Telling the story: Exploring the experiences of individuals impacted by the global refugee crisis

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Telling the Story:
Exploring the Experiences of Individuals Impacted by the Global Refugee Crisis

A Project Presented to

The Faculty of the Undergraduate College of Psychology & the Honors College
James Madison University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Bachelor of Science & Honors

by Hannah Pellegrino
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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Psychology, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Science and Honors College

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For the millions of hearts impacted by conflict, persecution, or disaster. For those who are forced to leave their homes out of fear and lack of safety. For those who are dedicated to making host communities places of peace, acceptance, and compassion.

The world has so much to learn from your stories.
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Telling the Story:

Exploring the Experiences of Individuals Impacted by the Global Refugee Crisis

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to bring awareness to lives impacted by the global refugee crisis and learn from those who work to aid these vulnerable populations every day. Communities all over the world are being impacted by migrating populations, and, the need for advocacy, education, and awareness remains vital. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports the world’s population includes more people forcibly displaced from their homes since the UNHCR began data collection on displaced persons in 1951 (UNHCR or PEW http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/10/05/key-facts-about-the-worlds-refugees/ , 2016). This translates into almost one in ten persons displaced worldwide (UNHCR, 2016). Persons being forced to leave their homes because of persecution and violent conflict are disproportionally represented in Middle East countries, with one of 20, or 5.6% displaced from their homes. This project contributed to increasing awareness about the millions of people impacted by the global refugee crisis to thereby improve community responses to welcoming newcomers.

As host communities experience shifting demographics and influxes of migrating populations, individuals who work, volunteer, and advocate to serve these populations become increasingly necessary. These individuals have the opportunity to interact with newcomers in unique and meaningful ways. Using a qualitative methodology, this study examined the interview responses of volunteers, aid workers, and advocates who dedicate their time to serve and aid the refugee population. More specifically, this study explored their view of advocacy and service; who or what inspired to pursue this work, what personal characteristics have inspired their work as advocates, and what stories and experiences have inspired them in this world. Trends relating to empathy,
purpose in life, and motivation to serve were of particular interest. In addition to these predetermined trends, emerging patterns and themes in their stories were identified. Interviewing these individuals revealed a beautiful thread of the rich narrative of human connection.

This project was motivated by two questions: What are the stories that have inspired the volunteers, aid workers, and advocates at the heart of the refugee crisis in their work? How are the themes of empathy, purpose in life, and motivation to serve represented in their stories? In order to explore these two questions, qualitative conversational interviews were conducted with individuals who work and serve displaced persons. Interviews were conducted in two primary locations; Valletta, Malta and Harrisonburg, Virginia. Connection and relationship are at the heart of humanity, and this project hopes to use the personal stories of inspiration told by the volunteers, aid workers, and advocates to shine a light on the experiences of those impacted by and addressing the refugee crisis in Malta and the United States.
Imagine

Inescapable danger has erupted in the place you call home, dismantling all aspects of security, familiarity, and livelihood. Suddenly walking to the market could mean walking through a warzone. Maybe the structure you once knew as home has become an unrecognizable pile of rubble. Perhaps access to food has become compromised, and it has been days since you and your family ate or drank clean water. Familiar sounds that once used to comfort you have been replaced with explosions, shrieks, and weeps of mourning. Each day becomes a question of survival, seeking security starts to feel like an impossible task. As the situation escalates and the life you once knew seems further and further away, staying starts to feel like more of a risk than fleeing. In the middle of the night, you and your family begin your flight; leaving absolutely everything behind. Getting away from the immediate danger is just the beginning of your journey. Risking everything for the hope finding safety for you and your loved ones again. If you are able to make it into a stable nation, sanctuary is not guaranteed and yet another arduous process of gaining status lies before you. This process could take months or even years, enduring crowded or even unsanitary living situations. For millions of individuals around the world today, this description has become their reality.

Overview of the Global Refugee Crisis

The 1951 United Nations Conference on the Status of Refugees and Stateless Persons defined a refugee as someone who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the
protection of that country” (UNHCR, 2012). Over the last six years, the number of individuals identified as refugees has risen consistently and dramatically. The total number of people who have been displaced from their homes is the highest it has been since the aftermath of World War II (UNHCR, 2016). Furthermore, the number of people being forced to leave their homes continues to increase. The latest report from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees identified 65.3 million people who were forcibly displaced from their homes during 2015, 5.8 million more individuals than the previous year (UNHCR, 2016). Individuals who are forcibly displaced include persons who are refugees, persons who are internally displaced, and persons who are seeking asylum. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees distinguishes between these statuses using the following definitions: asylum-seeker: an individual who is seeking international protection, internally displaced persons: an individual who seeks safety in other parts of their countries, refugee: an individual fleeing conflict or persecution. While these classifications differ slightly, all individuals who are forcibly displaced experience persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations.

Widespread violence and conflict impact a community in its entirety. In fact, the most vulnerable populations of a region are often the most severely impacted by violence and conflict. Consequently, women and children make up a significant proportion of forcibly displaced persons in the current crisis (UNHCR, 2016). Children below the age of 18 years old accounted for a little over half (51%) of the refugee population during the year 2015 (UNHCR, 2016). Not only do children make up a significant portion of the total number of displaced persons, but they often must navigate displacement on their own. In the 2015 report, the UNHCR identified 98,400 displaced children who were unaccompanied or separated (UNHCR, 2016). Typically, these children have experienced the death of one or both of their parents, violence or conflict in their homes, or extreme poverty.
Children, women, and men from all over the world have felt the impact of fear-inducing violent conflict.

