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Fares</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>July 2012</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Shereen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>March 2012</td>
<td>Student &amp; working</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Azaa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>December 2013</td>
<td>Student &amp; working</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total sample average</strong></td>
<td><strong>7 women, 8 men</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>23.7 years</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3B: Summary of social supports received and shared

Table 1: Types of social supports received and shared

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Different types of social support</th>
<th>Social support received</th>
<th>Social support shared with other Syrians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social supports as individually-mediated</td>
<td>Social supports as institutionally-mediated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature &amp; function of academic support</td>
<td>Encouragement, motivation &amp; affirmation to continue studying from friends &amp; family</td>
<td>Availability of NGO-funded scholarships to access higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Retrieving past academic documentation from Syria</td>
<td>“Formal” or “weak” social relationships with Lebanese peers at university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Informal language and homework support groups to help each other</td>
<td>Relationships with Lebanese peers confined to “only in study”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support for completing scholarship applications from family &amp; friends</td>
<td>Few, ad-hoc supports to learn English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature &amp; function of emotional support</td>
<td>Sustaining relationships with friends &amp; family in Syria and abroad, despite displacement</td>
<td>Absence of formal psychosocial supports through institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Soothing self – nostalgia inducing relationships; psychosocial support to buffer against stress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subverting reality – temporary pause from current reality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature &amp; function of instrumental support</td>
<td>“Lebanese know more” – relationships for adapting to Lebanon</td>
<td>Information received from other Syrians about life in Lebanon and Syria through volunteering opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Sharing information about jobs, scholarships, university admission processes</td>
<td>o Shaping or stoking migration aspirations</td>
<td>o Camaraderie with other Syrians – “way to meet people”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Receiving one-off monetary remittances from family in Syria and friends abroad</td>
<td>o Absence of formal instrumental supports through institutions to seek information</td>
<td>o Accommodating distant Syrian friends &amp; family members when they first arrive to Lebanon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Reduced-rent/Free housing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3C: The interplay of individually- and institutionally-mediated social supports

**Individually-mediated social supports**

Academic supports (language translation, homework completion, scholarship applications)

Emotional supports (affirmations, motivation, encouragement, remembrance & shared memories)

Instrumental supports (information about jobs & housing, shaping migration aspirations, financial support in the form of loans, free housing)

**Institutionally-mediated social supports**

Academic supports (uneven in nature & reach - scholarships for formal higher education in Lebanon, language learning)

Emotional supports (Lack of social relationships with Lebanese at university & beyond, no formal psychosocial supports for refugee youth)

Instrumental supports (information emerging though relationships developed while volunteering)

Social supports emerging through organic, unorganized, one-on-one social relationships with individuals locally- or globally/transnationally- situated

Social supports that are systematized through institutions and organizations but were largely tenuous, fragmented and mostly absent for young Syrians in Lebanon

*Figure 1.* Inter-woven strands of individually and institutionally mediated social supports for young Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Figure adapted from Scarborough (2001).
References


Enriquez, L. (2011). "Because We Feel the Pressure and We Also Feel the Support": Examining the Educational Success of Undocumented Immigrant Latina/o Students. *Harvard Educational Review, 81*(3), 476-500. doi:10.17763/haer.81.3.w7k703q050143762


Conclusion

As the world experiences unprecedented levels of forced migration, the highest since the Second World War, we must ask ourselves how young men and women experience forced displacement, how it shapes their sense of self and relationships, the ways they see their places in their communities and the world, and how these experiences upend or generate opportunities for young people’s belonging within their new host communities.

Through this three-paper dissertation, focused on the case of young Syrians’ life and education pursuits in Lebanon, I examine how participants create and contest, learn and unlearn the boundaries of belonging when displaced by conflict. Furthermore, I examine the constellation of actors, including individuals and institutions, at the global, national, and local levels who, through policy and practice, simultaneously diminish, deepen, and dissolve the boundaries for young Syrians’ belonging in Lebanon. Though young Syrians continually experience these politics of belonging, through their actions and practices, they also exert countervailing pressures to confront, circumvent, and redefine these boundaries of belonging.

