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Syrian Refugee Teens’ Acculturation in Canada: A Preliminary Analysis of Refugee Integration Stress and Equity Team Data at the University of Toronto

Mohamed Afify

Abstract

Approximately 21,550 Syrian refugees under the age of 17 have found a home in Canada between 2015 to 2019 (IRCC 2019). They have resettled during a time with growing sentiments of Islamophobia (Beirich and Buchanan 2018) and xenophobia (Bricker 2019) across the West. The question of Islamic compatibility with the West has posited a concern among policy makers and the general public. Understanding how this group of adolescents acculturate in Canada provides a lens into Canadian multiculturalism and our ability to welcome newcomers. This paper examines how adolescent Syrian refugee males construct their identity in relation to their homeland and Canada. Additionally, it asks how the construction of identity influences their acculturation preferences. In this essay, the results displayed are based on 15 interviews conducted in 2019 with Syrian adolescent males as a member of the Refugee Integration Stress and Equity team at the University of Toronto. These findings focus on teens’ critical period of individuation, and how they navigate identity formation in this Canadian context. This paper adds to the concept of cultural contestation (O’Brien 2017) by holding it against the Canadian case. The findings suggest that most of the adolescent males follow integrationist or ethnic acculturation strategies, while Canadian multiculturalism possibly mitigates sentiments of cultural contestation.

The Canadian government has accepted nearly 60,000 Syrian refugees since November 2015 as many thousands more continue to seek refuge (IRCC 2019). Like others before them, these newcomers carry experiences of both grit and struggle. Our evolving Canadian refugee resettlement environment offers scholars of immigration and youth a renewed mandate to study how adolescent boys construct their identities in a critical period of flux and transition. As a phase of individuation, adolescence can lead to disorientation especially when paired with the socialization of two different cultures with contradictory cultural schemas (Fischer 2015). By studying the patterned experience of these adolescent Syrian refugees, we can better understand how they construct their identity in two relative contexts and the types of acculturation that may result from such identity formation. In a climate of growing anti-immigration sentiment across Canada (Bricker 2019), it is imperative to learn how migrants are adapting, managing and adjusting to a new way of life in a context of unprecedented refugee resettlement. This paper offers a preliminary assessment of a subsample of interviews with adolescent boys conducted as a part of the Refugee Integration, Stress, and Equity (RISE) team at the University of Toronto among the first of five interview waves.
The purpose of the analysis is to answer the following questions: how do adolescent Syrian refugee males construct their identity in relation to their homeland and Canada? And how does the construction of identity influence their acculturation preferences? To answer these questions, I describe and analyze data from interviews I (and other RISE team members) conducted between November 2018 and April 2019. I analyse the interviews using the theoretical framework of acculturation strategies relative to the participant’s expressed identity. The first section discusses evidence of a process of othering among the teen males and how they perceive themselves in relation to Canadian society. The second section focuses on how boys’ Arab and Muslim identities manifest in a Canadian context; which can, at times, feel directly contradictory from that of their homeland. According to O’Brien (2017), Muslim teens can find themselves in an arena of cultural contestation where they sometimes create specific acculturation strategies in order to coexist within both cultural schemas. I end with a discussion of possible future directions for research as well as related considerations that are beyond the scope of this paper. This includes the association of perceived discrimination and acculturation preferences since previous research has demonstrated this relationship to be an influential factor in immigrants’ acculturation strategies.

**Migrant Acculturation and Integration**

To inform the broader scope of this study, I refer to Ouellette, Warmington and Yu (2007) who assess several Canadian studies of refugee integration in Canada. From their analysis, several key findings are relevant to this study. First is that refugee economic integration is varied by migration status (Ouellette et al. 2007:20). For example, Landed Canadian Refugees (LCRs) and Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) both lag behind other migrant groups such as landed immigrants and Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs), however after the fifth year from landing, the discrepancy fades (Oullette et al. 2007:20-21). Although economic integration is a strong predictor of how refugees are faring in their new home, other factors (such as trauma, human capital and social networks) need to be considered to accurately assess a group’s integration (Oullette et al. 2007:26). Secondly, although the term can be vague, “refugee integration” requires a sort of adaptation by both the newcomer group and the host country which involves a reflexive approach reflected in the Canadian policy landscape (Oullette et al. 2007:17). However, new evidence from Statistics Canada suggests that refugees migrating to Canada from Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan and other Muslim-majority countries do not reach parity with their immigrant counterparts even when key markers of human capital (e.g. educational attainment, language skills) are held constant (Taylor 2019). In the case
of this recent cohort of Syrian newcomers to Canada, who are largely Arab and Muslim, they may experience different cultural stigmas which may not have been the case with other groups, especially given a present-day political climate that presents Muslim refugees as a problem in need of resolution (Mondon and Winter 2017). This is reflected through xenophobia across Europe, the United States and Canada, a proliferation of anti-immigration hate groups and a push for policy reform to halt migration to Western countries (Beirich and Buchanan 2017). As Oullette et al. (2007) contend, refugee integration is a two-way relationship between the host society and the refugee population. The way these two groups interact will shape how refugees integrate and adapt. Positive experiences are likely to lead to more successful integration and future success, while negative experiences will likely lead to contradictory outcomes. For example, perceived discrimination can lead to mental health issues which have been linked to poor academic scores and retention (Rose et al. 2017).

