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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Assessing excellence in community-based research: Lessons from research with Syrian refugee newcomers

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Abstract

In this article, we critically reflect on three Syrian refugee research projects that were conducted simultaneously in Ontario, Canada, in order to: (1) strengthen the community system of support for refugee newcomers; (2) address social isolation of Syrian parents and seniors; and (3) promote wellbeing of Syrian youth. Our purpose in this article is to demonstrate a tangible way of assessing research projects which claim to be community-based, and in so doing gain a deeper understanding of how research can be a means of contributing to refugee newcomer resilience. Our assessment of the three studies was done through the reflective lens of the Community Based Research Excellence Tool (*CBRET*). *CBRET* is a reflective tool designed to assess the quality and impact of community-based research projects, considering the six domains of community-driven, participation, rigour, knowledge mobilisation, community mobilisation and societal impact. Our assessment produced four main lessons. The first two lessons point to the benefit of holistic emphasis on the six categories covered in the *CBRET* tool, and to adaptability in determining corresponding indicators when using *CBRET*. The last two lessons suggest that research can be pursued in such a way that reinforces the rescue story and promotes the safety of people who arrive as refugees. Our lessons suggest that both the findings and the process of research can be interventions towards social change. The diversity of the three case examples also demonstrates that these lessons can be applied to projects which focus on both individual-level and community-level outcomes.

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Keywords:

Community-based research; refugee newcomers; refugee resettlement; research excellence

Introduction

A community-based approach to research aspires to engage community members in a way that will lead to their wellbeing and effect positive social change. By researching ‘with’, not ‘on’, vulnerable populations, advocates of community-based research emphasise capacity-building and agency of community members in addressing pressing issues that affect their lives. But how do research partners assess whether they have delivered on this promise? More specific to this article, how is this assessment done when researching with refugee newcomers?

The purpose of this article is to critically reflect on three Syrian refugee research projects through the lens of the Community Based Research Excellence Tool (*CBRET*). *CBRET* is a reflective assessment tool for assessing the quality and impact of community-based research projects in relation to the six domains of community-driven, participation, rigour, knowledge mobilisation, community mobilisation, and societal impact (Ochocka, Janzen & Stobbe 2018). *CBRET* has been piloted across Canada and internationally.

The three projects involving Syrian refugee newcomers were conducted simultaneously in Ontario, Canada, in order to: (1) strengthen the community system of support for refugee newcomers; (2) address social isolation of Syrian parents and seniors; and (3) promote wellbeing of Syrian youth. Our intent was to demonstrate a tangible way of assessing research projects which claim to be community-based, and in so doing gain a deeper understanding of how research can be a means of contributing to refugee newcomer resilience.

The article begins by describing the three research projects. *CBRET* is then defined and its theoretical underpinnings and implementation reviewed before using *CBRET* to assess the extent to which the three projects were community-based in promoting refugee wellbeing and empowerment. Finally, the article reflects on the implications for future community-based research in promoting favourable conditions for people who are vulnerable, including refugee newcomers.

The Syrian Newcomer Projects

Three concurrent research studies related to Syrian refugee newcomers were led by the Centre for Community Based Research during 2016–2017. The Centre for Community Based Research is an independent, non-profit research organisation located on the University of Waterloo campus in Waterloo Region, Canada. Waterloo Region is a mid-sized urban centre (about 0.6 million) of three cities and four townships in southwestern Ontario. This community was seen to be a promising case study, given the presence of a well-established and functional newcomer support infrastructure (Janzen, Walton-Roberts & Ochocka, 2012; Janzen et al. 2012) led by the Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership (WRIP). The region is also one of 36 Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) communities in Canada equipped to receive government assisted refugees. Waterloo Region received at least 1630 Syrian refugees between November 2015 and the end of January 2017, an increase of about 250 percent over previous years (IRCC 2017). By the end of January 2017, Canada had resettled 40 081 Syrian refugees, setting the record for the total number of refugees resettled in a calendar year and surpassing the previous record in 1980 during the Indochinese refugee movement (UNHCR 2017).

Given such unprecedented numbers of refugee arrivals, the federal immigration department (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada – IRCC) launched a multi-pronged research strategy. One strategy was to partner with an academic funder, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), and issue a targeted call for rapid academic research with Syrian refugees. Another IRCC strategy was to issue a request for proposals for research studies to identify, test, analyse and compare innovative approaches that showed potential to improve integration outcomes for Syrian refugees. We discussed these opportunities with the local immigration partnership (WRIP) and with a group of key refugee gatekeepers. These community stakeholders supported the idea of developing three research applications, one for the joint IRCC-SSHRC grant and two for the IRCC call on Syrian parents/seniors and Syrian youth. All three applications were successful, and each was about CA\$25,000–\$30,000 in monetary value. These three projects are described in more detail below.

STUDY 1: COMMUNITY SYSTEM OF REFUGEE SUPPORT

A ten-month research study was conducted in Waterloo Region between September 2016 and June 2017. The purpose of the research was to collaboratively explore the disruptive impact of the recent Syrian refugee influx on the way local communities support newcomers. This was done in order to: (1) determine innovations in how local communities could better support refugees, and then (2) determine how public policy could reinforce those innovations. The project was funded through the targeted joint IRCC-SSHRC research call.