These record breaking numbers of displaced persons result from ongoing and escalating conflicts around the world. Violent conflict throughout Iraq and Syria has impacted millions of people. The conflict in these two nations have produced almost a quarter of the total number of displaced persons around the world (Grandi, 2017). Additionally, numerous individuals have been uprooted by the major humanitarian crises throughout South Sudan, Yemen, and the Lake of Chad region of Africa (Grandi, 2017). Instability in Somalia and Afghanistan also contribute to the record number of people being driven away from their homes. The persistence and intensity of these conflicts leaves displaced persons with little hope of return, forcing them to seek new homes as refugees or asylum seekers.

Driven by desperation, fear, and a desire for a safer home, many individuals take extreme measures to escape the horrors of violence. Once forced to leave, many individuals end up in refugee camps or risk their lives to find safety in another country. These initial efforts to leave home are desperate actions of flight. In the camps, children face exploitation, women are at extreme risk for sexual abuse and violence, and all experience the pains of limited resources and shelter (Human, 2012). While refugee camps generally provide refuge and relief from previous circumstances, new challenges and traumas persist under the often harsh living conditions (Human, 2012). In order to get to a refugee camp, individuals generally must travel substantial distances. Whether by land and foot or by sea and boat, the journey to refuge often puts people in threat of great danger. In recent years, the number of individuals resorting to travel by boat has increased significantly (UNHCR, 2016). In particular, the rate of travel across the Mediterranean Sea into Europe has risen.

Since 2013, the UNHCR has reported a large increase in the number of refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea from Libya, Somalia and the Syrian Arab Republic with corresponding increases
in the number of deaths of refugees at sea. In search of safety and protection, throngs of individuals and families from the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa risk their lives by crossing the Mediterranean Sea into the Southern region of Europe. The voyage across the Mediterranean into Europe can be extremely dangerous. Displaced persons pack into small boats and set out for a multi-day trip across the Mediterranean Sea (Human, 2012). Typically, captained by smugglers, these poorly equipped boats are often lacking supplies, such as sufficient food, water, fuel and navigation equipment to complete journey comfortably or safely (Human, 2012). Consequently, the rides across the Mediterranean Sea are incredibly dangerous, even resulting in fatalities (Human, 2012). Between 2013 and 2016, over one million individuals arrived in Europe via boat voyages (UNHCR, 2016). During this time nearly 7,700 individuals lost their lives at sea or were reported missing (UNHCR, 2016). When boats capsize or go into distress, patrols from the Southern regions of Europe are called to provide assistance. Typically, these are patrols from Malta, Sicily, or Greece (Human, 2012).

Countries along the Southern region of Europe have been significantly impacted by the rising number of individuals embarking on these boat voyages. The countries of Malta, Albania, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Turkey, reported a significant increase in mid-year asylum levels, receiving 60,800 asylum requests during the first half of 2014. These countries have played an integral role in responding to the European refugee emergency and providing aid services or individuals seeking safety. The impact of this refugee crisis in Southern Europe has continued to impact these nations and the rest of continent (UNHCR, 2016). The small island nation of Malta has been significantly impacted by the refugee emergency.

**Community Response to the Refugee Population in Valetta, Malta**

Since 2002, Malta has been significantly impacted by this influx of individuals seeking protected status (Mainwaring, 2012). Malta’s membership in the European Union and unique geographic location are some of the main reasons it has become such an important destination for
those searching for refuge. In 2004, Malta joined as a member of the European Union, becoming the one of smallest nations to gain membership (Mainwaring, 2012). Upon its entry into the EU, the Maltese government began to distinguish itself in the global political world by establishing alliances and referring to the influx of irregular migrants\(^1\) as a crisis\(^2\) (Mainwaring, 2012). Consequently, Malta has become one of the primary entry points to the EU for migrants of all types (Human, 2012). As a primary entry point and one of the border states in the EU, Malta is responsible for processing all claims of asylum, even if that means assuming a disproportionate influx of displaced persons\(^3\) (Human, 2012). Under the Dublin II regulation, once asylum seekers have been registered and documented in Malta, they can travel to any other EU member states and return to Malta for their protection (Human, 2012).

The relationship between refugees and the people residing in the surrounding Maltese community is incredibly complex. The nation’s dense population, comprising about 450,000 persons in close proximity, has strongly influenced the formation of their community and relationships as a nation. Rooted in rich cultural tradition and Catholicism, the Maltese community is recognized for its strong kinship and charitable network (Bradford, 2014). While this can create a positive community for the nation, it has lead to incredible obstacles for transitioning refugees. The Maltese community has had mixed responses to the increasing number of refugees and migrants to the nation’s shores. While some portions of the community respond with negativity, others exhibit incredible compassion and dedication to helping refugees in their community.

Current humanitarian aid efforts in Malta focus on helping establish alternatives to the current detention policies, improving refugee camp facilities, and fostering an environment for

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\(^1\) An irregular migrant is defined as individuals who arrive without documentation and who fail to comply with immigration law (Bradford, 2014).

\(^2\) Referring to the increased numbers of irregular migrants fleeing to the shores of Malta as a crisis, the nation has been able to gain political attention (Mainwaring, 2012).