Their integration may also vary from other migrant groups due to both the current context as well as their ethnic and religious makeup. Briones et al. (2012) found variation in immigrant youth adaptation in Spain, as Moroccan youth experienced more discrimination and worse adaptation than an Ecuadorean cohort. Similarly, Montgomery and Foldspang (2008) conducted a study of 131 refugees in Denmark, of which 67 were Middle Eastern. They found a significant link between perceived discrimination and internalized issues associated with adoptions such as withdrawal, leading to further isolation from the host country (Foldspang and Montgomery 2008). Similarly, discrimination has a profound effect on the acculturation strategies which migrants adopt. The concept of acculturation will be elaborated on in the following section where I identify how acculturation strategies may impact overall identity development for adolescent Syrian refugees. Previous literature suggests that a generally hostile social climate in the West presents challenges for Muslim and Arab migrants, establishing that this group possesses unique characteristics that prevent them from integrating similarly to other migrant groups. However, aside from explicit discrimination, bicultural stress can impact adolescent development as well. Therefore, this group is intersecting with a new culture and a context of political divisiveness and polarization which is very likely to impact development. For example, Blanco (et al. 2014) measured the existence of bi-cultural stressors and their impact among Hispanic adolescents in the U.S. They found that adolescents struggling between homeland and host-land identity integration had an increased likelihood of alcohol misuse (Blanco et al. 2014).
In the human life course, adolescence is a second phase of individuation in which a person becomes distinct to themselves and forms their identity (Fischer 2015). On its own, this process is full of crisis and instability but, when paired with the stressors of integrating one’s identity with a new culture, this process can be interrupted with implications for the third phase of individuation (Fischer 2015). This struggle is further pronounced when an adolescent’s parents also have difficulty integrating into a new culture (Fischer 2015). Thus, given the social and cultural distance many resettled Syrian adolescents may feel in Canada, their acculturation strategies may be more or less positive and integrative.

**Culturally Contested Lives and Acculturation**

As mentioned previously, the framework of this paper follows Fischer 2015’s four acculturation strategies. The first strategy is *assimilation*, where the culture and values of the homeland are abandoned and replaced by the new host country (Fischer 2015). The second strategy is *integration* where both homeland and host-land cultural schemas are adopted and reconciled (Fischer 2015). The third strategy is *separation* which is characterized by individuals holding on to their original culture and avoiding interaction with the host-land culture. Lastly is *marginalization*, which is when individuals decline to maintain involvement with either cultural schemas or contact with other groups; this is often the result of discrimination (Berry and Sabatier 2009). Existing academic literature presents strong evidence that suggests discrimination can predict individual’s acculturation strategy. For example, Ameyaw (et al. 2018) found that participants who were more associated with an assimilation strategy were less likely to express a sense of perceived discrimination. This suggests that host populations are more accepting of assimilation over other strategies (Ameyaw et al. 2018). However, the degree to which this applies likely has great variance depending on a country’s social environment and institutionalized policy.

In a comparison of Montreal, Canada, and Paris, France, researchers found that newcomers in Montreal were more likely to be aligned with strategies of integration and less likely to employ strategies of separation and marginalization (Berrey and Sabtier 2010). Relatedly, visible minorities in Paris (e.g. Haitians, Algerians and Moroccans) were the most discriminated against in comparison to other European migrant groups (Berrey and Sabtier 2010). Although there were no Arabs or people from Muslim-majority countries in the Montreal group, Montreal was less associated overall with discrimination. However, people from Muslim-majority countries might have a different experience today in Franco-Canadian settings like Montreal and Anglo-Canadian settings like Toronto as
discussed earlier. Overall, an emphasis on ethnic acculturation (i.e. placing importance on transmitting homeland culture to a subsequent immigrant generation) in Paris was associated with higher levels of perceived discrimination, yet that was not the case in Montreal (Berrey and Sabtier 2010). In the French context, Arabs experience some of the highest rates of discrimination and draw less often upon strategies of assimilation than other ethnic groups such as Vietnamese or Greek immigrants (Berrey and Sabtier 2010). Furthermore, despite Algerians mostly preferring integration, they still experienced some of the highest rates of discrimination, furthering the hypothesis that Arabs present a somewhat unique case in the West.

The question of Muslim compatibility with Western life is the central theme in John O'Brien's (2017) ethnography *Keeping It Halal*. O'Brien (2017) studied a group of adolescent Muslim males who were all part of a Sunday mosque club. They called their friend group “The Legendz.” Given the prominence of their faith on their identity, O'Brien (2017) analyzed how these adolescents navigated the two contradictory cultural rubrics. O'Brien defines *cultural rubrics* as the set of schemas, habits, symbols and practices (O'Brien 2017). For example, a typical adolescent in the U.S would gain status by going to parties, taking part in heterosexual relationships and possibly consuming alcohol; all of which are forbidden under the tenants of Islam (O'Brien 2017). Association too much with Islamic culture puts them at risk of not seeming ‘cool’ whereas associating too much with U.S culture put them at risk of disappointing local expectations and Islamic ideals (O'Brien 2017). This situation of living ‘culturally contested lives’ is not unique to just Arabs in the west. O'Brien (2017) notes that other minority groups experience this phenomenon such as African American and Latino Youth.