This dissertation has sought to center the voices and experiences of young Syrians who find their sociocultural and developmental worlds colliding. Developmentally, as they come of age, into a stage of early and emergent adulthood, they also find their sociocultural worlds rapidly changing. As they find themselves in Lebanon, a new sociocultural context where the spoken, formal language and the unspoken rules of the game are vastly different from those they mastered and internalized in Syria, young Syrians must find ways to communicate with their Lebanese counterparts and to navigate life in an entirely different context. Simultaneously, young Syrians also confront and experience the heft of global and national policies and structures, within education and beyond. In the face of these large-scale
forces that can at times seem fatalistic, young Syrian refugees in Lebanon must chart pathways to navigate their education and life pursuits in Lebanon, and beyond.

To conclude my dissertation, I synthesize across the three papers, highlighting the methodological, theoretical, and substantive contributions of this work. Through this analysis, I seek to highlight the implications of this work for research, policy, and practice within the field of refugee education.

**Methodological: Examining the interplay between individuals and institutions**

This study draws on principles of portraiture, a social science methodology that explicitly concerns itself with the search for goodness. For far too long, discourses around youth impacted by conflict have been reductionist and facile, relegating youth to social locations where they are either hopeless or harbingers of trouble. However in extricating goodness in the context of a refugee influx and amidst the many trials and tribulations that participants confronted, I did not occlude or oversee imperfections. In fact, portraiture suggests otherwise and recognizes the texture and complexity of social life, of the simultaneities of strength and promise alongside weakness and vulnerability. Subsequently, much of my focus when collecting, analyzing, and communicating these data have been to move away from simplistic and one dimensional portrayals of young refugees’ lives, to instead demonstrate the intricate and complicated webs of local and transnational lives that young Syrians found themselves caught up within and also created when displaced to Lebanon.

Paying careful attention to the multiple local, national, and global policies, practices, and structures that circumscribed and shaped young Syrians’ pursuits of education and life in Lebanon, and the ways that young participants confronted, contested, and circumnavigated these forces, implied prioritizing depth over breadth in my research design. For this reason, I purposefully constructed a sample of 15 young Syrian participants and 12 policy actors,
whom I interviewed multiple times in 2016. On average, I interviewed each of my youth participants at least thrice, and met with each several times informally.

This deliberate focus on repeated interactions with young Syrians allowed me to meet several methodological goals. Most importantly, it allowed me to build long-lasting, strong relationships that I could maintain, even after my official exit from Lebanon. These relationships served as an open channel of communication, allowing me to verify factual pieces of information that participants shared with me during our conversations, when I found myself writing in the solitary confines of my library carrel at Harvard. Moreover, though I did not speak Arabic, the mother tongue for my participants, opportunities to engage multiple times created enough familiarity, comfort, and trust to allow participants to take their time to express themselves fully, to use Arabic-English translation applications to express their ideas, and to not feel judged if they stumbled or encountered challenges when responding.

In addition, the chance to meet my participants several times over meant that we could meet in the many different settings they occupied—their homes, their universities, cafés where they used to hang out, among others. These created opportunities for me to see less simplistically and more holistically, to understand what was changing, sometimes even within a week, and to be able to view my participants not just as Syrians, as refugees, as young and displaced, but as whole people, complete with their sets of strengths and struggles. This deliberate, deep immersion when researching young refugees’ educational and life pursuits upon displacement is in stark contrast to NGO-driven examinations of refugee youth that typically rely on surveys, are one-time encounters, and only focus on particular dimensions of individuals’ lives instead of understanding the socio-ecological context within which individuals lives are continually shaped and negotiated.
Finally, but importantly, investigations focusing on refugee youths’ experiences on displacement often times locate the problem within global and national institutions’ policies and practices. These examinations paint a picture of global and national institutions in broad strokes, wherein institutions are monolithic entities devoid of their organizational cultures, agendas, and the extended political economies within which these institutions and, consequently, individuals’ practices are constructed and patterned. One of the goals of this dissertation, particularly in the second paper, has also been to unearth the many dilemmas that global and national actors within the field of refugee education confront in furthering organizational mandates, often rooted in human-rights based discourses. I find that the very fulfillment of these mandates is fundamentally rooted within the purview of nation-state based structures, oftentimes structures outside the walls of the Ministry of Education, a finding that is subsequently discussed and contextualized within the next sub-section on the theoretical contributions of this work.