The study was developed and guided in consultation with a steering committee of local non-government and government organisations/departments. Using a system change analytical framework (Trickett 2009), the study's main research questions explored the disruptive impact of the Syrian influx on the vision, structure and process of the local refugee support system. Four mixed-method approaches were used to obtain answers to these questions from multiple stakeholder perspectives: (1) a review of local media and organisational documents; (2) semi-structured interviews with 11 key informants who provided a 'balcony level' view of the local response; (3) an online survey completed by 38 individuals and organisations active in the local response; and (4) three focus groups involving 14 purposively sampled participants representing leading organisations in the local response. Research results were presented to and discussed at three local community forums and with about 50 federal policy-makers in Ottawa.

STUDY 2: SYRIAN PARENTS AND SENIORS

The purpose of this three-month project was to explore how to reduce social isolation for Syrian parents and caregivers who stay at home with their children and for Syrian older adults. The study had four main objectives: (1) to provide the opportunity for Syrian refugee parents and older adults to identify barriers and challenges related to Syrian integration in the community; (2) to provide the opportunity for service provider organisations and religious/community leaders to reflect on issues of social isolation and social integration for the Syrian community as a whole; (3) to support Syrian parents and older adults to conduct, analyse and present research with other researchers; and (4) to develop recommendations for solutions to reduce social isolation among Syrian refugee parents and older adults.

Several community organisations in Waterloo Region helped to develop and guide this project by participating on the Steering Committee. We also hired, trained and supported two Syrian adults (one mother and one father) and one university student fluent in both

Arabic and English. These community researchers assisted in data gathering, analysis and dissemination. They also provided critical feedback on the study processes and deliverables during weekly research team meetings and monthly steering committee meetings. Regarding methods, we spoke with 57 individuals through focus groups and interviews (38 Syrian mothers and fathers; 8 older adults and 11 service providers/community leaders), all in Waterloo Region. The research team presented research findings, including eight new interventions/models, to a group of over 80 people, including Syrian refugee parents, older adults and service providers at a community celebration on 25 March 2017 at Kitchener City Hall.

STUDY 3: SYRIAN YOUTH

The purpose of this three-month study was to explore solutions with Syrian refugee youth regarding their issues and challenges, which were emerging as priority concerns. The study had three main objectives: (1) to provide opportunities for Syrian refugee youth to identify research priorities related to their situations; (2) to train and support Syrian refugee youth to conduct and analyse research with and relating to their peers; and (3) to identify possible solutions to the key challenges that Syrian refugee youth faced when integrating into their new communities.

The main research questions were organised according to three priority areas that reflected the major challenges that Syrian youth faced in Canada: school integration, family responsibilities and mental health. The project hired, trained and supported four youth as community researchers, three of whom were originally from Syria and one from Iraq. All project activities were guided by the same joint 19-person steering committee with study 2. The Research Team gathered data through focus groups in Waterloo Region, Windsor, London, Ottawa and Greater Toronto (GTA), with a total of 75 Syrian refugee youth. Most focus groups were held face-to-face in secondary schools, community organisations and other youth-friendly venues (e.g. coffee shop), while two were held via Skype and teleconference. All focus groups were conducted in Arabic, each by two community researchers. Research results were presented at the community celebration described in study 2.

Community-Based Research Excellence Tool (CBRET)

CBRET was developed following a National Summit (funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada) titled 'Pursuing Excellence in Collaborative Community-Campus Research'. The 2014 Summit was attended by leading Canadian practitioners of community-based research who worked in diverse university, government and community settings. Summit discussions generated a list of 'indicators of excellence' for conducting community-based research, which were subsequently organised into an assessment tool that was piloted and further refined by Canadian and international researchers and their community partners (see CCBR 2019 for more details about the Summit and the development of *CBRET*).

CBRET was developed to fill a perceived gap. As we detail elsewhere (Janzen, Ochocka & Stobbe 2016), our intention was to develop a shared, yet implicit, theory of change to underpin community-based research projects. Commonly used in the field of program evaluation, a theory of change is an explicit model of how the actions within a social intervention (i.e. its activities) contribute to a chain of impact (i.e. anticipated outcomes) (Funnell & Rogers 2011). Research can be viewed as social intervention; not only the findings of research but

also its processes inform social innovation and change (Kemmis & McTaggart 2005). But what underlying theory of change supports such an understanding of research? While many describe the principles, values and ideologies underpinning community-based research (briefly reviewed below), to our knowledge there is no explicit theory of change within the community-based research literature.

In developing *CBRET*, our ambitious goal was to offer a generic theory of change for research that claims to be community-based. Consistent with other theories of change, it would function to: (1) clarify what makes research distinctly community-based; (2) provide a roadmap to implementing community-based research; and most importantly for this article (3) be useful in evaluating the quality of a community-based research project. The challenge was to develop a theory of change that was sufficiently comprehensive to capture the many distinctive elements of community-based research, yet generic and flexible enough to adapt to the uniqueness of individual research projects (see Janzen, Ochocka & Stobbe 2016 for a more detailed review of *CBRET*'s theory of change). Below we briefly describe the theoretical underpinnings of *CBRET* and how it is practically implemented.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The term 'community-based research' is emerging as a common descriptor of research that seeks both to challenge and provide an alternative to externally led and expert-driven research. The term is gaining traction in Canada (Neufeldt & Janzen 2020; Travers et al. 2008) and globally, as evidenced by the establishment of the UNESCO Chair in Community-based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education (GUNI 2015). A variant term, 'community-based participatory research', is used more frequently in the United States (Israel et al. 2005; Minkler & Wallerstein 2008). Other similar terms are used, including (but not limited to) action research (e.g. Stringer 2007), community-engaged scholarship (e.g. Kajner 2015) and participatory action research (e.g. Kemmis & McTaggart 2005).