O'Brien cites Eli Anderson’s (2000) conception of “decent” or “good” and “ghetto” or “street” (O'Brien 2017). Similar to their Muslim counterparts, these youths navigate two opposed cultural rubrics; by excelling at school and being “decent” they are more aligned with academic success. However, they also make themselves vulnerable to ridicule by peers who deem them to be “nerdy” or “acting white” (O'Brien 2017). O'Brien (2017) found that the Legendz manage to navigate both cultural rubrics by, for example, listening to popular rap songs, but censoring certain parts. For the most part, they successfully navigated both cultural rubrics and implicitly engaged integration strategies. However, they did express a certain pressure to do so, as if the strategy of integration could only be possible through clearly defined aspects of assimilation such as knowing rap songs and playing basketball. That is, they felt an onus to present themselves as American first and Muslim second. Following O'Brien, would this dynamic apply to recently resettled young men in Canada? In the following sections, I assess if and how Syrian
adolescent males navigate competing cultural rubrics and if they perceive a similar challenge as that of the Legendz. Analysing the case of newcomer Syrian boys in Canada can further identify how Canada's policy of multiculturalism may manifest into different acculturation strategies, deepening our knowledge of how Arab newcomers in particular build their identities in the Western world.

**Methods**

The process of data collection was conducted under the umbrella of the RISE (Refugee Integration, Stress, and Equity) research project, headed by the principal investigator Dr. Neda Maghbouleh, a sociologist at the University of Toronto. As a research assistant, I was granted the ability to use interview data collected between November 2018 and April 2019 with Syrian newcomer mothers and teenagers (n=121). This paper focuses on a subset of 15 interviews with teenage boys conducted by myself and one other male research assistant. The interview guide included 40 questions that covered the respondent's history, religion, relationships, identity and problems (see Appendix A). Once we had contact with a family willing to participate, RA's would contact the mother first as many of the teens were under 18 years of age. Once contacted, a time and location were scheduled to the preference of the participant and their family. To ensure ethical consideration was maintained, following the REB guidelines as set out by the University of Toronto, each respondent was briefed on their rights as a participant which included explaining that the study was voluntary and that confidentiality would be maintained. To ensure confidentiality, each participant was given participant numbers and I provided pseudonyms for those who's information I used in this study.

All other data is protected and cannot be viewed by anyone not a part of the RISE team. Interviews with extremely sensitive information were only viewable by the principal investigator and research officer. To further ensure ethical protocol was met, RA's made it a point to express that if participants would no longer like to be part of the study, all of their information would be deleted. Every participant was given a $20 gift card to a major chain pharmacy and grocery store as honorarium. These protocols were essential in maintaining ethical clearance while helping the team build rapport with the participants. After the wave of interviews was complete, the audio was translated and transcribed into English. Once the transcription process was finished, I was able to conduct a thematic analysis to uncover primary indicators of integration or strain via an analysis of the participants’ responses. A key methodological limitation is that a majority of the 15 interviews involved parental presence in the discussion space or in an audible distance. This likely impacted the teenage respondents’ answers since parental pressure may have led to less candid answers.
Analysis

National Identity Formation and Acculturation

In this section, I assess how participants negotiate their identity in regards to Syria and Canada. This was captured through questions proposed in the interview guide which examined their sense of national identity and whether participants saw themselves as potential Canadians. I analyze their sense of mattering and their perceptions of Canadian identity as they pertain to ethnicity and race. These questions also provide insight into areas where teens may prefer certain acculturation strategies over others. For example, when it comes to making friends, teens may only have close ties to Arab or Muslim friend groups which could indicate a preference for separation. Whereas if teens expressed that a “Canadian” could be anyone from any ethnic, religious or racial background, that could indicate an acculturation strategy closer to integration.

Part of their identity formation revolves around how they view themselves in Canada. I was curious to investigate if participants saw themselves as ‘other’ or simply part of Canadian society? What the young men described in the interviews varied significantly. Some expressed an acceptance of Canadian multicultural values, which may indicate that they do not perceive themselves as ‘other’, but rather as a part of a flexible national Canadian identity. When I asked Ramy (age 14), who had been in Canada for four years, this question he replied:

*Interviewer:* *laughs* When you hear someone say ‘Canadian’ to describe someone to you, who do you imagine?

*Ramy:* What do you mean?

*Interviewer:* If I told you ‘my friend is Canadian’ who do you imagine in your head?

*Ramy:* A normal person. He respects others.

*Interviewer:* What does he look like, what is his life?

*Ramy:* A kind person and I don’t know, just a normal person, a normal human.

*Interviewer:* And what is a normal person to you?

*Ramy:* A good person. A person trying to finish school. I first thought they were all white.

*Interviewer:* Sorry, like what?

*Ramy:* Like they’re all white

*Interviewer:* Oh, *laughs* you did not find a lot of Whites?

*Ramy:* No, not all of them. I did not think there would be every area. And I thought the would only be Canadian, but here they are spread out, every area has people here.

*Interviewer:* If I told you someone is Canadian, you don’t always imagine someone white, they can be...

*Ramy:* Here? Any person could be Canadian.
With an expressed perception of Canada as a multicultural country, some teens like Ramy seemed to describe a preference towards integrative acculturation. They saw themselves fitting into a prevalent notion of Canada as a country open to all ethnicities, religions and races. Youth in our study, like Ramy may be an exception, as they largely live in some of the most diverse parts of Ontario and Canada. Yet, even then, their answers were not unanimous as it was expected. In fact, some seemed to understand themselves as ‘other’. I interpreted this by looking closely at their responses to questions in our interview guide that asked participants to reflect upon who they understand to be a “foreigner” versus a Canadian. When Omar (age 13) was asked who he thinks is Canadian, he gave a response that would indicate a sense of othering since he stated:

*Interviewer:* Ok. When you hear someone say ‘Canadian’, describe to me this person, what do they look like?

*Omar:* Like... what?

*Interviewer:* Like if I told you ‘yesterday I was with a Canadian person’ who do you imagine, what do they look like? Describe him to me.

*Omar:* Canadian?