Theoretical: Conceptualizing refugee youth belonging in the local and transnational spheres

The three papers demonstrate the fragile, fleeting, and contradictory nature of belonging. Several constellations of actors intersect the lives of young refugees when displaced—actors within the country of origin, the host nation-state, global, national and local institutions, both within and beyond the domain of education, and host-country nationals and other young refugees like themselves. However, the interests, actions and, consequently, decisions of these different actors are not always aligned. Though one set of actors may expand the spaces of inclusion and access, a different set may impose additional levels of enforcement, curtailing or shrinking the spaces for inclusion and belonging. Belonging therefore entails a
process of continual negotiation across time and place—among those who seek it and those who grant it.

We see the tenuous nature of belonging in the first paper through Azaa, Ali, and Amal’s portraits, each of whose sense of belonging in Lebanon is eclipsed by different subsets of actors outlined above. In Amal’s case, though she is able to access high school through a school principal willing to admit her without official approval from Lebanon’s Ministry of Education, Amal lacks the funding to access university education. Amal’s school teachers foster a deep sense of relational belonging to the school by bolstering her confidence in English, making concessions for her to turn in her assignments in Arabic, while the rest of the class does so in English. These relationships help Amal blur the boundaries that have otherwise been experienced by other young Syrians as bright and bold boundaries, difficult and, at times, even impossible to dissolve or transgress. Though these boundaries fade in high school, these boundaries are, in contrast, marked brightly once again at university when Amal is chastised for her religious beliefs, for her weak understandings of the basics of Science, a subject she self-taught herself amid active conflict within Syria. Underlying these contradictory practices are different implicit messages around the contours of belonging, of where it is possible or not to blur boundaries, and how the spaces to truly belong in Lebanon for Syrians are far and few.

One of the elements that constitute belonging relates to a sense of rootedness, a sense of home, where home represents safety, stability, and the warmth of, and attachment to, strong relationships. However, in the case of Lebanon, belonging for young refugees is elusive. On the one hand, young Syrians confront enduring structural and cultural barriers that circumscribe their future goals and opportunities. These include limitations on young Syrians’ right to formal employment, the looming fear of deportation, ongoing xenophobia
and discrimination, and the paucity in opportunities for higher education. Even for those who are able to access higher education, questions linger if they will be able to persist and successfully transition through their higher education experiences. To the youth participants, these barriers seem impossible to fundamentally transform or dismantle. Implicitly, these barriers communicate that the only long-term future for young Syrians is back inside Syria, and that hospitality in Lebanon has its limits. Many of these barriers are a confluence of several factors: a shrinking labor market for Lebanese youth and a high youth unemployment rate; a tumultuous past that Syria and Lebanon have shared; and, Lebanon’s experience of hosting Palestinian refugees within its territory since 1948. Fleeing persecution and armed conflict, young Syrians are able to stay in Lebanon and are therefore able to belong, at least temporarily, in Lebanon. However, in the wake of structural and relational barriers, they are unable to belong with Lebanon and its fellow citizens.

Despite these many challenges to belonging with Lebanon, young Syrians locate opportunities that provide safety, stability, and a sense of collective membership; spaces where they are able to blur the boundaries to belonging. I find that one such space is volunteering sites, where young Syrians work in service to their community of other Syrians in exile. For the few participants that were engaged in meaningful and productive volunteering opportunities, these spaces enriched their lives and provided them with the opportunity to use their time and skills productively toward defined goals in service of Syrian children. In so doing, these sites become among the many rare spaces for Syrians in Lebanon where participants’ dignity is upheld and restored, and where their quest to assert their sense of visibility is not accompanied with vulnerability or threats to their personal safety and wellbeing. Research and practice would be usefully informed by examining the many other localized spaces where young Syrians’ find their sense of belonging enlarged.
A further space where Syrians create belonging is a transnational space. The fact that young Syrians are now connected with other Syrians in diaspora in Europe, Canada, or back in Syria, as a consequence of conflict and forced displacement is not new. However, worth considering are the many kinds of material and non-material social supports that are received and shared across borders. The third paper outlines the variegated nature of many of these supports that are simultaneously shared and received by participants.