Regardless of terminology, and after decades of practice, a community-based approach to research is becoming mainstream in many institutions of higher education and community organisations around the world (Hall, Tandon & Tremblay 2015). Below we identify three hallmarks of community-based research: community-driven, participatory, and action-orientated. These hallmarks draw on Israel et al. (1998) and on our own collective practice at the Centre for Community Based Research (400 projects over 38 years) (see also Strand et al. 2003 and Wiebe & Taylor 2014 for comparable descriptors). Combined, they incorporate perspectives from diverse world regions across the Global North, Global South and Indigenous communities (Ochocka & Janzen 2014).

Community-driven is a hallmark of community-based research that recognises the pre-eminence of the community member's agenda over that of the researcher. It stresses that research should be responsive to the community context and be practically relevant to those most affected by the research. Community members should gain voice and choice through the research process (Smith 2012), with the research drawing on ways of knowing that resonate with them (Kemmis & McTaggart 2005). This hallmark draws on Indigenous research traditions in which research processes promote community self-determination (Kovach 2015; Wilson 2008).

Participatory emphasises that community members and researchers share control of the research agenda through active and reciprocal involvement in the research design, implementation and dissemination (Hall 1975; Nelson et al. 1998). It draws on the

participatory research tradition of the Global South which acknowledges that, when people are conscious of their situation and the power that oppresses them, they can collectively work towards emancipation and a better future (Fals Borda 1987; Freire 1970). An emphasis on equitable participation assumes engagement of committed activists and other ‘decisive stakeholders’ who are central to the research issue, and who may or may not have had previous experience in research activities (Chaudhary, Dhar & Tandon 1989).

Action-oriented honours the so-called action research tradition of the Global North that is frequently associated with Kurt Lewin. This research tradition emphasises progressive change through successive reflective action cycles (Lewin 1948, 1951), that is, the research results in practical outcomes in the lives of participants (Stringer 2007). An action-orientation therefore views research as social intervention where both the process and the results of the research are useful to community members in making positive social change and in promoting social equity (Kemmis & McTaggart 2005; Ochocka & Janzen 2014).

Community-based research is linked to social innovation as diverse stakeholders are engaged to creatively tackle pressing societal issues (Hankivsky 2012; Ochocka & Janzen 2007). Another way of thinking about community-based research relates to the function of research: what goals does research fulfil? Community-based research functions at three levels: to produce knowledge, to mobilise knowledge, and to mobilise communities. These three functions are described in turn below.

Knowledge production: As with all research, community-based research extends knowledge through systematic investigation. Within community-based research, knowledge is co-produced as both community members and researchers are engaged in designing and conducting research for knowledge generation (Hall 2011; Stoecker & Tryon 2009). Community-based research recognises community members as knowledge-rich partners, offering their experiential and practical knowledge to complement theoretical knowledge held by outside experts (Heron & Reason 1997; Ochocka, Janzen & Nelson 2002). Such an approach responds to fundamental issues of fairness and equity; ‘knowledge democracy’ is advanced as community members are seen as full partners in research that impacts their lives (de Sousa Santos 2006; Hall 2011). Such an approach also has epistemological implications in challenging the exclusivity of conventional Western scientific norms (e.g. objectivity, validity, replicability and reliability) while privileging the assumptions of stakeholders, who may have alternative ways of knowing beyond Western norms of what constitutes evidence (Visvanathan 2009).

Knowledge mobilisation: Community-based research also functions to activate knowledge for use within society (Levesque 2008). Research findings are disseminated and communicated in strategic and creative ways that inform and motivate various audiences to transform society within their respective spheres of influence (Hall 2011; Hall, Tandon & Tremblay 2015). Following Phipps (2011), knowledge mobilisation includes products developed and disseminated by researchers (producer push) and requested by end users (user pull), as well as events where researchers exchange research findings with community members, policy-makers and others (knowledge exchange).

Community mobilisation: Finally, community-based research is a relational exercise in that it enables diverse stakeholders to work together in new ways. Community-based research therefore functions to initiate community engagement and enhance social movements in a way that serves to maximise research utilisation (Kemmis & McTaggart 2005; Small & Uttal

2005). In other words, research produces not only a vision for future collective action but also builds a sense of community and enables people to work towards that vision (Stringer 2007).

Taken together, these three hallmarks and three functions represent the foundational theoretical underpinnings of *CBRET*. As can be seen in Figure 1, the *CBRET* framework includes three main components (i.e. research engagement, rigour, and impact), which are further divided into six categories corresponding to the three hallmarks (in red) and the three functions (in blue) of community-based research. The ordering of the main components is important as it emphasises a belief that both the design quality (rigour) and ultimate research utility (impact) of community-based research are largely determined by how well the research is driven by and equitably involves those stakeholders who lives are effected by the issue under study (engagement).