*Interviewer:* Yes.

*Omar:* His description, I don’t know. Blonde, his hair blonde, everything blonde.

Unlike Ramy, Omar expressed a more restrictive idea of what a “Canadian” looks like such as identifying people as having, “everything blonde.” It is important to note however, that Arabic language itself provides complexities to what could be overly simplified interpretations of participants’ own words. Essentially, among Arabic speakers, the word ‘Canadian’ refers to Canadian national identity, but ‘foreigners’ is used by our participants as a term to describe people who are not white, but also not Arab; this is similar to how the term ‘foreigners’ would have been used by this population in their home countries, too.

Therefore, complexities in Arabic language and different schemas in a Canadian resettlement context offer challenges when asking participants to describe a ‘Canadian’ as the terms and schemas may be conflated with Arab-specific notions of who ‘foreigners’ are. Nonetheless, across the 15 interviews analysed here, there were two common answers to “who is a foreigner?” Some participants expressed that a foreigner is anyone who is not Canadian or has not been in Canada long enough. Answers such as these may indicate an individual’s stronger preference towards integrationist acculturation, as they imply a more fluid perception of Canadian identity and who could potentially become Canadian, leaving open the possibility that they too can become Canadian. On the other hand, responses along the lines of “Westerner” or “non-Arab” may indicate a separationist
or ethnic acculturation preference, as the individual likely perceives their Arab identity as distinctly ‘other’ than that of Canadians. Thus, their definition of foreigner may focus on a fixed cultural identity rather than a national identity. This means they may situate their definition of foreigner detached from their Canadian context and interpret the questions from an Arab lens. For example, when Firaz (one of the oldest participants at the age 17) was asked this question, he demonstrated a normative view of a foreigner in the Canadian setting, meaning someone who is new to the country.

*Interviewer:* Ok. When someone says ‘foreigner’, who do you imagine? Describe to me who you imagine.

*Firaz:* Maybe they can be an immigrant, a person who isn't Canadian.

*Interviewer:* So not Canadian would be what?

*Firaz:* Someone from, from a different country.

*Interviewer:* Like where?

*Firaz:* Maybe they are from a different continent. Maybe they can be, they can be, I don't know, from a different country. Like they are strange [unfamiliar with area], not born here. They have maybe a different religion and different civilization from the Canadians.

Firaz's expression of the normative perception around foreigners in Canada coincides with his normative perceptions as to who is a ‘Canadian’. Firaz's answers seem uniformly accepting of a multicultural rubric, indicating an orientation toward integration. Other participants' responses tended to follow a more “Arab” interpretation of the word. For example, Nasir, who is 15 years old, was rather puzzled by the question, stating:

*Interviewer:* [If I am telling you ‘yesterday I was with someone who is a foreigner, me and him were doing whatever’ who do you think of? What does a foreigner look like in your head?]

*Nasir:* Like a human.

*Interviewer:* Like a human. This human looks like what?

*Nasir:* A human.

*Interviewer:* How would you describe a foreigner to me?

*Nasir:* Does not speak Arabic.

*Interviewer:* Does not speak Arabic. Anything else?

*Nasir:* Their looks can be different, I cannot tell you that this is a foreigner. All foreigners must be like this; I could not describe to you these things.

Here, Nasir's answer indicates confusion due to how the word “foreigner” is translated in Arabic. Alternatively, it may reflect a more generalizable Arab-specific interpretation, contradicting the participants’ current settings in Canada. That is, under the Canadian definition they could be defined as foreigners.
To further investigate how teens interpret their identities within the Canadian context, another question in the interview guide was included as a tool to reflect upon how important individuals felt in Canada. Do they feel that Canadians care about them? Not only might their answers to this question shed light on their sense of belonging, but they could also give us some insight into teens’ mental health and sense of integration. Whereas six participants responded that they did feel a sense of importance, the rest were split in their sentiments, either feeling not important at all, or being indifferent to the question. This was due to ideologies of feeling that they mattered as much as anyone else. Ramy, who articulated a sense of multicultural identity earlier in his interview, described a sense of immediate importance followed by a sense of indifference. This may be a result of high expectations upon arrival as the economic condition of these families is more stable than after the first year. Ramy’s response may be a reflection of those initial expectations, stating:

Interviewer: Ok. How much do you feel that people here care for you, other than your family and your friends? Do you feel that the normal Canadian people care about you?
Ramy: As soon as we came they treated us different when we came, they watched over us more.
Interviewer: Different, how?
Ramy: They treated us, they were very good with us. And the others, everyone else treats us normally, because they are used to us.

Although our interview guide did not attempt to provide an extensive assessment of mental health, it may be a good indicator for youths’ sense of isolation which can lead to detrimental effects on mental health. Akkaymak (2017) demonstrated how migrants’ expectations can quickly shape their perception of their reality. He found that highly educated immigrants experience more strain due to their perceived high-status credentials which made limited job prospects feel even grimmer (Akkaymak 2017). In the case of resettled Syrian youth, we may find an opposite effect. Many refugee teens did not expect much diversity in Canada upon landing. Some knew very little about Canada aside from the fact that it is cold. Therefore, the shock of seeing anyone similar to themselves may have quickly reduced the feelings of isolation, though they appear to persist for some. Overall, these initial interviews with teen boys indicate that most engage a strategy of integration or ethnic acculturation. While some teens’ responses engage a notion of multicultural Canada, and are therefore easier to interpret within an acculturation frame, their perceptions of “who is a foreigner” complicates this interpretation. Some participants’ persistence in identifying Canadians (or Westerners in general) as foreigners may indicate an embedded and primary Arab cultural rubric. Equally possible is the idea that an Arabic language interpretation of “foreigner” is too
broad in scope to accurately serve as an index of acculturation strategy or cultural rubric. Aside from their interpretation of “foreigner,” the participants do not seem to express a sense of exceptionalism in regards to their ability to adapt to Canadian society. However, other aspects of their life such as religion may possess a more pronounced effect on their ability to integrate and their preferred acculturation strategy.

