

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Understanding the Relationship Between Refugees and the Host Community Through Afghan Refugees' Lived Experiences in Pakistan

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Abstract: With massive forced displacement, hosting refugees has become one of the leading concerns for developing countries like Pakistan. In the given context, this article is an attempt to unfold the nature of the relationship between the Afghan refugees and their Punjabi host community. To understand, describe, and interpret the essence of the refugees' lived experiences, 31 adult Afghan refugee scavengers were involved in this qualitative study through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The collected data revealed that while being in exile, the Afghans had formed new relationships with their hosts. These relationships were generally positive and reciprocal in nature. The Afghans confirmed the absence of discrimination and harassment from the hosts and highlighted both the monetary and nonmonetary help that they receive from the native residents at times. However, despite being in good terms, Afghan refugees reported restricted movements with the host community. The reasons were predominantly grounded in Afghan traditions of protecting the honor of the women and the privacy of the household by limiting the contact with native residents. It emphasizes the need to further enhance the interaction among refugees and hosts.

Keywords: Afghan refugee, scavenger, lived experience, host community

In recent decades, the world has experienced massive forced displacement as a result of war and persecution. With 25.4 million worldwide, the refugee population has reached new heights. In the settlement and welfare of refugees, developing countries have always been in the front line. Pakistan is one of the top three refugee-hosting countries by sheltering 1.4 million refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019).

War and political instability in Afghanistan had led its people to seek refuge in neighboring countries, preferably Pakistan and Iran. The influx of Afghan refugees has a protracted history in Pakistan, spanning over approximately four decades now (Ahmad, 2017). When they first arrived, these Afghans were accommodated in hundreds of refugee camps or villages, built on natives' land, across the country (Chattha, 2013). These camps were supervised by the

Pakistani Chief Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and several international non-governmental organizations (Margesson, 2007). In the camps, the refugees were not only provided with food but education, health care, water, sanitation services, and vocational training, with the help of several non-governmental organizations. Additionally, they were permitted to move into the country for jobs freely (Rowland, Rab, Freeman, Durrani, & Rehman, 2002; Turton & Marsden, 2002).

Afghans faced harsh realities of life when the government of Pakistan decided to close major refugee camps due to severe security threats, decrease in humanitarian assistance, and to facilitate the process of repatriation (Khan, 2017a). Upon camp closures, the residents who were reluctant to return to Afghanistan were given an option to relocate to urban areas of Pakistan (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2009). Due to the absence of basic facilities, infrastructure, and limited economic possibilities back in Afghanistan, most of the refugee families preferred resettlement in the urban areas of Pakistan over repatriation. Subsequently, the urbanization of Afghan refugees and their free movement in local areas brought them closer to the native residents and made their interaction inevitable.

Literature Review

In protracted situations, refugees are perceived as a socioeconomic burden and security threat to the host communities (Kreibaum, 2016; Kirui & Mwaruvie, 2012; Jacobsen, 2002). Therefore, there are always higher possibilities of conflict erupting between them. A study in Kenya found that international humanitarian aid for refugees caused the Kenyans' hatred towards refugees. As native residents spent a miserable life in their homeland, the refugees enjoyed plenty of free food and other facilities. Hence, the aversion further led to conflicts (Kirui & Mwaruvie, 2012).

A mass influx of refugees may also disturb the socioeconomic composition of a receiving state, its political structures, and the distribution of resources that can affect the living standards of the native residents. Scarce resources and livelihood opportunities in host countries often initiate competition among local communities and refugees, which could ensue conflicts (Alshoubaki & Harris, 2018; Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006). Similarly, the Sustainable

Development Policy Institute (2004), in its study on scavengers, documented the rifts between native residents and refugees over collecting limited recyclable material. However, besides competition over limited resources, differences in habits and customs, decreasing quality of life, and political conflict between the sending and receiving states all contribute to the tension between refugees and hosts (Alshoubaki & Harris, 2018). Moreover, Ruegger (2018) asserted that ethnic identity is also one of the key sources of conflict eruption among refugees and the host. Political or economic grievances not only make the conflict between the two groups unavoidable, but it could also turn into violence.