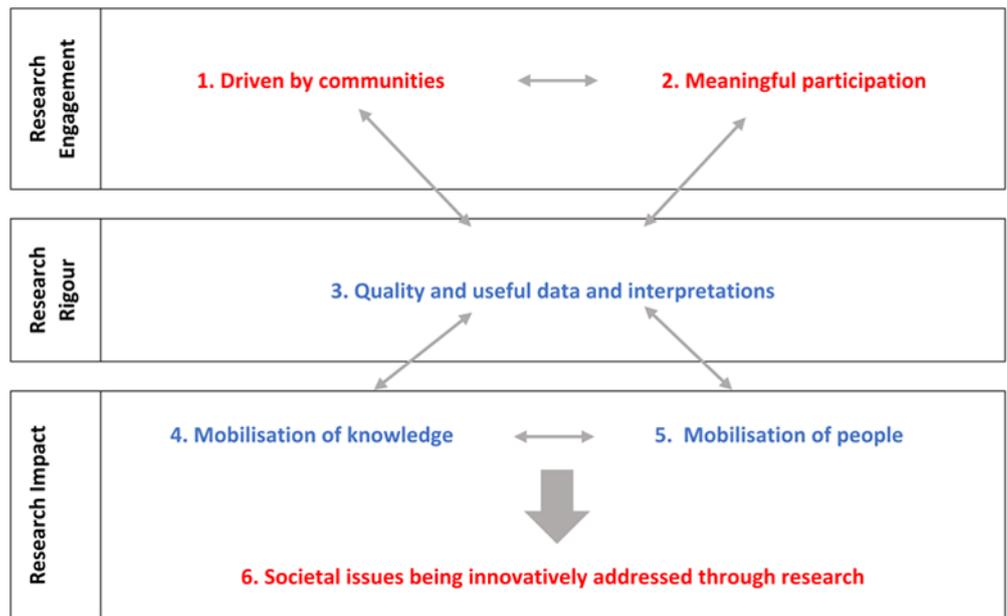


Figure 1 *CBRET* Theoretical Framework

The three main components and corresponding six categories outlined in Figure 1 represent the outcome domains of a community-based research project’s theory of change. That is, implementing research in a way that is community-based (the research activities) should make a difference in how the research-engaged stakeholders produce rigorous evidence and ultimately impact society (the research outcomes). Traditionally, assessing the quality of a given research study focused primarily on standards related to rigour, whether through the lens of positivism (e.g. Campbell & Stanley 1963) or alternative paradigms such as naturalistic inquiry (e.g. Lincoln & Guba 1985). However, recently, there has been growing interest in assessing scholarly inquiry in terms of its impact on society (e.g. Stoecker 2005) and how well it has engaged community members (e.g. Curwood et al. 2011). Our *CBRET* framework brings elements of these three assessment dimensions together in a single, unified theory of change.

PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION

The Community-Based Research Excellence Tool (*CBRET*) is a reflective tool used to assess the quality and impact of community-based research projects and proposals. It can be used either individually or collectively, formally or informally, and by people internal or external to

the research partnership. *CBRET* can also be used for the purposes of planning, monitoring and evaluating research studies conducted with communities.

CBRET assesses community-based research excellence according to six categories (see Figure 1 above). Each of the six categories are divided into two or three sub-categories, each with a list of sample indicators. For example, the category ‘driven by communities’ has three sub-categories: (1) evidence of community entry being engaging and relevant; (2) evidence of those most affected by the issue under study control the research agenda; and (3) evidence that research is aligned with community norms, needs and capacities; each having seven to eight sample indicators and space for listing additional indicators. Providing *sample* indicators rather than *prescribed* indicators within each sub-category stresses that *CBRET* is not a standardised tool. Instead, *CBRET* instructions encourage users to adapt the tool to the unique circumstances and context of each community-based research project.

A research project or proposal can be evaluated within each *CBRET* sub-category in one or both of two ways: (1) quantitatively by using a nine-point scale (from poor to exceptional) to rate those indicators that apply; and (2) qualitatively by writing out the project’s or proposal’s key strengths and weaknesses related to the indicators of that sub-category. The final *CBRET* assessment page provides opportunity to tally all scores across the six categories (when using *CBRET* quantitatively) as well as opportunity to add three open-ended appraisals (when using *CBRET* qualitatively). In the next section we use *CBRET* to assess the three recent Syrian research studies in which we participated.

Assessing the Three Projects

This section assesses the three community-based research projects mentioned above using the *CBRET* theoretical framework as a reflective lens. This was a qualitative self-assessment done by the authors of this article after the completion of the projects and was not part of a systematic project evaluation. We adapted *CBRET* sample indicators that were deemed appropriate for our three studies (summarised in Table 1 in the Appendix). We also highlighted key strengths and weaknesses of each project within each of the three domains of excellence (engagement, rigour, impact). Studies 2 and 3 were assessed together because both projects were implemented concurrently and by a joint research team.

RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT:

All three projects were strong in terms of facilitating a community-driven process in which stakeholders meaningfully participated even if short timelines were limiting.