Cultural Contestation

In O’Brien’s (2017) ethnography, the prevailing sentiment among the Legendz is that they felt an onus to prove their American identity, in order to justify the expression of their Muslim identity. For a variety of reasons, I hypothesized that this sentiment would not be as strongly held with this cohort of resettled Syrian adolescents in Canada. Most importantly, the youth in our study live in diverse areas across the Greater Toronto Area. Additionally, Canadian multiculturalist policy overtly promotes the expression of a wider variety of backgrounds and cultures than more assimilationist policies in the U.S. To better assess cultural contestation, I analyzed how the teens practice their religion within a new cultural context. Religion is a salient part of Arab identities. In this case, Arab ethnic and national identities are intertwined with Islamic culture as evident by the language itself. Phrases such as ‘Inshallah’ (in God's will), are ingrained into the cultural rubrics of most Arabs. And largely, it is non-Christian religions that are commonly understood as directly contradictory to normative notions of Western life (O’Brien 2017).

Religion was an especially sensitive topic in our interview guide. Some teenagers expressed guilt for a perceived lack of practicing religion as well as often as they should, while others expressed an increased sense of religiosity. The most salient pattern among teenagers was the culture shock they expressed experiencing in Canada and how this conflicted with their cultural practices. Mohamed (14) was the first participant I interviewed, and we spoke in a crowded Tim Hortons. He had begrudgingly left his old public school for a new one because his family had recently moved within the Toronto area. While describing what seemed to be cultural contestation, he seemed reluctant and timid to express his views on what seemed to be his experience with seeing public displays of affection.

*Mohamed:* Oh, I like this. In Turkey and in Iraq I used to pray. Yes, the mosque, it does not busy us.

Here, everything they do. We just go out and not speak. We do not go to them and tell them this is haram or something. They have their religion, everyone to their religion. My religion is Islam. Some people are Christian religion. Yes.

*Interviewer:* Ok. Do you feel that your relationship with religion changes since you came, unlike when you were in Turkey or Iraq?
Mohamed: Yes, it changed.

Interviewer: How did it change?

Mohamed: It changed... I see... Istaghfarallah [God forgive me] I see the girls like this and the boys like this. Everywhere I go I see something horrible.

Mohamed’s understanding of “something horrible” relates to O'Brien's (2017) concept of cultural contestation; some teens in our study expressed this cultural contestation as a source of stress. After living in Muslim-majority countries all their lives, their cultural rubrics led to certain expectations in society, making Canadian society all the more surprising. Unlike the Legendz, Mohamed did not describe experiencing this stressor from his peers nor did he feel that this was a practice necessary to gain status. Instead, he seemed hesitant to even express these sentiments. This may indicate a need for broader conceptualization of cultural contestation as sentiments of shock or stress are consciously averted to avoid displaying an image of ungratefulness or imposing traditions. Kareem (age 17) felt a similar sentiment as Mohamed, saying:

Interviewer: Ok. Have you felt, like, has there been any time that you felt you could not be as religious as much as you would have liked in Canada? Has it become harder for you? Or something like that.

Kareem: Of course, it's harder here. In Syria and Jordan, you do not see, for example, what do I tell you... For example, girls were in different schools. There was a school for boys and a school for girls. They were not with each other. Here everyone is with each other, it's normal, so it became harder.

Interestingly, Kareem experienced a sort of stress and an expressed difficulty to practice his religion from the general environment, rather than explicit cultural pressures. Again, this is different from what O'Brien (2017) documented among the Legendz as they consciously used category symbols to identify more with mainstream American teens. But here, I notice that the teens express stress from implicit external pressures which they fear will disrupt their ability to practice their religion or traditions. This is not a fear of lacking status among peers, nor is it pressure to assimilate, but rather it seems to be the fear of temptation of integrating into the Canadian mainstream and neglecting their Arab roots. The key difference is that teens who express feelings of cultural contestation do not express an obligation to change their identity or display their Canadian identity before their Arab identity. Rather, they seem to express a fear of eventually assimilating and neglecting their cultural roots, though it is unclear whether this is a fear that is self-generated or if it has been passed on by their parents. However, other teens did not express any sort of stress and emphasized secular values and a reciprocal respect for other religions and cultural practices.
Mouhayman (age 16) emphasized this sentiment as he stated:

*Interviewer:* Yes ok. So this following question is have you felt any pressure to change your religious practices? So from the people around you at school, when you're at work, do you feel any of those kinds of pressures or not really?

*Mouhayman:* No not really. Because nobody involves themselves in your affairs-

*Interviewer:* Ok yes-

*Mouhayman:* Like everyone says that every person can practice their own religion.

*Interviewer:* Yes exactly.

*Mouhayman:* Nobody gets involved in someone's religion.

*Interviewer:* Yes here-

*Mouhayman:* Yes and in the schools they don't bring up the topic of religion at all.

*Interviewer:* Yes yes.

*Mouhayman:* And at the schools they don't bring up religion. No classifications of: ‘oh you're Muslim, he's Christian’.

*Interviewer:* Yes yes.

*Mouhayman:* No Canadian people pressure you onto religion.