\(^3\) Malta receives and processes the highest rate of asylum applications per population when compared to other nations in the industrialized world (Human, 2012).
community between the Maltese and refugees. Some of the aid agencies working to help individuals living as refugees in Malta are: UNHCR, the Migrant Offshore Aid Station, International Office of Migration, Integra, Organization for Friendship and Diversity, Migrant Women of Malta, and Kopin. These organizations are dedicated to helping refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced persons entering Malta. While each aid organization’s services varies, serving and advocating for refugees is central to each mission. Not only are the organizations dedicated to helping those who are destitute, marginalized and fighting a challenging system, but they make an effort bring awareness of these challenges to their community.

**Community Response to the Refugee Population in Harrisonburg, Virginia**

Another community which has been deeply impacted by the recent global refugee crisis is Harrisonburg, Virginia. Interestingly, this region in the Shenandoah Valley has been a place of opportunity for people all over the world throughout its history (Zarrugh, 2008)). Harrisonburg (population 52,478) has long been a destination for migrant workers, immigrants seeking employment, and refuge for vulnerable populations. The agricultural industry and faith-based compassionate ministries have drawn a disproportionally higher number of individuals and families from around the world to Harrisonburg. Agro-related industries in Harrisonburg create plentiful jobs, attracting many newcomers, especially those migrating from Central and South America (Zarrugh, 2008). Furthermore, many of the employers intentionally recruit and hire newcomers to the community (Zarrugh, 2008). In addition to employment opportunities, churches and relief services bring many immigrants and refugees to the Valley. Both Mennonite and Brethren Churches have a long history and reputation for welcoming refugees and immigrants into the United States. Additionally, both faith communities demonstrate a dedication to providing humanitarian assistance to other parts of the world. The Harrisonburg community has a thriving Mennonite and Brethren
subpopulation (Zarrugh, 2008). As the number of individuals fleeing from the place they once called home continues to increase, Harrisonburg has continued to be a place of resettlement and refuge.

In February 2017, an Executive Order was signed by the President of the United States to temporarily halt refugees. While the executive order was blocked in court, a study identified 7.2 people per 1,000 people in Harrisonburg area (using a population estimate of 129,000) were from the countries listed in the immigration order (Brookings, 2017 https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2017/01/30/these-communities-have-a-lot-at-stake-in-trumps-executive-order-on-immigration/).

Individuals who come to Harrisonburg as refugees go through a very different process than those entering Malta. While Malta serves individuals in a stage of initial flight, Harrisonburg serves individuals who are legally and formally being resettled into a community. As a part of the United States, individuals coming to Harrisonburg are subject to an intensive vetting process that typically takes years to complete. Individuals and families often spend between 3 to 6 years waiting in refugee camps for their information to be processed. Once this extensive process is complete, newcomers arrive by plane, and are then resettled into the community.

Current humanitarian aid efforts in Harrisonburg focus on helping individuals and families to integrate into a new society and begin building a new life. The resources available help newcomers learn English, find jobs, find housing, and adjust to life in the United States. Some of the aid agencies that serve newcomer populations include: Church World Service, Faith in Action, NewBridges Immigrant Resource Center, Harrisonburg High School Peer Mentoring Program, and Rocktown Rallies. These organizations help newcomers to the Harrisonburg community integrate and adjust.
Humanitarian Service Providers

The humanitarian efforts in both Harrisonburg and Malta provide necessary support and resources to some of the world’s most vulnerable populations. Individuals who work in such settings, dedicating each day to helping refugees and newcomers find safety, serve in important and meaningful ways. Many of these individuals interact with others who have experienced immeasurable trauma and disruption in their lives. The need for a compassionate response is indisputable. The people who serve, work and advocate with refugees and newcomers provide them with an initial community and welcome. These relationships create spaces for brave acts of vulnerability, sharing of stories, and deep human connection. Within such compassionate response there are expected trends of empathy, motivation to serve, and purpose in life as aid workers reflect on their personal story and the stories of those they serve and work with.

Defining Constructs

The factors of purpose in life, motivation to serve, and empathy are expected to be consistent themes in the stories of individuals who work and serve refugees and newcomers. Purpose in life refers to an individual’s perceptions of life meaning in terms of the degree they experience purposefulness. This definition is adapted from literature surrounding the Purpose in Life Scale (Crumbaugh & Henrion, 1988). Motivation to serve refers to an individual’s intentionality behind their actions; what experiences, beliefs, and hopes drive and inspire them to work and serve in the ways they do. This definition is adapted from the work of Warner and Evans in their book Inspiring Leadership (Warner & Evans, 2006). Empathy refers to an individual’s ability to share and understand the feelings of another. This ability is informed by adopting an empathic mindset, which seeks to understand before seeking to be understood (Covey, 1989). This definition of empathy is informed by Stephen Covey’s book 7 Habits of Highly Effective People and Bruce Perry’s book...
Born for Love: Why Empathy is Essential and Endangered. Given the operational definitions, the three constructs of empathy, motivation to serve, and purpose in life seem to be deeply intertwined.

**Importance of Story**

Great power and profound connection can be found through the sharing of stories. The process of telling one’s story gives space for personal reflection, opportunity for others to learn, and a means for deep emotional connection. Psychologist Jerome Bruner investigated the importance and power of stories. He suggests that stories allow us to understand the world. Specifically, he asserted that routine and extravagant life experiences can be organized through narrative processes (Bruner, 1991). Furthermore, Bruner emphasized that stories reflect the way humans operate; what our own and other minds are like, and how humans navigate and make meaning in life (Bruner, 1990). A 1995 study by Rimé, found that people shared a vast majority of their emotional experiences—over 95%—within a few hours. When individuals confide their traumatic stories with others, they typically experience immediate and positive physiological changes, including reduced blood pressure and muscle relaxation. The theoretical frameworks presented by Bruner and Rimé surrounding the importance of stories suggest that humans have shared experiences based on culture, identity, and circumstance, and through reflective narratives we are able to make sense of such experiences. This process invites others into an intimate space, creates space for learning, and reveals new truths to be shared.

