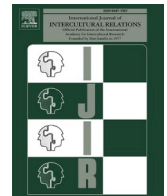




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Refugee parents' experiences of coming to Sweden: A qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Each year, millions of people worldwide are forced to leave their homes. Many of those affected are families. There are already a considerable number of initiatives designed to support refugees who are resettling in new countries and cultures. However, few are promotive interventions aiming to support parents and thereby their children through the extraordinary challenges they face. To develop a culturally adaptive intervention, more knowledge about how refugee parents from different countries perceive and handle these challenges is needed. This study explores refugee parents' own perspectives on the obstacles, challenges and opportunities they faced during their first years in Sweden to guide the future development of promotive interventions for refugee parents. Interviews were conducted with Arabic, Kurdish, and Somali-speaking refugee parents ($n = 28$; 19 mothers, 9 fathers). The interviews were examined using content analysis. One overarching theme emerged; "The new language is the key for entering social networks and society, and for helping your child in a new country". The new language was viewed as a key to integration, and to mastering parenthood in the new context. This theme consisted of four categories; "parents' motivation and hope as driving forces," "navigating among past and present culture and values", "loneliness as a risk factor" and "a new way of being a parent and relating to an acculturation gap". These findings may help guide the development of parenting interventions for refugees, to promote integration and well-being among parents and their children.

1. Introduction

The number of people forcibly displaced worldwide (internally displaced people, refugees and asylum seekers) doubled in a decade, and by 2021 the number had reached 89.3 million (The UN Refugee Agency [UNHCR], 2022). Consequently, more people are resettling with children, and becoming parents in a new country. Roughly 40% of forcibly displaced people worldwide are children (UNHCR, 2022). Parenting in an immigrant family is undoubtedly challenging. Parents must master the parental role while also adjusting to a new culture and likely challenges such as unemployment, living in dangerous neighbourhoods, and lower socioeconomic status (Baghdasaryan et al., 2021; Betancourt, Abdi et al., 2015), discrimination (Stewart et al., 2015), the loss of family and

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community support (Osman *et al.*, 2016; for an overview, see Merry *et al.*, 2017).

Refugees and asylum-seekers are at higher risk of mental health problems than the general population (Blackmore *et al.*, 2020). Prevalence rates of PTSD are around 8 times higher, and depression 2.6 times higher, among refugees and asylum seekers than the general population (Blackmore *et al.*, 2020). An elevated prevalence of mental health problems has been seen to persist several years after displacement (Blackmore *et al.*, 2020). Experiences before, during, and after flight affect refugees' well-being (Chen *et al.*, 2017; Lindencrona *et al.*, 2008; Reed *et al.*, 2012). During resettlement, a range of daily stressors, such as housing problems, unemployment, low access to social or mental health services, and poor or insecure neighbourhoods, as well as interpersonal stressors and emotional distress, are to varying extent associated with symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, functional impairment and general distress (Hou *et al.*, 2020). Considering the composite effects of the challenges, trauma and distress refugees are likely to face before, during and after migration, it is clear that they may need support and guidance when establishing a new life in the receiving country. To ensure that an early parental intervention includes valuable components, it is essential that the intervention is informed by both established prevention strategies and by refugee parents' perceptions of their current needs.

The process of adjustment and transition to the host country, acculturation, is often described as a dual process of cultural and psychological change (Berry, 2006). Within a family, acculturation is complex as it may occur at different speeds and extents. Youth tend to acculturate faster than their parents, commonly called an "acculturation gap" (Birman, 2006). Adolescence is an important and challenging period, with intensive physical, cognitive and emotional changes (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). During this period, all adolescents are expected to master a number of developmental skills, which impact substantially on their adult life (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Adolescents of immigrant background are expected to meet additional expectations in their acculturative tasks and to establish themselves as members of the host society (Jugert & Titzmann, 2020), meaning that they may be in need of additional support. Additionally, parents' own adjustment to their new living conditions, and strengths and weaknesses related to the resettlement process, may exacerbate the challenges to accomplishing their parenting goals. A young person's well-being is positively associated with the level of acculturation within the family, and with parents' active engagement in and orientation toward the settlement culture (Sun *et al.*, 2020). A comprehensive review of 138 qualitative studies, focusing on parental experiences of the acculturation process, identified three themes that shape parenting experiences in the new country (Merry *et al.*, 2017). The first theme described the horrific experiences of hardship and/or loss in the context of precarious migration and past traumas. It also included challenges related to the resettlement process and mastering parenthood in a new context (Merry *et al.*, 2017). The second theme treated resilience, i.e., "the capacity of a system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten the viability, function or development of the system" (Masten, 2014, p.6), and strengths of the parents, e.g., through the retention of hope for a better future (Merry *et al.*, 2017). Finally, the third theme reflected the obligations, difficulties, resources and possible resilience factors associated with living transnationally, and having links with the home country (Merry *et al.*, 2017). Overall, this review summarized a sizable literature highlighting the intertwinement of parenting and the resettlement process.