*Interviewer:* Ya no exactly ya ya.

*Mouhayman:* That's what's nice.

Lastly, teens were not uniform in detailing their experiences of both discrimination and acceptance in Canada. For example, Omar (age 13) found that sentiments of exclusion and inclusion equally characterized his experiences:

*Interviewer:* What is the thing you like most or didn't like.

*Omar:* What I didn't like in Canada, they keep calling me Syrian and always they bully me [in English], that. What I liked in Canada, is that they respect you. They don't ask about your religion, that, the respect.

*Interviewer:* Has someone bothered you because you are Syrian, other than teens at school?

*Omar:* I don't think so, no.

Interestingly, Omar expressed contradictory views when it came to his peers as they bothered him over his Syrian identity. Therefore, it seems teens who experienced discrimination find themselves in a gap between a federally mandated policy of multiculturalism which is promoted through the educational system and anti-Arab or anti-Syrian sentiments which some of their peers express. This gap likely explains how teens in our study have expressed contradictory sentiments in regard to Canada being both tolerant and discriminatory. Overall, the case of cultural contestation in Canada does seem to have qualities unique to this context. First, the teens in our study express less felt pressure to adapt their cultural rubrics in order to gain status among peers, unlike what the Legendz experienced. Instead, when feelings of cultural contestation are present, settled Syrian teens express them as fear of diverting away from traditional values or practices. This does not
appear to be motivated by an effort to gain status, but because of a dominant cultural environment that is culturally contradictory and difficult to avoid. In essence, this is a more diffused sentiment of cultural contestation, one that is more implicit and without an explicit onus to privilege a certain cultural rubric over another. Despite these sentiments, most of the teens do not express this as a stressor, but praise Canada for being tolerant, even those who reported experiencing discrimination here. This is possibly explained by the dissonance between the notion of multiculturalism promoted through Canadian education and the racist sentiments expressed by their peers. From this, it appears that sentiments of cultural contestation do exist for resettled Syrian teens in Canada, but they seem to be mitigated by policies that promote an integrationist acculturation strategy, like multiculturalism.

**Discussion & Conclusion**

The broader scope of this study was to assess the acculturation strategies Syrian refugee adolescent males while assessing the impact of cultural contestation as theorized by O’Brien (2017). Overall, I present two main findings. First, teens are almost evenly split in their acceptance of a multicultural identity. While some consider a Canadian to be someone from any religious or ethnic background, others perceive Canadian as White Westerners. The implication of this is that acculturation strategies may be evenly split between integrationist and separationist (and or ethnic) acculturation strategies. This notion was further reinforced through their perception regarding who is a foreigner. I observed a similar divide regarding those who perceive the concept of a foreigner through a normative Canadian lens which is anyone new to Canada, indicating an integration acculturation strategy. While others used one that aligned with an Arab cultural rubric, being a White, Westerner, which indicates a preference to a separationist or ethnic acculturation strategy.

Second, I observed key differences between how sentiments of cultural contestation manifest in the Canadian context. Although some teens do express sentiments of cultural contestation, they do not feel an onus to overtly express their Canadian identity. This is unlike what O’Brien (2017) observed which was teens consciously making an effort to adopt mainstream American cultural symbols in order to justify their expressed Muslim identity. Here, when teens do express these sentiments, it is a general shock, stressor or fear of eventually assimilating and neglecting their Arab culture. Yet, they do not express explicit pressure or onus to overtly identify with their Canadian identity. This may be attributed to a policy of multiculturalism which they likely encounter through their schooling. Canadian
multicultural policy could be having a mitigating effect on cultural contestation which could explain the difference between how they experience cultural contestation versus what the Legendz experienced (O’Brien 2017). This mitigating effect may further impact the acculturation preferences of these teens as one of the main predictors of acculturation strategy is perceived discrimination (Ameyaw et al. 2018). Thus, through the promotion of multiculturalism, teens may be less impacted by overt discrimination, which could encourage more preference of an integrationist acculturation strategy. It is important to note key differences from this cohort of teens and those observed by O’Brien (2017). Most of the teens observed by O’Brien (2017) were either born in the U.S or immigrated at a young age. This likely has an impact on the value they placed on adopting a more American cultural rubric and consciously expressing it. In comparison, none of the teens I interviewed had been in Canada for more than three years and the majority are younger in comparison to the Legendz. Therefore, different phases of identity formation are likely involved which shaped some of the differences observed. The Syrian teens may be at an earlier period of contestation.

Their selective use of English in the interviews could be an indication of this as they code switch to express certain sentiments of contestation such as ‘bullying’ and ‘racism’. Longitudinal data would be essential in understanding how the teens integrate over time while assessing if their views on discrimination have changed. A large concern was that when teens negate discrimination as schoolyard bullying, they are using mental accounting to underplay what might be a larger issue. Therefore, it is imperative to understand how these teens experience bullying as compared to native-born teens and whether the effects of bullying are the same on refugee teens. Finally, this research would have benefited from a gender comparison. Syrian teens female’s lives are very different from their male counterparts. We may find differences in discrimination (as females with hijabs are a more visible minority) and differences in acculturation strategy as mobility between gender could impact how they integrate. Due to the limited scope of this study, I was unable to incorporate an analysis of gender, however, any assessment of refugee integration that does not include a gender analysis would be incomplete.
References


IRCC. 2019. Syrian Refugees – Monthly IRCC Updates. Immigration, Refugees and


### Appendix 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
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*For 5 out of the 15 participants it was unclear from the interview data when their families arrived; imputing from other sources of data, these are the best estimates.