Regarding strengths, all three studies engaged key community-defined gatekeepers in the research exploration during the proposal writing stage. In Study 1 we brought news of the joint IRCC-SSHRC rapid research call to the Refugee Services Action Group of the Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership. This Action Group was made up of the various local refugee serving organisations who agreed to respond to the call for proposals. The group helped to shape the research purpose and questions and responded to drafts of the research proposal. Selected members of this community group were also formally listed as co-applicants on this academic grant application and later became actively involved on the project steering committee. In Studies 2 and 3, we approached several Syrian community members and their supporters as soon as the IRCC call for proposals was issued. Initial contacts were made through a local Masjid, a Muslim service organisation, local immigration and settlement organisations, and high schools serving Syrian youth. These key individuals helped to organise

two exploratory meetings: one at a private sponsorship organisation (with representatives from Syrian youth, teachers and youth organisations) and one at the local Masjid (with a number of Syrian parents, faith leaders and service providers). An Arabic-speaking university student was involved as a translator. These two gatherings were key in building interest in the research studies, in shaping the research purpose and activities, and in reviewing proposal drafts (all within a two-week period).

All three projects worked collaboratively with community stakeholders. They placed high value on experiential knowledge and on community input to guide research activities. The collaborative structure included cross-stakeholder steering committees that served as a mechanism for ongoing community input into the research agenda. Each committee acted as project ‘conscience’ – reacting to ethical challenges, suggesting strategies, and guiding each research step and product. Community stakeholders contributed to recruiting research participants and to disseminating research findings (e.g. co-organising a community forum, crafting a policy brief). In Studies 2 and 3, we merged the steering committee with the research team, benefiting from the synergy and from efficiency during the studies’ short duration. Several research partners stated that they felt a shared ownership of the research processes and outcomes as well as a great ‘synergy’ in the teamwork.

In Studies 2 and 3 we shared financial resources with the community, allocating 35 percent of funding to community researchers. Six community researchers were hired, trained, supported and mentored. These individuals, suggested by community gatekeepers, were hired based on their ability to communicate with and activate the Syrian community. Their research skills were secondary in the selection criteria as the project provided them with solid research training and ongoing support, both individually and as a group. We managed to earn their trust to the extent that some shared personal painful experiences and ongoing struggles with us. Students on the research team who spoke Arabic were helpful in enhancing community researchers’ understanding of research concepts and the Canadian job context.

When I first arrived and before I got my job [with organisation name], I was almost socially isolated. I did not know anyone here except our sponsor family and they are busy most of the time. When I got my job [with organisation name] I started meeting new people (Syrians and Canadians) and I started to feel that I am not alone in this new community.

– Community researcher

All three projects emphasised the importance of aligning research with community norms, needs and capacities. For example, each research team and steering committee meeting started with personal check-ins and with appropriate food. Each meeting also included reflections about overall project learnings and ongoing impacts on individual and community capacities. As a group, we collaboratively planned next steps and evaluated past activities. These regular discussions helped to identify cultural nuances and build trusting relationships that lasted beyond the project duration. For example, in Studies 2 and 3 we listened and addressed research challenges, honouring community ways of acting and knowing. One of the first hurdles that the researchers encountered was the hesitancy of participants in providing informed consent. We discussed numerous strategies to increase participants’ comfort and trust, such as holding the focus group in an informal settings (e.g. participants’ homes), using icebreaker activities and emphasising that there were no negative consequences to participating (e.g. that participating in the focus group would not threaten their family’s reputation or status in Canada). In addition, researchers noted that research participants were more likely to participate if they had a personal connection to the individual who invited them (e.g. a

leader at the mosque) and if the transportation was arranged for them in advance. Researchers also had to consider the time of day when organising focus groups, as many parents and older adults had language classes either in the morning or the afternoon. Other considerations for scheduling included timing of prayers, meals and children's schooling.

Regarding weaknesses, the most notable challenges were brought about by the short project durations, particularly in studies 2 and 3. The initial engagement with Syrian community members was rushed in building trust and in resonating with a range of culturally appropriate understandings. Representatives from the emerging local Syrian organisations were consequently not included on project steering committees. The research team overcame this challenge by building on existing trusting relationships in our local community and by applying experience from previous research conducted with refugees and immigrants (and in intercultural contexts). Another weakness was a lack of funder involvement on the steering committees. In studies 2 and 3 it was particularly unfortunate that no federal government representative was able to join the groups in order to be 'the face' of Canadian authority. Their inclusion would have helped to demystify the role of research in Canadian democracy for Syrian researchers and would have improved the effectiveness of knowledge mobilisation.

RESEARCH RIGOUR

All three projects produced meaningful and useful data and interpretations despite the existence of limitations.

In terms of strengths, all three projects chose research methods that were appropriate for the research purpose and research questions and captured the comprehensiveness of stakeholder perspectives. All three projects used multiple methods of data collection. Project 1 implemented both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (individual and focus group interviews) methods to gain both breadth and depth of opinion across the community. This combination of methods allowed for triangulation of stakeholder opinions, with positive response rates. Studies 2 and 3 used qualitative methods only (i.e. individual and focus group interviews), to which research participants responded very positively (all interviews were conducted in Arabic). In all three studies, the steering committees provided valuable advice in determining appropriate sampling criteria as well as respectful and effective participant recruitment strategies.