In Pakistan, Afghan refugees are largely known for scavenging and recycling activities. Being associated with dirt and garbage, they are further regarded as the lowest in the social and occupational hierarchy (Li, 2002). Hence, they are likeliest to be discriminated, harassed, exploited, and socially excluded. Medina (2007) stated that scavengers are often considered as a symbol of backwardness and sometimes as criminals. They are viewed as a menace and are often accused of thievery (Ogwueleka, 2009). Based on the nature and perception of the job, public place scavengers, on the lowest stratum of society, maintain a distance and restrict interaction with Afghans (Schenck & Blaauw, 2011a, 2011b). Hence, social exclusion and isolation sometimes encourage scavengers to establish their own communities away from the commoners, where they practice their own habits, customs, beliefs, and values (Berthier, 2003).

After the closure of the campus across Pakistan, initially, the Afghan refugees were welcomed wholeheartedly on humanitarian grounds, integrated to the local community, supported, and accommodated by native residents (Ghufran, 2011). However, the peaceful coexistence took a turn after the Afghan-assisted terror attacks, especially the deadliest attack in Peshawar army public school in 2014, killing at least 145 people (Walsh, 2014), and repeated clashes across the Pak-Afghan border, leaving many dead. Consequently, the pressure and vexation towards Afghans grew, which later resulted in the recent wave of coerced repatriation of refugees (Khan, 2017b). However, after repeatedly extending the deadline for deportation, the government of Pakistan allowed refugees to stay in the country until the end of December 2017 (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

During this period, the refugees experienced discrimination, harassment, detention, and deportation from the law enforcement agencies (Ahmed, 2017). Regardless of the police mistreatment, the refugees' relation with the native residents largely remained positive and friendly (Malik, Lyndon & Vivien, 2018; Khan, 2016). Most of the Afghans were born in Pakistan and experienced socio-cultural, linguistic, and religious homogeneity during their exile that strengthens their social ties with the local population. However, in some cases, the Afghans noticed a change in their hosts' attitudes towards them that included intimidation and harassment (Malik, Mohar, & Irvin-Erickson, 2017).

Despite the Afghan refugees' extended stay in Pakistan, little is known about their relationship with native residents. Moreover, the existing literature largely misses the refugees' voices. Therefore, in the given scenario, this paper is an attempt to fill in the gap by understanding the issue at hand through the worldview and experiences of refugees.

Methods

For this qualitative inquiry, hermeneutic phenomenology was chosen to gain a comprehensive understanding of refugees' experiences and lifeworld. It is a sub-type of phenomenology that opposes the idea of reduction or suspending personal opinions presented by Edmund Husserl (Kafle, 2011). Unlike Husserl, Martin Heidegger introduced hermeneutic phenomenology that is interpretive in nature, concentrates on meanings of the experiences, and their effects on the individuals (Laverty, 2003). It was considered a suitable research strategy for the current study as it attempts to explain the subjective experiences of people through their lifeworld stories (Kafle, 2011).

The study was conducted in Gujrat, Pakistan. The settled Afghan community in the city is a beneficial location for the study for easy access to suitable informants and data. Apart from that, familiarity with language and dialects, spoken at the research site, helped to access suitable informants, convince them for the interview, and record and interpret the data accurately. After choosing the research site, a blend of purposive and snowball sampling was employed to access the suitable informants. Initially, based on the inclusion criteria (i.e., adult male, refugee scavengers, extended period of stay in the research

site), the potential participants were approached with the help of local residents, and we briefed them about the purpose of the study and significance of their participation. Their doubts and ambiguities about the research and us were also handled with care by ensuring anonymity and confidentiality of the shared information. Furthermore, to protect the anonymity of the participants, their identities were concealed by assigning them pseudonyms that we used throughout the article.