### Appendix 2

**AT START OF INTERVIEW [consent process]**

1. Thank participant; Introduce ourselves.
2. Explain that the study focuses on newcomer parents and teenagers.
3. Explain that we are interviewing you (the teen) because your parent has consented to be in our study and consented to your participation. Each mother and teen is asked to do 3 interviews and surveys about their migration and experiences of family and resettlement over the course of 3 years.
4. Though we expect each conversation to take approximately 60 minutes, they can be as short or long as you desires.
5. You can quit at any time, or skip questions you feel uncomfortable answering.
6. If any one member of the mother/teen dyad decides to withdraw, data for both will be removed. You may also change you minds after the interview is concluded and if you get in touch with us afterwards, we will do our best to remove data for both mother and teen, though that may be difficult once it has been made anonymous and compiled with information from the other people we are interviewing.

7. Some of the issues we discuss may be painful and we will be sensitive to that. The goal of the study is to help create policies and systems of support for newcomers to Canada like you.

8. Participation does not come with any personal benefit other than a $20 gift card in honor of your time.

9. We work for the University of Toronto, not the government, but our study is funded by the government.

10. Only we, the researchers, will have access to your personal responses. We will not use any real names. What is shared with us will be kept confidential with the following exceptions: we will report any evidence of child (persons under 18 years of age) maltreatment to the appropriate agency as required by law. However, this has never happened before. The University ethics review team may make sure we follow the ethics review process by examining our procedures and data.

11. Nonetheless, it is possible that certain characteristics about your life (number of siblings, etc.) may be recognizable to people you know, even when fake names are attached.

12. We will pause frequently to allow for questions.

13. We reiterate that participating in the university study will have no effect on your residency in Canada. It will not affect relationships with any center, agency or school.

14. After the study is done, we will make the results available (but not with any names or their actual voice recordings) via a project website and through academic publications.

15. Do you still wish to participate?

We will record their responses as follows:

**CASE ID number:**

**Agrees to participate:**

YES NO
Interview Guide - Teens

"Thank you for agreeing to do this interview."

“First, I’d like to ask a few simple questions about your family. Remind me, how many siblings do you have?” [if needed, ask participant to list in detail their ages/gender]

"This next series of questions asks about your life before and after moving to Canada."

A. Tell me the story of how you left Syria:
[probes: where did you first go when you left Syria? How did you end up in Canada? Sponsorship [Government? Private?]]

1. How were things when you first arrived to Canada?
2. In what ways are things better since you first arrived? In what ways are things more difficult?
3. Are you currently enrolled in school? If yes, what kind of school do you attend? How is it going?
   [probes: any difficulties? language? specific classes?]
4. Do you do any kinds of work inside or outside the home right now? Tell me more:
5. Tell me about your work goals: what do you hope to do for your job someday? Why? Have you shared this with your parents? What do your parents think about this?
6. Tell me about things you enjoy in your life (hobbies, fun, and leisure). Has this changed since Syria?
7. Aside from your family, do you spend time with other people here in Canada? Friends?
   [probes: Have you been able to make friends here? How?]
8. Is this different than back in Syria? How so?
9. Are you still in communication with friends from Syria? Say more:
10. Tell me about your relationship to religion in Syria. Was religion part of your upbringing? If yes, how?

11. Has your relationship to religion changed since coming to Canada? Have you been able to maintain the practices that are important to you?
"In this next series of questions, I'd like to ask more about your family."

13. Tell me more about your family in Canada. Tell me about those not with you in Canada:
14. Tell me about your mother. How do you feel is she doing these days?
   [probes: What is your relationship like? What disagreements do you have?]
15. Have you noticed a change in your mother since coming to Canada? If yes, what?
   [probes: What do you think is the biggest difficulty she is facing today? What do think she is proud of? What makes her happy?]
16. [if relevant] Tell me about your father. How do you feel he is doing these days?
   [probes: What is your relationship like? What disagreements do you have?]
17. Have you noticed a change in your father since coming to Canada? If yes, what?
   [probes: What do you think is the biggest difficulty he is facing today? What do think he is proud of? What makes him happy?]
18. Tell me about your siblings. How are they doing right now?
   Repeat: for sibling X
   Repeat for sibling Y
   Repeat for sibling Z
19. Tell me about your youngest sibling. How is s/he doing?
20. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your family?

"In this next series of questions, I'd like to ask you more about school."

21. Tell me about your schooling experience in Syria. Did you like going to school?
22. Tell me about your schooling after you first left Syria.
23. Do you like school right now? Why? Why not?
24. What do you hope for yourself this year in school?

"In this next series of questions, I'd like to ask about your impressions of Canada:"

25. What did you think of Canada before you arrived? Had you heard anything from others (stereotypes, ideas, warnings) about Canada?
26. When you first arrived to Canada, what were your initial impressions? Were they different than what you expected? Have your first impressions changed?
27. When you hear someone say "Canadian" to describe someone (a person/a family), whom do you think they are describing? To you, what does a Canadian look like?
28. When you hear someone say "foreigner" to describe someone, whom do you think they are describing? To you, who is described as a foreigner in Canada?
29. How do you view Canadian mothers? Canadian fathers? Canadian teenagers?
30. Are there things you have seen in Canada that you are surprised about? Things that you like? Things that you dislike?

"In this next series of questions, I'd like to ask about troubles you may have experienced."