With regard to ethical practice, the cross-stakeholder steering committees played an ongoing role in discussing ethical issues, using community verifications of studies' results. In addition, study 1 was externally approved by the Community Research Ethics Office (CREO). This formal ethics review added an external check in following not only the three ethical principles of academic research in Canada (respect, welfare and justice) but also adding a fourth principle related to community benefits and harm (see CREO 2019).

Data analysis was linked to the study purpose and main research questions and involved diverse stakeholder perspectives. For all projects, triangulation analysis involved using multiple researchers to reduce the potential bias that can result when a single person conducts analysis. In study 1, data analysis occurred by method sequentially before cross-method analysis and relied on the steering committee to make suggestions of how to fill in data gaps. In studies 2 and 3, researchers first worked with Arabic translations and interpretations, using a common analysis template. In all studies, the research themes were first discussed by the research team before being verified by the steering committee and later by research participants at the

community forums. The combination of multiple methods and collaborative stages of data analysis strengthened research rigour and improved the trustworthiness of research findings.

There were also weaknesses in research rigour in the studies. In study 1, the survey distribution relied on the contact list of the local immigration partnership. While this list likely included the bulk of those most active in the local Syrian refugee response, there were others (particularly private sponsors) who could have been missed. As a result, the generalisation of survey results must be done cautiously. In addition, the study focused only on the opinions of people most active in supporting Syrian newcomers over a relatively short time period. A larger study over a longer period of time could have better understood the broader community's opinions. Studies 2 and 3 had very short timelines (three months), which limited the extensiveness of data collection and analysis. Data collection was intense and conducted within limited sites (mostly in Waterloo Region and in a few regions in Ontario). The transferability of study findings is therefore limited. Qualitative data analysis was also rushed, which led to a lack of theoretical depth. However, the overarching goal for these projects (which was to gain insights on new and alternative ways of supporting the integration of Syrian refugees in Canada) was met. Both studies suggested models of intervention grounded in the Syrian refugee experience and in collaboration with supporting stakeholders.

RESEARCH IMPACT

All three projects mobilised knowledge and community members, which produced short-term outcomes but has had limited long-term and policy impact to date.

All three projects demonstrated that research was not only used to create knowledge but to move knowledge into action. Research findings were shared widely, utilising strategies appropriate for the intended audiences. For example, the three studies (and their respective steering committees) combined forces on two different community events. First, research findings were shared and verified at a large community gathering at City Hall where Waterloo Region celebrated the one-year arrival of Syrian newcomers and the local community response. About 600 people and politicians attended and enjoyed the presentations, music and food. Included in this community celebration was a feedback session on study results attended by about 80 people. This session was an ideal convening moment to publicly hear and legitimise the key challenges faced by Syrian refugee youth and adults and for providing feedback on suggested models and interventions. All three projects delivered presentations at an 'Immigration Research Day' in Waterloo Region, organised by the Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership with the active involvement of a range of project community partners. In addition to these local events, study 1 also made numerous external presentations at immigration conferences and at the IRCC Ottawa offices to about 50 IRCC policy-makers.

Several written products were produced for various audiences. Final reports for all three studies were posted on the respective project websites and short research summaries were produced for research participants and public audiences. In addition, for study 1 a detailed nine-page policy brief was developed, with considerable input from the steering committee, and submitted to IRCC (Janzen & Ochocka 2017), and an academic journal article was written summarising project findings (Janzen, Ochocka & English Leis, under review). Finally, given the demand of requests for information related to all three studies, an online 'Syrian refugee research packet' was distributed through Centre for Community Based Research's e-news and website, providing links to the three projects' written products.

The mobilisation of people for short-term impact was also successful to a certain degree throughout the projects. For example, the three studies contributed to the aforementioned community celebration. The celebration reinforced a main finding of study 1 that resettlement of refugees in Waterloo Region was not the responsibility of one or two refugee organisations but of the whole community. This notion of a ‘resettlement community’ seems to be taking root as recently funded refugee projects in Waterloo Region have a strong emphasis on finding creative ways of engaging community members in refugee support (e.g. language classes in the workplace, youth involvement in community centres). We have also witnessed in the three projects an increased valuing of resettlement research that is done collaboratively, with research capacity built through stakeholder involvement. Generally, all three studies have contributed to deeper capacity for a settlement ‘learning community’ in Waterloo Region and have sparked a new research proposal to build evaluation capacity across the local settlement sector.

At the individual level, another tangible short-term outcome emerged when interacting with Syrian community members. Some individuals expressed feeling empowered as a result of their active involvement in working towards collective community change. Others started to value the Government of Canada’s approach of seeking input, engaging new partners and developing forward-looking strategies to improve newcomer outcomes. Studies 2 and 3 were especially valuable to community researchers as they gained confidence in their skills and abilities, earned valuable Canadian work experience, and built their personal and professional networks.

This project gave me the chance to work with passionate, hard-working and caring people who want to create a better community. I have been very lucky to be able to work on this project where every second of this job has been a unique learning experience that has helped me grow as a human. I am very thankful for all the learning, relationships and every moment I got to spend working on this project.