As the number of persons being displaced from their homes continues to increase, so does the need for compassionate humanitarian response. Individuals who work in to fill this vital role to society. These individuals have the opportunity to hear firsthand the stories and experiences of immigrants and refugees being impacted by some of the world’s most horrific conflicts. Through qualitative conversational interviews, the present study examines how individuals who work with refugee and immigrant populations reflect on their personal story and the stories of those they serve.
Strong themes of empathy, motivation to serve, and purpose in life were expected to be present in participants’ stories and reflections. Additionally, I was interested in learning more about what stories would emerge as these individuals shared.

Methodology

Participants

Participants were individuals who connected to resettlement, advocacy, and policy initiatives concerning migrating populations in Malta and Harrisonburg, Virginia. Aid workers, government officials, nonprofit managers, volunteers, and current refugees all participated in the interviews. All participants were over 18 years of age. Participants varied by gender, ethnicity, and race. Of the 12 participants, there were four males and eight females. All participants were proficient in English, even though for some it was not their primary language. Participants from Malta represented the following agencies: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Malta, the Office of International Migration, Kopin, Integra, Organization on Friendship and Diversity, Migrant Women of Malta, and the Migrant Offshore Aid Station. Participants from Harrisonburg, Virginia represented the following agencies: Faith in Action, NewBridges Immigrant Resource Center, Church World Service, Harrisonburg High School Peer Mentoring Program Advisor, and Rocktown Rallies.

This project originally intended to explore the experience of those who serve refugees and the refugee experience; however, a more complex and multifaceted story soon emerged. While the experiences and reasons for leaving home may be very different, refugees, asylum seekers, and migrating persons can all find themselves in a new host community and home. Furthermore, these populations face many similar challenges, seek similar services, and work with similar government offices. The stories of migrating persons, asylum seekers, and refugees are all deeply intertwined, and
individuals who work with one thread are often well informed about the needs and situations of the other threads. The notable connection between these populations, their needs, challenges, and experiences became evident very quickly. For this reason, individuals who work with any of these populations were welcome to participate in interviews.

**Procedure**

Before participants were identified or interviews were conducted, the research project was submitted to the Institutional Review Board, and the project received approval. This approval certified the ethical integrity of the study and researchers involved. A convenience sample was utilized throughout this project to identify potential interviewees in Malta and Harrisonburg, Virginia.

In order to identify participants to be interviewed, the organizations that work with refugees and immigrants in Malta and Harrisonburg, Virginia were extensively researched. During this period, Dr. Debbie Sturm assisted in identifying organizations and persons in Malta to speak with. Later, her connections with these organizations assisted in formally organizing interview times. After identifying potential organizations of interest, these agencies were contacted via email to inform them about the purpose of the study and invite them to participate. The staff of those organizations were welcome to participate, and using the snowballing sampling process, they had the opportunity to name other relief agencies or persons to potentially participate. Interviews included organizations with persons serving as educators, aid workers, community volunteers, and government officials. Given the nature of the participating cultures, some unanticipated willing participants also shared their experiences related to the global refugee crisis. Research was conducted in primarily public and agency spaces (offices, cafes, hotel lobbies, classrooms, or other meeting areas or predetermined meeting rooms) in Malta and Harrisonburg, Virginia.
In order to examine trends of empathy, motivation to serve, purpose in life, and emerging story, a semi-structured interview methodology was adopted, in which conversational interviews were recorded, transcribed, and manually coded. Using an audio recording device allowed the participant’s complete response to be captured. The lengths of the conversations with participants ranged from thirty minutes to ninety minutes. Interviews consisted of nine open-ended questions\(^4\) that explored their personal story and the stories of the individuals they serve in their jobs. Interviews were conducted using a traditional phenomenological qualitative inquiry methodology, due to its strength in uncovering descriptive experiences, meaning, and essence. Data analysis of the conversational interviews involved the following steps (Creswell, 2007):

- Reading through written transcripts multiple times to obtain general sense of the data;
- Identification of significant phrases or sentences;
- Formulation of meaning and clustering these into themes across transcripts;
- Integration of the results into a rich and exhaustive description of the phenomena; and
- Validation of the findings with participants whenever possible or necessary.

This qualitative study utilized a combination of a priori codes and emergent codes to meaningfully analyze the data collected in Malta and Harrisonburg. A consensus methodology was adopted to explore the themes of the study. In order to ensure dependability, a total of three researchers worked together to code for a priori constructs and to identify emergent themes in individual stories. Empathy, motivation to serve, and purpose in life are a priori codes. This means that these constructs were identified and defined before interviews and examination, using existing theoretical constructs. The examination of individuals' stories were analyzed by using phenomenological, emergent methodologies. Similar to grounded theory, this means that themes were identified, discussed, and confirmed during the coding process by numerous sources.

\(^4\) Questions can be found in the Appendix
Employing this phenomenological qualitative inquiry model revealed evident trends of empathy, motivation to serve, and purpose in life in the interviews. Additionally, this method allowed for interesting and unexpected themes to emerge as participants’ stories were examined.