The available studies also suggest that, although challenging, being a parent and having a child to care for can constitute an important source of strength for overcoming the adversities faced by many forced migrants (Merry *et al.*, 2017). This suggests that parenthood may increase parental resilience and the potential for mental well-being. Parents and family also influence children's resilience (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016; Masten & Palmer, 2019). While family cohesion is a protective factor, parental mental health problems, often resulting in impaired parenting, put young refugees' mental health at risk (Scharpf *et al.*, 2021). Offering adequate support for parents can therefore improve conditions for children. There are a number of recent initiatives to support refugee parents, some of which employ existing parenting programs, such as: the adapted version of the "Family Based Preventive Intervention" named "Family Strengthening Intervention for Refugees (FSI-R)", Betancourt *et al.*, 2020; "Parent Management Training - Oregon Model (PMTO)", Bjorknes & Manger, 2013; "Strong Families", El-Khani *et al.*, 2021; "The Caregiver Support Intervention", Miller *et al.*, 2020; An adapted version of "Connect", Osman *et al.*, 2017; "Mother-Child Education program", Ponguta *et al.*, 2020; "Happy Families", Puffer *et al.*, 2017; and "The Mind Spring group programme", Husby *et al.*, 2020). There is, however, an overall lack of promotive interventions that are specifically developed for refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people (Uphoff *et al.*, 2020).

This study is part of an ongoing comprehensive research program in Sweden (The PIA Project) designed to develop evidence-based and cost-effective parenting and youth programs that may help support resilience among newly arrived refugee families. Due to the war in Syria, the number of people applying for asylum in Sweden increased, reaching its highest levels in 2015, when 162,877 people applied for asylum (Swedish Migration Agency, 2022). Temporary restrictions on obtaining a residence permit (SFS, 2005:716) and stricter border controls led to a decrease in asylum applications from 2016 and onwards (Swedish Migration Agency, 2022). Interventions based on qualitative studies have shown promise in raising awareness in communities and promoting engagement in preventive services (Betancourt, Frounfelker *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, we conducted a qualitative study to gain insight into the experiences and challenges of parents with adolescents, regarding the resettlement process, to inform the development of a parenting intervention specifically for refugees. We focused on parents' own experiences of living in Sweden, their engagement in their child's school, and spare-time activities, and their parenting roles. The current study also aimed to broaden the perspectives of existing qualitative studies on refugee parents in Sweden (Baghdasaryan *et al.*, 2021; Mangrio *et al.*, 2020; Osman *et al.*, 2021; Osman *et al.*, 2016) by including participants from the three largest language groups among refugees in the middle of Sweden in 2019 and 2020 when the interviews were conducted, namely Arabic, Kurdish, and Somali.

2. Method

The study used an exploratory qualitative-interview design. The interviews were conducted between November 2019 and June 2020 as part of the PIA Project (Promoting Integration and Adjustment among refugees). The study was approved by the Swedish

Ethical Review Authority (dnr 2019–04032).