In the absence of formal, institutionalized supports, especially those that acknowledge young Syrians’ psychosocial and emotional needs, participants use these transnational relationships to subvert their current realities, to soothe themselves, and to sustain their memories of the past. Importantly, transnational academic supports in the form of information about scholarships and university admissions, and motivation to persist, enable participants to chart their pathways to their academic goals. Moreover, these supports are not only received but also shared in the hopes that they will open doors for other young Syrians to continue pursuing their educational and life goals.

Belonging is fundamentally characterized by safety, stability, and rootedness, a sense of permanence that home marks. However in the case of my young participants, they learn that Lebanon can never provide that sense of permanence and that belonging in and with Lebanon will forever remain tenuous. In this instance, the contours of refugee youth belonging shift from the contours of belonging in non-refugee contexts where permanence is possible. With this finding, I do not conclude that the absence of permanence implies that belonging is not possible. Instead, this finding raises further questions. Might there be ways that hyper local-spaces of belonging are nurtured and sustained, where individual and collective safety and dignity are upheld, and where deep, productive, and authentic relationships are prioritized?
For example, if transnational belonging is being created by refugee youth, how might the role of national and global structures within refugee education be reimagined? Global and national structures and policies in the field of refugee education wield enormous influence on the educational trajectories of refugee learners, yet often fail to consider transnational dimensions. Though the promise of education is often framed within global policies, doing good on that promise is most often contingent on national structures that fall within the purview of host nation-states. In the absence of systematic supports within nation-states that enable young refugees to chart pathways to educational success, the transnational sphere offers promise. However, as I will subsequently discuss, all transnational support systems are not a panacea.

**Substantive: Implications for research, policy and practice in refugee education**

This dissertation raises three overarching implications for research, policy, and practice within the field of refugee education.

First, we need more grounded understandings of how young refugees perceive and experience the boundaries of belonging across different kinds of contexts of exile. Which elements of these perceptions and experiences are universal and which are highly contextual? Furthermore, what are the novel strategies that young refugees use to confront and circumvent bright boundaries to belonging and how might these strategies hold promise and potential for blurring these boundaries in more systematic ways? Further research might also examine the informal spaces beyond education- and employment-based institutions where young refugees spend considerable amounts of time and the opportunities within these spaces to deepen young refugees’ belonging.
Second, from a policy-based perspective, we need to consider the many ways in which young refugees are already leveraging their transnational worlds to draw on and extend different kinds of material and non-material support. In my study, I find that academic support in the form of money and motivational affirmations are important for young refugees to persist through university. However the more concrete forms of academic support for homework completion and language learning are conspicuous by their absence within the transnational sphere.

Though there has been a burgeoning in e-mentoring initiatives using technology to connect refugee learners with benevolent individuals based outside the host nation-state, it is unknown if these allow for the development of symmetric, deep, and authentic relationships that are conscious of power dynamics. Social support cannot be based solely in the transnational sphere, as refugee young people evidence the needed deep understandings of the local context within which they are embedded and the unique challenges they must confront within these contexts inherent in mentoring relationships. Might we radically reimagine the suite of supports available to refugee youth wherein they are able to: access mentors who understand their local realities and their goals and aspirations; avail psychosocial support free of judgment and stigma; and learn productive skills that are transferable across borders and contexts?

Finally, refugee education practice might be usefully informed by considering the creation and sustenance of hyper-localized spaces where local belonging is possible. High school and university classrooms, along with volunteering opportunities, are spaces where refugee youth and host-country youth are able to work with intentionality and purpose toward the achievement of defined, concrete, and time-bound goals and, in the process, come to better understand each other. They are spaces where their success is knotted
together in relationships with one another. Might we develop these spaces to purposefully cultivate practices, habits, routines, and cultures that allow all members to feel they fundamentally belong in and with a learning community? Spaces that enable refugee and host-country youth to flourish, to believe they have an equal stake and, most importantly, to feel visible and heard?

In 1914, many thousand miles away from Lebanon and Syria, closer to Appian Way, here in New England, Robert Frost wrote “Mending Walls,” where he penned his thoughts on walls, boundaries and belonging.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,…
…There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbours? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.