**Analysis & Findings**

Analysis and examination of the data revealed well-developed themes of empathy, motivation to serve, and purpose in life throughout the interviews. While each interview highlighted different and varied responses concerning their personal life, work experience, and interactions with refugees and immigrants, elements of the A priori constructs were consistent and numerous. Each construct had substantial supporting evidence across the interviews; however, motivation to serve and empathy received an overwhelming amount of support.

The provider’s interview narratives were positively coded for evidence of motivation to serve 117 times, evidence of empathy 110 times, and evidence of purpose in life 55 times. Additional emergent themes in individuals’ stories were identified through the coding process. Themes that emerged across the interviews included: the importance and value of education and acceptance, the impact of global travel, dedication to working with vulnerable populations, and a recognition of the interconnectedness across humanity. As participants told their story, shared their work experiences, and reflected on the stories of the people they serve, the A priori and emergent themes were revealed in varying aspects of their lives.

**Motivation to Serve**

The theme of motivation to serve appeared most frequently in participants’ stories and responses. For this study motivation to serve was operationally defined as an individual’s intentionality behind their actions; what experiences, beliefs, and hopes drive and inspire them to work and serve in the ways they do. Participants reflected extensively on the experiences that
brought them initially to the work, the inspiration they found in their service, and the hopes that
drove them to continue in this field. This prominent feature in participants’ stories suggests that
motivation to serve is an important component of humanitarian work involving refugees and
immigrants. As responses were examined further, additional subthemes of motivation to serve were
also identified. Subthemes of individuals’ motivation to serve included: elements of agitation and
frustration with social injustices, unexpected journeys leading to their work, and finding inspiring
meaning in their experiences through work.

A number of participants referenced some sort of social agitation or frustration that pushed
them into working with refugees or immigrants. Social injustice, discrimination, and lack of
compassionate response were common aspects of these reflections. When recalling the events that
lead one participant to their work with a refugee youth organization, they state, “…I had been
noticing a lot of racism coming up. It was annoying me…And then I noticed they asked for
volunteers for help to teach English in the open centers here and I signed up.” (PG, 
Malta |3). Another participant explained how her frustration of social injustice fueled the formation
of her current work in this way, “I realized that I was frustrated enough that I wanted to get
training to work with people that experienced a high level of pain in their lives. So it was a
roundabout and backwards way to get to where I am now.” (AH, Harrisonburg |3). Some
participants even noted that frustrations carried into their work with refugees and immigrants,
especially when reflecting on making systemic changes to help others. “This is long time work.
And the notion that you’re going change something in a short period of time… you’re going
to make some progress and you can make some changes, but the story is long. And that,
you know, within US culture, we’ve been here for 500 years and we’ve done somethings well
and some things not so well. And finding those ways of changing and making structural
changes takes a long time and it is hard work. Finding people that will resist. They may not
resist vocally, but they will resist by not doing anything.” (AS, Harrisonburg | 4). The frustration and agitation these individuals experienced ignited a motivation in them to serve, to continue striving to make a difference.

When sharing their journey, participants’ responses varied greatly in terms of how persistent their motivation to serve refugees and immigrants had been throughout their life. For some, the drive to work with these vulnerable persons was evident and consistent. “All I knew was that I wanted to work with refugees” (MP, Malta | 2). However, for many, their motivation primarily stemmed from an interest in social justice issues, but not specifically working with refugees. One participant stated, “So I need to be clear, I did not choose to work with Faith in Action because of the focus on refugees and immigrants. It was more from a perspective of congregations working together to work at community justice issues- that’s what attracted me to work with Faith in Action.” (AS, Harrisonburg | 2). Another participant shared, “I’ve never been involved in any refugee work before last year, kind of stumbled into it. But I’m glad because I feel like it is very worthy endeavor in that, we all kind of have a responsibility to do what we can to alleviate these horrible things that can happen in humanity, so I’m trying to do what little piece I can.” (AD, Harrisonburg | 1). While their paths to working with refugees and immigrants varied, a motivation to make a positive difference by responding to social injustice was evident in the stories of participants.

Many participants also noted sources of inspiration and personally meaningful experiences inform their motivation to service refugees and immigrants. As one participant reflected on her experiences helping other migrant women integrate into the community, she said, “Because when you think about women empowering women, and migrant women empowering migrant women, it’s something amazing” (UE, Malta | 4). Another participant reflected on the ways that the people he works with have impacted and motivated him to serve; “I’m also inspired by the
The resilience of some of the people that I work with; both staff and also the refugees that we resettle. They are people who have suffered a lot” (JH, Harrisonburg | 2). When contemplating what inspired her in her personal life, one participant stated, “So what makes me motivated is my freedom” (RH, Harrisonburg | 6). Finally, another participant shared, “It's helping people—even if it’s one person in a week that gets the help, I find that it’s still good. I wish I could help more than that. But the reality is that if you manage to assist—be it in any way, I think that’s what moves me. I find the human interaction and the ability to assist someone who doesn’t have the means, doesn’t have the knowledge, doesn’t have the energy to do it… that’s what moves me” (MC, Malta | 3). As participants shared their experiences working and serving refugees and immigrants, responses representing their motivation to serve were abundant. This trend suggests that having as strong motivation to serve others is an important part of helping others who have been impacted by the global refugee crisis.