-- Community researcher

Longer term outcomes have been weaker to date. All three studies worked hard to create opportunities for Syrian newcomer families and their supporters to gather and learn. Still, the longer-term fruit of these efforts has been limited. In study 1, the ultimate goal of creating an innovative and strengthened local refugee support system that would be scalable and sustainable is still a work in progress. While the local immigration partnership has recently renewed conversations about how to leverage learnings from the Syrian influx, they have yet to establish a ‘new normal’ for the community’s refugee support system. In studies 2 and 3, the ultimate goal of informing new interventions for refugee newcomer youth and parents has been limited. Local community expectations were raised, but democratic change was not experienced by the people involved in these research projects.

Perhaps the greatest disappointment across the three studies relates to policy impact. It is unknown what policy impact studies 2 and 3 had and there is no evidence of any direct IRCC-funded programming changes. Despite the successful community forum (to which IRCC was invited but did not attend) and our direct follow-up to IRCC, it remains unclear whether IRCC delivered on its initial promise of using the research results to create new and alternative ways to support the successful resettlement and integration of Syrian newcomers in Canada. Study 1 was more successful in its policy efforts as the project had direct audience with policy-makers. For example, the study was one of many efforts across the country encouraging communities to close the gap between support received by government assisted refugees and that received by those who were privately sponsored. The Centre for Community

Based Research also was successful in a national proposal to the IRCC to build the evaluation capacity of refugee-serving organisations across the country (see: www.eval4refugee.ca). Still, many other recommendations outlined in the policy brief remain unaddressed.

Implications for Future Community-Based Research Assessment

In this section, we highlight four overarching learnings from our assessment that may be helpful for other community-based researchers. The first two lessons are more generic to the implementation of *CBRET*, while the second set of two lessons may be of interest to researchers working with refugee newcomer populations.

LESSONS RELATED TO IMPLEMENTING CBRET

The first lesson is to **actively pursue all *CBRET* categories** when assessing community-based research projects that aim to promote transformational social change. Indeed, the six categories (i.e. driven by community; meaningful participation of stakeholders; meaningful and useful data and interpretations; mobilisation of knowledge; mobilisation of people for action; and societal issues addressed through research) are interdependent, each relying on the other in creating momentum towards the desired social transformation. For example, study 1 demonstrated that Waterloo Region emerged from the Syrian influx with a stronger refugee support system. The research study, itself, can be seen as one small component in reaching that desired outcome by offering opportunity for systematic community reflection. But this outcome required researchers to make efforts to be community-driven, participatory and rigorous, and actively mobilise knowledge and the community members, all towards the goal of transforming a local refugee support system in which refugee newcomers would thrive. Conversely, the shortcomings we acknowledged through our *CBRET* self-assessment can be seen as limiting factors in maximising the research's potential to promote refugee resilience. This holistic emphasis supports Block et al.'s 2013 contention that refugee participation in research is not automatically empowering as it also requires a larger social transformation agenda.

This first learning also helped to unpack Stringer's (2007) claim that research can produce not only a vision for future collective action but can also be a direct intervention in enabling people to work towards that vision. The six *CBRET* categories produced concrete goals that community-based researchers can strive towards as they build sound evidence and an activist community through their research. Put differently, the categories can be seen as building blocks for social innovation as diverse stakeholders creatively tackle pressing societal issues (Hankivsky 2012; Ochocka & Janzen 2007). The three case studies show that these *CBRET* categories can apply equally to projects in which the unit of analysis is the direct lived experience of refugees, as it does to those studies which have a community-level unit of analysis for supporting refugee newcomers.

The second lesson is to value the **tailoring of *CBRET* sample indicators for each community-based research project**. The indicators developed for each of the six *CBRET* categories of community-based research excellence are to be seen as sample indicators rather than indicators that are prescribed to be used precisely. They encourage consideration of ways to advance the quality of community-based research, while allowing freedom for modification and expansion. The benefit of this adaptability in self-determining appropriate indicators is that the assessment is more likely to capture the unique context of each community-based

research project. The intention of *CBRET* is to assess the research process by using the sample indicators as reflective prompts. The adaptability of those prompts helps to capture project nuances. Such an ideographic (i.e. non-standardised) approach to assessment is consistent with naturalistic inquiry where the aim is to develop interpretations that are contextualised (i.e. not generalised) and afford deep insights of a particular setting (Lincoln & Guba 1985).

As an illustration, in our assessment of three case studies, we considered all 75 *CBRET* sample indicators, but only used 65 percent of them, some slightly adapted. We also developed new indicators that we thought were relevant to our specific project circumstances. For example, we added: (1) translators used in research explorations; (2) stakeholders responded to drafts of research proposals; and (3) greater capacity towards a resettlement 'learning community' in Waterloo Region. Our modifying and expanding of the sample *CBRET* indicators signifies that the assessment tool provides aspirational targets that require its users to be reflective agents who are able to adapt and interpret those targets within their understanding of what is important. There are those who suggest that, ideally, community-based research is an exercise in the democratisation of knowledge (e.g. de Sousa Santos 2008; Gaventa 1991; Hall 2011). While this notion of knowledge democracy is typically understood in the context of knowledge production (i.e. building evidence that values multiple ways of knowing), our contention is that knowledge democracy can also extend to assessment of how that knowledge is being produced. Having a reflexive tool that is tailored and adaptable to various contexts helps facilitate the cultural relevance of the reflection.