Thirty-one adult Afghan refugee scavengers, who had experienced the phenomenon to be researched and were ready to share it (Wagner, Kawulich, & Garner, 2012), participated in the study after recording their consent. The consent form not only included the brief information of the research but also highlighted the rights of the participants and the potential risks involved. Subsequently, their life stories were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews spanning over at least one hour. To get access to their life experiences, Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, was chosen as the medium of communication as it was the only shared language among the interviewees and the interviewer. During the interview, the participants were encouraged to express their experiences, perspectives, and feelings in detail. Probes and follow-up questions were used as conversing tactics to gain a deeper understanding of interviewees' responses and motivate the less expressive one to speak up (Yin, 2011). The interviews with refugees took place in 2016 when the pressure and hostility against refugees were on peak and continued until saturation was obtained.

Subsequently, to make sense of the collected life stories, the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and translated into English. Later, they were analyzed through Max van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological reflection. The data analysis grasped the essential meaning of the experienced phenomenon by uncovering its thematic aspects (Kaite et al., 2016). The themes that emerged from the data analysis are presented in the subsequent sections.

Results

Thirty-one male Afghan refugee scavengers, residing in Pakistan, participated in this study. Socio-demographic characteristics reported in Table 1 demonstrated that the majority of the informants belonged to the age group 20–29 years and stayed in

Pakistan for at least 15 years. In terms of birthplace, more than half of the total participants were born and raised in Pakistan and never got a chance to visit their country of origin. Initially, most of the informants stayed in refugee camps and later, in 2007, relocated to other cities due to the closure of all four refugee camps. The closure operation was carried out by government authorities mainly to eradicate the security risks posed by the illegal, free movement of individuals, goods, drugs, and weapons across borders (Margesson, 2007). After the closure of the camps, many of them moved to the city of Gujrat, where they have been living and interacting with the native residents since then. However, some of the participants ($n=5$) relocated to the research site way before the closure of the camps and spent more than two decades in the town.

The empirical data obtained from the Afghan refugee scavengers were systematically analyzed and followed five essential themes emerged: (1) natives'

stance on scavenging, (2) nature of the relationship with neighbors, (3) quality of relationship with native friends, (4) help from the host community, and (5) frequency of visits. These themes assisted us to understand "what" the informants have experienced in the phenomenon and "how" they have experienced it (Moustakas 1994).

Natives' Stance on Scavenging

Afghan refugees largely emphasized on how the natives—people living in their neighborhood—perceive their profession. Talking about the natives' stance on their profession, informants revealed that people, out of curiosity, ask them about the nature of the job and reasons for doing it repeatedly. Most of the natives find the job filthy and constantly motivate them to leave it and find a respectable job. On a similar note, Yousif (19 years old), recalled a recent but relevant incident and shared:

Table 1
Sociodemographic Characteristics of Afghan Scavengers

Characteristics	N = 31	%
Age		
Below 20 years	3	10
20–29 years	18	58
30–39 years	3	10
40–49 years	6	19
Above 50 years	1	3
Sex		
Male	31	100
Place of birth		
Pakistan	17	55
Afghanistan	14	45
Total years in Pakistan		
15–25	19	61
26–36	12	39
Total years in Gujrat		
Less than 10	6	19
10–14	11	35
15–19	9	29
20 and above	5	16

They (Punjabis) think I should stop continuing this job. Yesterday two women, sitting in the street, stopped me and asked why (do) I not skip this job and do something else. They said I am too good to deal with waste. I told them I do not have any other choice.

Piling up a large amount of retrieved waste within the residential area could be problematic for inhabitants as it is messy and unhygienic. However, the findings revealed that the majority of the informants did not face any objection from the native residents. Similarly, Kamran (19 years old), who had been living in the research site for the last 16 years, described his experience in the following excerpt:

They do not have any issues with my job. Some scavengers do collect filthy items, and if their homes smell like hell, then people around them request (them) not to do this work in their vicinity. I collect clean items, so they never objected to my job. Sometimes they ask to do any other job just because they think I deserve a better job.