**Empathy**

The construct of empathy has been operationally defined as an individual’s ability to share and understand the feelings of another, and this ability is informed by adopting an empathic mindset, which seeks to understand before seeking to be understood. As participants shared their stories and experiences, trends of empathy were unmistakable. Responses informed by empathy could be grouped into a number of subthemes. Participants demonstrated empathy as they reflected on the experiences and stories of the refugees and immigrants they work with. Some responses highlighted the need to empathize with the overall refugee crisis, others expressed complete awe of the strength and courage individuals who are refugees demonstrate. Participants highlighted the need for communities to adopt an empathic mindset; one that seeks to understand before seeking to be understood. Finally, participants identified the importance of empathy in helping professions and humanitarian assistance.
Understanding that the situations forcing individuals to flee and become refugees are completely out of their control was an important trend that surfaced again and again. Participants acknowledged the need to empathize with this truth; to imagine it as a personal reality. When meditating on the experience of refugees, one participant responded, “So what I’m saying is that your life can change *snap, like that. And this is…You do not have a choice in this…it can happen to you” (MP, Malta | 10). Another participant shared a similar sentiment, as she reflected on a challenge she shares with others, “Put yourself in the shoes of a person that has to leave their own country. It could happen to anyone.” (FG, Malta | 14). Circumstances far beyond our control can have a transformative and dismantling impact, and the refugee crisis is a prime example of such situation. Participants adopted an empathic mindset when contemplating this reality. Additionally, participants expressed a type of reverent awe as they attempted to empathize with experiences and trauma that were beyond what they had ever experienced. One participant commented, “They are victims of the war; they are victims of this conflict; and all that sort of stuff. And they are also survivors, you know? They have made tough choices. They are finding themselves in difficult circumstances, but they are…still surviving and still trying to do the best” (AD, Harrisonburg | 8). As another participant recalled a particularly upsetting story, she pondered, “Just how strong do you need to be to be able to do that and not break down and die and to get your kids there?” (RS, Harrisonburg | 11). The number of challenges and changes that forcibly displaced individuals endure is difficult to imagine. One participant acknowledged the challenges in truly being able to empathize with what individuals who are refugees have experienced; “That they do stuff that’s constantly being thrown at them, and they are able to adapt to that change pretty admirably. And I can’t imagine like having to figure out what they have figured out to get to where they are” (AD, Harrisonburg | 9). Trends of
empathy were evident in many of the responses that participants shared, especially as they contemplated the circumstances and trials that displaced persons endure.

Not only is it important to personally empathize with the circumstances and experiences of refugees and immigrants, but helping to educate the wider community and spread awareness is equally important. Many participants shared the need to help others in their communities to adopt a more empathic mindset. In a sense, participants shared instances when the community demonstrated a lack of empathy in regarding refugees and immigrants. One participant shared the sentiments of a resettled refugee. “A woman who has been here since 2001, she just said, ‘okay, why doesn’t anybody care about our story?’ What she was referencing was what’s still going on in the Congo, what’s still going on in her home community. There is still violence going on; there are still other things going on there. She said we hear about in the US, some animal dying and that’s a bigger deal for them than what’s going on in my home community” (AS, Harrisonburg | 7). While discussing the myth that refugees and immigrants come to the United States to take resources, one participant suggested that this mindset lacked empathy with the reality of the immigrant and refugee situation in the United States. She stated, “Immigrants and refugees are certainly, persons work really, really hard and are often- for a number of reasons, not draining resources. Partly because it’s a requirement that to become a US citizen that you not drain resources… But people can’t drain the resources that they can’t access” (AH, Harrisonburg | 11). Participants shared the importance educating others in the community to help encourage more empathic mindsets.

The need for a mindset of empathy is vital to successfully serving and helping others through work. Many of the participants acknowledged the importance of adopting such a mindset and highlighted how that influenced their work. When reflecting on her colleagues and others who serve refugees and immigrants, one participant stated, “They all do a really good job of placing
themselves or imagining what their lives would be like in similar circumstances. And you know, I think that that helps paint the way that they see this particular time of conflict and the refugee crisis” (AD, Harrisonburg | 8). Furthermore, participants recalled particular instances when being empathic towards those they work with was important. When sharing a story about visiting a resettled woman and her family, one participant said, “So I’m walking in there being like this place is a dump like and she’s so proud of it because it’s so much nicer than anything she’s had before and that was just so valuable for me to remember not to see things from the way I might be perceiving it but that other people have other experiences and it causes them to see different conclusions and such and such” (RS, Harrisonburg | 12).

Individuals who work with refugees and immigrants demonstrate empathy in numerous ways and in many aspects of their work. Whether it be through seeking to understand the circumstances that caused families to flee to flee their home or urging others to adopt empathic mindsets, trends of empathy are common in the work of individuals responding to the refugee crisis.

### Purpose in Life

The construct purpose in life was operationally defined (based on the Purpose in Life Scale by Crumbaugh and Henrion, 1988) as an individual’s perceptions of life meaning in terms of the degree they experience purposefulness. While this construct was less frequent in participants’ responses than the other two constructs, it was still profoundly present throughout all of the interviews. As participants shared significant life lessons, people and relationships, love, faith and connection were common subthemes throughout responses that demonstrated strong purpose in life. In participants’ responses, they shared where they found meaning in their life and also the inspiration they experienced from seeing how refugees and immigrants find meaning in their lives. For many participants, these responses were often accompanied by palpable emotionality. Their
tone softened, their eyes swelled with tears, some of them lifted their hands and covered their hearts as they shared. These responses of purpose in life hold deep meaning and emotions.