LESSONS RELATED TO RESEARCHING WITH REFUGEE NEWCOMERS

In addition to lessons related to the *CBRET* tool, we learned two lessons about researching with refugee newcomers. One is to **pursue research in such a way that reinforces the rescue story of people who arrive as refugees**. Research with refugee communities can be an intervention towards their resiliency. To do so, the uniqueness of the refugee experience (i.e. being forced to migrate for fear of persecution or death) must be considered as distinct from the settlement experience of other migrants (i.e. choosing to migrate in hope of a better life). Research can support refugee newcomers to make the shift from fleeing destruction to rebuilding and reclaiming life in a new home. This shift can be facilitated through collaborative research that helps to promote autonomy and rebuild capacity among people with refugee backgrounds (Mackenzie, McDowell & Pittaway 2007). It does so by reinforcing two key elements of the refugee self-rescue story: foregrounding a person's eligibility to exist (identity) and their ability to act (agency) (Kyriakides et al. 2018).

Our *CBRET* assessment sheds light on how collaborative research can reinforce the refugee rescue story according to these two key elements. Regarding identity, in all three studies, the Syrian newcomers were invited to be research participants contributing to their new identity; no longer refugees fleeing but permanent residents whose opinions matter in building Canadian society. Studies 2 and 3 extended this sense of new identity by providing new roles for Syrian newcomers as researchers, as steering community members and as forum participants. Regarding agency, all three studies provided opportunity for Syrian newcomers to be agents of change in helping to create new supports for newcomers. The hiring and training of Syrian newcomers as researchers in studies 2 and 3 was particularly profound, not only in providing newcomers with financial resources, but in building skills, self-confidence and self-efficacy. For some, the (admittedly brief) research experience was pivotal in securing future employment and education in Canada, and in increasing their ability to act in ways consistent

with pre-flight life. In short, the three research projects provided newcomers opportunity to assert their authority to be and act as ‘persons of self-rescue’ in pursuit of a life beyond refuge (Kyriakides et al. 2018).

A final lesson is to **pursue research that promotes safety for people who arrive as refugees**. The vulnerability of refugees as research participants is well documented. Potential sources of vulnerability include precarious legal status, unequal power relationships, low literacy rates, unfamiliarity with research and western consent procedures, emotional fatigue/distress in sharing personal stories, and mistrust/conflict within refugee communities (see Block et al. 2013; Clark-Kazak 2017; Mackenzie, McDowell & Pittaway 2007). Awareness of this vulnerability has given rise to articulation of ethical considerations in refugee research. For example, Clark-Kazak (2017) offers four guiding principles when researching with people in situations of forced migration: equity, right to determination, competence and partnership (principles which strikingly mirror the hallmarks of community-based research). Others offer strategies to conduct trauma-informed research when researching with individuals who have trauma histories, as many refugees have (Andrews, Pepler & Motz 2019; Mackenzie, McDowell & Pittaway 2007). The primary concern of these strategies is to promote the safety of refugee newcomers by recognising and appropriately responding to signs of trauma and by resisting retraumatising practices.

Our *CBRET* assessment points out both the pros and cons of how the three studies promoted refugee newcomer safety. On the negative side, studies 2 and 3 had no formal ethics review, given the funder-imposed short timelines. Instead, the projects were guided by a cross-stakeholder steering committee whose collective responsibility included acting as an ‘on-going ethics committee’ to offer insight into minimising harm and creating a positive and safe environment. While the committee composition was diverse, with members active in mitigating power differentials and building mutual trust, the absence of Waterloo’s emerging Syrian leadership on the committee represented a potential gap in identifying safety issues. To compensate, the diverse research teams provided a mechanism for encouraging a shared responsibility in promoting safety, not relying on the expertise of one or two researchers but relying on the collective – a collective which in studies 2 and 3 included those with lived refugee experience. Finally, formal project evaluations could have better teased out the extent to which the studies promoted refugee newcomer safety.

Conclusion

Community-based research can be defined as an approach ‘that involves active participation of stakeholders, those whose lives are affected by the issue being studied, in all phases of research for the purpose of producing useful results to make positive changes’ (Nelson, Ochocka, Griffin & Lord 1998, p. 12). While definitions like this found in the literature serve to highlight broad principles of conducting research, there is considerably less clarity about how to concretely evaluate the extent to which these aspirations have been met. The Community-Based Research Excellence Tool (*CBRET*) attempts to address this gap. It does so by offering a structured way to assess the quality and impact of research projects and proposals claiming to be community-based.

We used the theoretical framework of the *CBRET* tool to reflect on three research projects with Syrian refugee newcomers, led by the Centre for Community Based Research. Our intention was twofold. First, we wanted to demonstrate a comprehensive and generic framework for assessing community-based research projects. In addition, we wanted to gain

insights into how research could be a means of contributing to the resilience of people with refugee backgrounds.

Despite some limitations, the self-assessment did produce four main lessons. The first two lessons point to the benefit of a comprehensive, yet adaptable, reflexive tool such as *CBRET*. The last two lessons suggest that research can be pursued in such a way that reinforces the rescue story and promotes the safety of people who arrive as refugees. These lessons highlight the importance of ‘supportive relationships’, which are highly valued within community-based research (Ochocka, Moorlag & Janzen 2010). These lessons also suggest that both the findings and the process of research can be an intervention towards positive outcomes for vulnerable persons, including refugee newcomers.

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