Kamran and many others asserted that Punjabis, the residents of the province Punjab, do not complain about their occupation, rather appreciate the fact that instead of borrowing money, Afghan refugees earn their own sustenance. Moreover, they acknowledge the hard work scavengers put into it and consider the activity appropriate and halal. On a similar note, Jamal reported about his neighbors that “they even tell other people that these Afghanis, either young or adult, do their own work instead of begging.”

Nature of the Relationship with Neighbors

Apart from the natives' perception of their work, Afghan refugees spoke about the nature of their relationship with the host community. Afghans confirmed that Punjabis neither discriminate against them based on their work nor look down on them, rather they treat them with respect. They claimed their relationship with the natives to be reciprocal in nature—it bounds both parties to treat each other with respect. They also believed that receiving good treatment from native residents was in response to their good behavior; however, if in case a refugee

starts dealing with natives wrongly, they will never be treated with respect again. Akbar's (60 years old) excerpt confirmed that “every relation is reciprocal when we treat them well, they treat us better, but if in case we start treating them badly they won't even say (to) us *Salaam* (greetings).”

An example of a good relationship with neighbors was observed during the interview with Nazir (25 years old). The person was very poor and was not having any furniture or tidy mat to sit on when we conducted the interview. Trash was scattered all over his small house. Instead of turning down the interview request, he took the researcher to his neighboring house, few steps away from his place. The neighbor welcomed us all and provided the required space, furniture, and an electric fan. Likewise, Latif (30 years old) shared even a stronger bond with his neighbors and regarded them as their family:

Our next-door neighbors are like our parents; we feel at their house like ours. Even if some members of our family go to Peshawar, we stay at their house. They feed us and help to do daily chores occasionally.

He regarded his neighboring family as his own. Expressing the nature of the relationship, he mentioned how comfortable it is for both families to visit, share their food, and help each other in household chores when needed. He added that when his family is out of the town, the neighbors look after his siblings and him in the absence of their parents.

Predominantly, informants expressed the absence of conflict with their neighbors. However, a few presented a contradictory view. Mainly, the complaints were about dumping garbage near houses, blocking drainage water, and child fighting. Essa (37 years old), who had been living in Gujrat with his wife and seven children for the last 15 years, explained the nature of the conflict with his neighbor in detail:

We have some problems with the neighbors who are living next to us. They throw their garbage outside the house, which blocks the sewerage pipe we share. Then, it becomes difficult for us to dispose of the water from the house. I requested them a couple of time to dispose of the garbage properly, but they do not pay attention to it. So that's why sometimes we argue and

blame each other. These neighbors are Punjabi but from a lower social caste called *machi*. They are also uneducated like us.

The excerpt shows the prevalence of quarrels and arguments among the Afghans and Punjabis, but these disputes were infrequent in nature.

Quality of Relationship with Native Friends

Friends play a substantial role in Afghan scavengers' lives. After intensively working from dawn to dusk, friends are considered as the sole source of recreation. Afghans usually have a large social circle, including immediate relatives, Afghan, and Punjabi friends. However, most of the informants were inclined to make friends within their ethnicity. Hence, a small segment of the refugees confirmed to have good Punjabi friends. Their native friends were studying, doing a variety of jobs, and business both locally and internationally.

Informants confirmed that unlike Afghans, their Punjabi friends convince them to quit their occupation and try their luck with something else. Nazir (25 years old) stated about his friends:

They ask me to leave this work and do something else. But I cannot do any other work. They are ready to give me a job as well, but I cannot survive on a PKR 5000-6000 (\$48-58) job as PKR 6000 (\$58) is only our house rent then how can I look after the rest of the expenses.

Nazir and many others were of the opinion that their native friends could not understand that other available jobs cannot make their ends meet. In other jobs, they are required to work full-time and get a fixed salary, which is often insufficient, whereas, in scavenging, they can work for longer hours to increase their income.