As many misty-eyed participants shared aspects of their life where they experienced purposefulness, the emotional connection could easily be seen and felt. One participant excitedly and passionately proclaimed how much her work means to her, “It’s a type of love to be honest. Every day I love it more than before.” (UA, Malta | 4). While reflecting on some of the important insights she had gained through her journey, one participant advised, “Everything teaches you a lesson. Meeting different people, different cultures. Reading, exposing yourself to art. Expose yourself to as many things as possible” (MC, Malta | 3). Another participant shared one of the lessons that serving in humanitarian work has taught her, “I’ve learned that I cannot change the world. I’ve learned that it’s a very ugly world, but with some beautiful people in it. I can make a tiny difference to some people’s lives” (MP, Malta | 7). As two participants shared core values of their life, the purposefulness they feel through their values could easily be detected. One participant shared the guiding and important role faith played in his life, “My faith. I’m a Christian and that has been a significant part of my life all throughout my life, and I continue to hold that very dearly. While it has changed how it looks over my life, that’s important part of it” (AS, Harrisonburg | 2). Another participant proclaimed the meaning that having freedom has brought to her life, “Life is good. I mean life is nice and we should live. Especially here. I mean I get my freedom. Not like there. I’m sitting at home most of the time, but I am free. This is my freedom. So what makes me motivated is my freedom” (RH, Harrisonburg | 6). Participants shared many ways in which they found meaning and purpose in their own lives, each one full of meaning and passion.

Additionally, some participants shared the inspiration they gleaned from others’ stories and the purpose they found in those stories. When discussing the challenges that refugees and
immigrants face throughout their journeys, one participant reflected on their incredible ability to continue to thrive, “So carrying on with their lives forward and leaving things in the past. Of course, I’m sure a lot of things will haunt them at night or even before, but there was this willingness to carry on. Willingness as if things were still together. There was this lust for life. It was still there” (FG, Harrisonburg | 16). Another participant pondered how purpose can be profound and significant in one’s life in this way, “I think often people’s awareness of this sustaining power, whether or not they recognize it to be God or your family, or whatever it is. It’s amazing what gets people through just really horrible, horrible things. Trauma that is just incredibly difficult to describe even. But they do it, like and are often the ones that care for others. And in a way that’s phenomenal when people who experience that have the capacity to care at a level sometimes that is… amazing. Whew. It is so powerful.” (AH, Harrisonburg | 12). Identifying and experiencing purposefulness in life illuminated the deep connection many of the participants felt to their work and the mission of helping and serving through their work.

Emerging Story

In addition to the predefined and expected themes of empathy, motivation to serve, and purpose in life, other reoccurring themes were also identified as participants shared their stories. These additional themes bring a rich and interesting perspective on the journeys of individuals who work in humanitarian relief; representing important elements of their stories and life. Some of the themes that occurred again and again throughout participants’ narratives included the value of learning, global perspectives, privilege, creativity, and interconnectedness. In sharing their stories,
many participants identified these themes as significant or influential in their journey to their current involvements.

Many participants referenced the importance of education and the life-long value of learning. Their formal educational pursuits, as well as experiential learning opportunities were recalled as turning points, important steps, or formational seasons in their lives. Participants shared their educational journeys and the importance of treasuring education in their family systems. While expressing the formative role of education in her family and her personal life, one participant explained, “My father was an English professor. My mother was an English teacher. I went to Germany when I was 16 as an exchange student” (RS, Harrisonburg | 1). The importance learning beyond formal educational settings was also emphasized in participants’ responses. As she recognized the components of her work that were attractive, one participant stated, “I wanted to learn something every day and basically that is what happens” (FG, Malta | 2). Throughout many of the interviews, the value of learning and their educational journey was an important part of participants’ narratives.

In addition to the importance of learning, participants frequently noted experiences of travel and exposure to global perspectives. Participants noted the profound impact that these experiences abroad or in new cultures have had on their lives and decision to work in humanitarian efforts. One participant shared her early experiences living in another country with her family. She shared, “I moved when I was like 5 months old. With my family to Southern Italy, specifically Italy, and we stayed until I was 13” (AH, Harrisonburg | 1). Later this participant acknowledged how her exposure to new countries, cultures, and languages has impacted her outlook on being in the minority. She explained, “But it doesn’t bother me to not understand, it doesn’t stress me out to be in a room full of people speaking another language. I’m comfortable with that dynamic” (AH, Harrisonburg | 5). Other participants echoed similar sentiments, expressing the
comfort they found being surrounded by diversity. Furthermore, many participants recognized the tremendous value that can be found in engaging with diverse backgrounds. One participant expressed the importance she found through these interactions in this way, “I missed being around people with an international perspective” (RS, Harrisonburg | 2). Participants expressed the value of adopting a global mindset by sharing exposure to different cultures the desire to seek interactions with people from other countries. This theme was present in many of the stories that participants shared.