31. Have you had any difficult or negative experiences so far in Canada? Tell me about that experience.
32. Have you ever felt you were treated unfairly because of who you are? Tell me about that.
   [probes: for the way you look, your language, accent, status, because born outside of Canada?]
33. What concerns do you have about your future? Why?
34. What things do you most miss from life before you moved to Canada?
35. How often do you worry about how your family will pay the bills? What are your biggest concerns about money right now?
36. Are you happy where you are living?
   [probes: If yes, why? If no, why?; what kind of troubles are in your building/street/neighbourhood]
37. If you have trouble with your schoolwork, with whom would you talk? How do you think you might get help for that?
38. If you have trouble with others at school, who would you talk to? How do you think you might get help for that?
39. With whom can you talk when things are difficult for you? Is there anyone here in town? How about people who do not live here -- through phone, texting, or other means?
40. If it was possible, would you want to return to Syria? To visit Syria again? To stay in Syria permanently?
41. How do you think your future in Canada will be? How much control do you feel that you have over your future? How about your family's future in Canada? What are your hopes for your family?
42. Would you want to settle in Canada permanently? If not, what other country else?
43. How much do you feel like you matter to others here in the community? To Canada?
44. How are you doing these days? What things are most difficult for you?
45. What are you most proud of?
Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us. The last part of this interview asks you to complete this survey:

As we mentioned at the beginning of the interview, this is the first in a series of interviews we would like to conduct with you. The next interview will be about a year from now it will be shorter, as we will not need to repeat questions about your background.

- Are you still ok with doing another interview then?
- How would you like us to contact you to arrange that interview?
Meet the Authors

Mohamed Afify is currently in his final year of University and completing the Sociology specialist and Political science minor undergraduate degree. Over the past three years, Mohamed has been a member of the Refugee Integration Stress and Equity team at the University of Toronto. Mohamed initially got involved with the program through a summer research opportunity program (ROP) where he was hired as a research assistant in 2018. In 2019, Mohamed received the UofT Excellence Award in the Social Sciences and Humanities department. This helped Mohamed nourish his passion for research and focus on his interests related to the field. After completing the final iteration of his research project, which he started in 2018, he developed a passion for independent research. Upon graduation in the spring, Mohamed hopes to take some time off and decide whether he would like to further his passion for research by pursuing a master’s degree in public policy or attend law school.

Brittany Stout is in her senior year at the University of Toronto and is double majoring in Criminology, Law & Society as well as Political Science. In addition to her participation and involvement as a senior associate in the Sociology and Criminology Academic Society, Brittany volunteers with the University Accessibility department. While her research interests are quite extensive, she is most passionate about criminal justice, prison reform, human rights as well as forensics and forensic psychology. Following her participation in the summer session of the carceral seminar ‘Walls to Bridges’, which helps break down barriers between incarcerated students and outside individuals, Stout plans to continue to volunteer within the community and gain increased professional experience in the legal field before pursuing a graduate degree in law. After her graduation in 2020, Stout’s goal is to utilize her degree to further pursue a career in human rights law in an effort to defend and advocate for the rights of the most vulnerable individuals.

Claudia Marszalek is a University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM) graduate. She has acquired an honours undergraduate degree in social sciences, specifically, a specialist in the Criminology, Law, and Society program, and a major in the Sociology program. Sociology and Criminology has fascinated Claudia since she was a little girl. Before entering university, her mental health positionality and life circumstances affected her severely. Claudia overcame her setbacks and pushed herself, and academic work, more than she ever believed she could. During Claudia’s academic career, she developed exceptional knowledge on the discourse and field of criminology and has grown to become passionate about particular
topics in criminology such as policing, the correctional field, digital surveillance, and Indigenous socio-legal culture and history. The autonomy at UTM allowed her to showcase her knowledge and ambitions to bridge formal and informal research in the criminological field. To extend her interest in criminology, Claudia has enrolled in a Master of Criminology program in the United Kingdom. This will pave an opportunity for her to conduct her own research that will contribute to contemporary literature.

**Sierra Fonseca** is an undergraduate student in her third-year at the University of Toronto Mississauga. She is on the path of completing her Bachelor's degree with a double major in Sociology and Criminology. She has continuously strived to excel in her schooling with the goal of becoming a lawyer. Helping the community is one of her many goals. She is also a continuous volunteer with the Accessibility Note-Taker Program. She strives to excel in everything that she does and has been described as reliable, dedicated, motivated, and as having a strong work ethic. She hopes to continue learning as well as to educate others and to engage in more opportunities to share the knowledge that she has acquired throughout her schooling.

**Grace Kwan** is a graduating Sociology and Professional Writing & Communication student at the University of Toronto and incoming Sociology MA student at Simon Fraser University. She researches and writes about sociopolitical issues through the lenses of gender, race, and nationhood. Her graduate research undertakes precariousness in Canadian migrant labour with a feminist and antiracist focus. Grace’s writing can be read on online publications such as Necessary Fiction and The Thirlyby, where she is a regular contributor. Her collection of creative nonfiction stories, *Prelude & Other Stories*, is forthcoming from Life Rattle Press.

**Destiny Luo** is a fourth-year Criminology, Law, and Society major at the University of Toronto Mississauga, with a secondary major in Professional Writing and Communication. She has previously contributed to “The Society: Sociology and Criminology Undergraduate Review” as a part of the editorial board for the journal’s second volume. Through her time as an undergraduate student, she has developed an interest in studying the inequitable ways that the Canadian criminal justice system handles members of marginalized communities. After graduating in June 2020, Destiny hopes to apply her skills in research and writing towards addressing racial and socioeconomic inequalities that are present within and exacerbated by the criminal justice system, whether as a journalist, lawyer, or in the field of policy making.
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