The findings revealed that instead of just suggesting the alternative jobs, the native friends also lend a helping hand and show the willingness to cooperate. Afghans quoted a couple of examples of receiving help from their native peer group. Khan (23 years old) shared that "they say it is a dirty job. They even say we'll look after the school expenses you just study with us in school." The excerpt shows how friends encourage Khan to skip his job and get an education with them. Although, Khan turned down his friends' offer as, for him, bringing money home was important than getting the education.

Help From the Host Community

This theme highlights the nature and occurrence of the help refugees receive from their hosts. The findings indicated that despite being in desperate need, Afghan refugees considered taking loans as embarrassing. However, when in need, they prefer to receive financial help from their relatives, whereas close native friends and neighbors are contacted as the last option. Although the informants expressed their dislike about getting help from native residents, many recalled the time when they received help from them. Kareem (48 years old) narrated:

...the neighbors who are living next to us helped my family when I went to Afghanistan to attend my father's funeral. They lent my family some money, which I returned at the earliest.

Apart from neighbors, native friends also extend their support in times of need. Anwar (19 years old) added that "they do help sometimes. When we do not have enough money, they lend us. They also tell me to return the loan whenever it is convenient."

The narrations mentioned are evidence of help refugees received from the host community. Apart from monetary help, Afghans claimed to receive other sorts of favors as well. For instance, the majority of the refugees were found to be staying in houses with no gas connections. To cook food, they had gotten a gas connection from their neighbors. At the end of each month, both parties equally distributed the bill and paid their share. Informants quoted many incidents of receiving help from the host community on a day-to-day basis. Such help includes access to drinking water, borrowing home appliances (e.g., iron), and ice. Refugees were unable to adopt a normal lifestyle followed by the majority of the natives; therefore, they were in constant need of help. The most common and frequent need was getting ice or cold water in the scorching hot summers. Unaffordability of buying fridge and ice from the market left informants with the sole option of borrowing it from natives. On a related note, Ibrahim (26 years old) revealed that he has been living at a place for free. He described that "we have built our huts on a Punjabi's land with his permission. We are not paying him any rent. As I knew him before, he allowed my family and I to stay at his place on my request."

Concludingly the refugee scavengers exhibited positive relationships with their hosts by stating that native residents offer genuine help and try to solve problems in their capacities.

Frequency of Visits

Despite being in good terms with native inhabitants, Afghans reported less to no level of visits. Addressing the reasons, many called it against their tradition to visit people at home who are not their relatives. In other words, the houses they preferred to visit were of their relatives'. Afghans expressed their views as follows, Essa shared, "...in our Afghan culture, it is not encouraged to visit the house which has ladies who are not your immediate relatives." Along the line, Mustafa (34 years old) said, "we do not let the *namahram* (non-related men) visit our house as it is against our tradition."

The excerpts clearly show that the presence of *namahram*, who are not bound by incest and with whom marriage is possible in Islam, is not encouraged among informants. As among Afghans, women are considered the honor of the family and are protected from male strangers. Afghan women are known to stay within the four walls of the house, and men of the family are supposed to look after their needs and limit their outdoor activities. However, in the case of the emergency, women are allowed to step out of the house but with proper *Purdah*, veil, which usually includes burqa or wider shawls to hide their bodies. In the given scenario, no male stranger, either Afghan or Punjabi, is allowed to enter the house.

To maintain the privacy and honor of the house, non-related men are discouraged from entering the house. Hence, Afghan refugees prefer to meet their friends outside the house. As Wali (24 years old) stated, "we (Afghans) are not allowed to bring friends to our homes, so I meet them outside the house. Similarly, I never visited them at their homes too."

Usually, on holiday or after work, scavengers go out to meet their friends. They sit at different shops, roadside restaurants, or food stalls and have chitchat. Young Afghan refugees prefer to play cricket with their friends. Informants also stated that due to the laborious and flexible nature of scavenging, they remain busy most of the time and hardly get spare time for the planned meet up.

Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of Afghan refugee scavengers living within the Punjabi host community in Pakistan. Our findings revealed that both the refugees and native residents were on good terms and rarely experienced any conflict. The formula of mutual respect made their lives peaceful and harmonious. The findings contradict previous studies (Alshoubaki & Harris, 2018; Kirui & Mwaruvie, 2012) that reported the presence of tension among refugees and their hosts. However, the friendly relationship between Punjabi hosts and Afghan refugees is likely to be influenced by the cultural and religious similarities between the two.

Scavenging or recycling is largely associated with Afghan refugees in Pakistan. The absence of a valid identity card, lack of education, skill, and resources made them engaged in a low-status job. Scavengers, being associated with dirt and garbage, are often kept at the arm-length and hardly interacted by the commoners. Unlike Berthier (2003), the Afghan refugees were not socially excluded and isolated in the research site; rather, they were staying around the native residents on the outskirts of the city. All the participants of the study were surrounded by native residents, and nearly all of their next-door neighbors were Punjabis, engaged in various types of jobs and small businesses.

Regardless of having socioeconomic and linguistic differences with Punjabis, the Afghans exhibited a good relationship with them. The narratives cumulated from the participants revealed that the refugee-host relationship was of mutual respect. Moreover, the absence of work-related complaints and discrimination was also reported. The participants were of the view that they have never been looked down upon by fellow Pakistanis, rather they are being treated equally. The finding indicates that despite having the class differences, the refugees and host community were living together peacefully. The quality of relationship among refugee scavengers and native residents contradicts with the results presented by Schenck and Blaauw (2011a, 2011b), who claimed that the scavengers, being associated with dirt and garbage, are often kept at a distance and hardly interacted by the commoners. Contrary to that, the local community showed positive treatment towards the refugee

scavengers (Malik et al., 2018). Overall, the Afghans shared a wide range of positive experiences and the absence of conflict with the host community, yet some of them had disputes with natives over trivial issues for the time being.

In the exploration of the refugee-host relationship, the empirical data revealed that participants, based on their job, received a wide range of reactions from native residents, but none of them was to humiliate scavengers or scavenging. Afghan refugees were often questioned by native residents, including neighbors and friends, about the nature of their job and reasons for their involvement in scavenging. The native residents also suggested that they quit scavenging and join a better job. These suggestions were gently turned down by the refugees as the scarcity of the other jobs made scavenging a better option for them. The participants' responses showed that they logically handled the suggestions, explaining how an inadequate level of education and skill restrict their involvement in comparatively better jobs.

As part of their positive relationship with the host community, the participants also shared the stories of help and support they received from the native residents. Apart from financial help, they were facilitated to fulfill everyday needs and activities. However, despite getting monetary and nonmonetary help from the hosts, refugees still maintained a distance with Punjabis to protect the honor and privacy of the Afghans household. Regardless of the restricted visits to the neighborhood, Afghan refugees largely emphasized the importance of visits for condolence after death. They not only highlighted the importance of such a visit but also identified it as their tradition to show sympathy to the deceased's family. Moreover, they were of the view that they can skip weddings but cannot skip funerals and death related ceremonies as being mindful of people in their hard time is part of their culture.

Conclusion

The empirical data obtained from the Afghan refugees facilitated the understanding of their experiences of living with the host community. The findings of the study revealed that despite Afghans' involvement in a low-status activity of scavenging and socioeconomic differences with the hosts, they had a friendly relationship with the native residents.

The relationship remained positive even when the government of Pakistan became tough and decided to repatriate them. Concludingly, the refugees enjoyed a support system in the form of native friends and neighbors that enabled them to function in the host society effectively. The study stresses the need to decrease differences and increase interaction among Afghan refugees and native residents by introducing awareness campaigns and trust-building activities. The findings of the study have contributed to the limited knowledge of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, but, as the study was conducted on small sample size, its findings cannot be generalized to all the refugees staying in different areas of Pakistan.

Declaration of ownership

This report is our original work.

Conflict of interest

None.

Ethical clearance

This study was approved by the institution.

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