Another important theme that emerged through conversations with participants was the construct of privilege and its implications. Many of the participants expressed a sensitivity and awareness of the role that privilege played in their life. Furthermore, they noted the close relationship between lack of privilege and oppression. One participant shared how his awareness of privilege and the prevalence of racism stemmed from his family experiences; “But I feel like I’ve had this sensitivity from my family and other experiences that I’ve had that communities need to be broader than the white established community that is typically the norm” (AS, Harrisonburg | 4). Participants also noted the importance of making decisions in a representative way; not permitting the privileged voices in a community to be the only ones heard. “Um, let me just say, that specifically here in Harrisonburg one of the challenges, or one of the opportunities that is here right now, is making sure whatever issue you’re working on, that those who are most directly impacted are at the table. That they are always part of the conversation. That they are always, hopefully providing the leadership of it. And I think in Faith in Action, that’s a challenge because we are primarily middle class white congregations with a notion of “We know how to do this. We know how to make a difference. We want to make a difference. The challenge is forming relationships that allow other voices to be heard and other voices to lead” (AS, Harrisonburg | 4). This perspective
was shared by a number of other participants. Another participant echoed, “I think a lot about power and privilege and whiteness. In thinking a lot about that in what it means for this community and what it means for churches in this community to value social justice- when a lot of the churches in this community that have resources are very white” (AH, Harrisonburg|6). Through participants’ responses, it was clear that being aware of privilege is necessary in this work; how it brings opportunities and power to those who have it and how it oppresses, silences, and limits those without it.

Participants also shared the importance of creativity in their lives. As one participant shared the elements of his current position that he really enjoyed, he stated, “I also have the privilege of kind of develop my own ideas. Maybe there are officers who don’t have it like that. So I think it helps that you have an idea and then you get immediate positive feedback and then you can develop” (FE, Malta|2). Having the ability to make new projects, solve problems in innovative ways, and implement new efforts were themes of creativity that participants acknowledged in their work and lives. As another participant shared the words they would use to describe their current work, he said, “Another one would be creative; the ability to be able to create- I think this would be for all of them for me and all of my staff” (JH, Harrisonburg|5).

The stories, experiences, and insights that were shared by participants were narratives of connection, relationship, and intersection. Many participants recognized the interconnectedness of humanity, social justice, and personal experiences. While speaking on the importance of adopting a holistic perspective to issues of social justice, one participant stated, “Yes, everything is interconnected. For instance, we look a lot at climate change and environment over here, not only at a local perspective which is a very strong perspective, but also from a perspective of that interlinks with migration” (FG, Malta|9). Another participant shared the
interconnectedness she felt between different seasons of her own life. “So in some ways it was a connection between who I am and what was going on in the community, and that has followed me in different ways over the years” (AH, Harrisonburg | 5). Additionally, many participants reflected on the profound connectedness of humanity.

The themes that emerged from participants’ narratives add detail and richness to understandings of the experiences of those impacted by the refugee crisis, both aid workers and survivors. The value of learning, global perspectives, privilege, creativity, and interconnectedness were represented throughout participants’ stories in Harrisonburg, VA and in Malta. There is so much to learn from the reflections of the individuals who participated in this study.

**Making Meaning**

As expected, empathy, motivation to serve, and purpose in life were prominent themes in the narratives of individuals who work with and serve refugees and immigrants. As individuals who serve these vulnerable populations in Harrisonburg, Virginia and in Malta reflected on personal stories and experiences of refugees and immigrants, these themes appeared again and again. While the exact goals of the organizations that participated differed, the significance of empathy, motivation to serve, and purpose in life in their narratives remained consistent. Additional trends that emerged in participants’ stories included the value of learning, global perspectives, privilege, creativity, and interconnectedness. The consistent representation of all of these constructs sheds important light on the reality of those impacted by the refugee crisis.

Many participants shared frustrations concerning the dialogue surrounding refugees and immigrants. It was noted that this dialogue is often fear-ridden, misguided, and lacking the compassion that this situation so desperately needs. They identified the harmful impact that comes from associating refugees with dangerous populations and disregarding these vulnerable populations
as unproductive or dangerous members of a community. Participants suggested that this perspective, viewing refugees and immigrants in a negative light, lacks awareness and understanding of the reality that displaced persons live. This perspective is dramatically inconsistent with the strong trends of empathy, motivation to serve, and purpose in life that were revealed through this study. Through these responses, it became evident that the story of refugees and immigrants is not known by all, and to truly respond with compassion requires that the story be known. Until then, there is great opportunity to listen, to learn, to ask questions, to advocate, to educate, and to love.

This project hopes to contribute to the understanding of the experience of displaced persons and, to help others understand and share the story as well. The responses revealed that a strong narrative of empathy, motivation to serve, and purpose in life is present in the experiences of those who have been impacted by the refugee crisis. Additionally, this narrative process allowed for new understandings surrounding the experience of displaced persons to be made, consistent with Bruner’s theory.

Participants were asked to share one word they would use to describe the experience of those they’ve worked with (both displaced persons and colleagues). Their responses to this question revealed an inspiring story about the experience of displaced persons. It is a story of struggles, resilience, strength, patience, hope, interconnectedness, empowerment, and life.
Appendix:

Interview Questions

1. Tell me a bit about your story.
2. What moves/inspires you in your life?
3. Describe the events that led you to participate in work with (and/or) for refugees.
4. What lessons have you learned working with social justice issues?
5. Describe a particularly meaningful encounter with a refugee with whom you work(ed).
6. Tell me five words that describe your work.
   - You said [words 1, 3, 5]. Tell me about a time that your work was [word 1]; [word 3]; [word 5].
7. Tell me a myth or misunderstanding about refugees you have discovered (but you believe many people do not realize) because of your work.
8. If you could tell the world one thing about the reality of the refugee experience, what would you share?
9. If you were to summarize the stories of those you’ve worked with in one word, what would that word be, and why?
PATIENCE

Hope

RESILIENCE

STRENGTH.

Interconnectedness

LIFE

Empowering

Resilience

Hope

Move on

They are amazing.

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Bibliography