2.1. Procedure

Arabic, Kurdish, and Somali-speaking people comprised the largest newly arrived immigrant and refugee groups in central Sweden when the project was planned. Interviewers speaking these languages were recruited primarily via service centres for immigrants in a municipality in Stockholm. The interviewers, two from each language group, were native speakers of one of the three languages and had experiences of working with the target group. The leaders were social educators, certified interpreters and/or municipality workers on parenting and social-information programs for refugees. They received three days of training in basic interview techniques, such as asking open questions and creating alliances with the informants. Information about the study was spread through meetings arranged by municipality centres and parenting groups, and the distribution of flyers in all three languages. Recruitment was primarily undertaken by the interviewers since they knew the language and had a double cultural competence that allowed them to explain and describe the study appropriately. Some of the interviewers had met one of the interviewees during other group-leader activities, but had no current professional or personal contact with any of the participants. The recruitment process was affected and delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, the number of Kurdish-speaking participants decreased because the intended interviewer was quarantined and a substitute had to be found. Parents who agreed to participate gave informed written consent. If a participant was illiterate ($n = 11$), the informed consent form was read aloud, and it was ensured that the participant fully understood the content. The informed consent form was then completed with the help of the interviewer and signed with a symbol. The interviews were conducted individually, in person, by one interviewer, a native speaker of the participant's mother tongue. All participants received a small reimbursement. The interviewers could consult clinical psychologists within the research group if they experienced a need to guide an interviewee to further healthcare after the interview, but no need for such assistance arose. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and translated into Swedish by authorized translators. Two of the interviews in each language were double-translated into Swedish and then compared. No major discrepancies were found, which indicates the accuracy of the translations.

2.2. Sample

The target group comprised refugee parents with at least one child aged 13–16 whose mother tongue was Arabic, Kurdish, or Somali. The parents had arrived in Sweden during the past five years and had a residence permit. It has been shown that acculturative changes tend to take 6–7 years to occur (Birman & Trickett, 2001), and this has been used as an inclusion criterion in previous research (Titzmann & Silbereisen, 2009). It was assumed that concerns about undecided residence status could be a barrier to participation. Therefore, we included only parents with a residence permit. In Sweden, asylum decisions are determined on the basis of the Aliens Act (SFS, 2005:716). Until July 2021, the availability of a residence permit was regulated by a temporary law (SFS, 2016:752), which restricted the possibility of obtaining a permit. Residence permits on asylum grounds are granted to refugees, quota refugees, and to people in need of protection. A residence permit can also be granted to a person who is a relative of, for example, a person who has been granted a residence permit as a refugee.

In total, 28 parents participated: 11 from Somalia (7 women, 4 men), 11 Arabic-speaking (6 women, 5 men) primarily from Syria (2 from adjacent countries), and 6 Kurdish-speaking women from the Kurdistan area in Syria (for demographics, see Table 1). No parents came from the same wider family. All the Somali-speaking parents had come directly to Sweden, while the majority of the Arabic- and Kurdish-speaking parents came to Sweden via another country. Fifty-nine percent had stayed 1–6.5 years in Turkey. Most of the parents (67%), said that they only used their mother tongue together with their family, while 33% also used Swedish. Most parents came from municipalities with segregated areas, mainly municipalities south of Stockholm. All of those who gave consent completed their interview and there was no drop-out. The median length of the interviews was 26 minutes (Somali Mdn = 36 minutes, Kurdish Mdn = 30 minutes, Arabic Mdn = 18 min).

2.3. Interview guide

The interview guide covered aspects of the parents' experience of resettling in Sweden. It was based on previous research (Merry *et al.*, 2017), and the following topics were covered: living in Sweden, child education, family relationships, being a parent in Sweden,

Table 1

Demographic characteristics: mean age of parents, number of children and highest level of education.

	Somali ($n = 11$)		Arabic ($n = 11$)		Kurdish ($n = 6$)	
	Mean (SD)	Range	Mean (SD)	Range	Mean (SD)	Range
Age	44.6 (11.6)	29–67	44.0 (6.3)	35–58	43.3 (5.5)	35–52
No. of children	5.4 (3.0)	1–9	3.9 (1.3)	2–6	4.5 (1.9)	2–7
Educational level	n (%)		n (%)		n (%)	
No education	4 (36 %)		4 (36 %)		3 (50 %)	
Compul./ high school	7 (64 %)		5 (45 %)		1 (17 %)	
University	-		2 (18 %)		1 (17 %)	

Note. Educational level: numbers and percentages. Information on educational level is missing for one Kurdish participant. Compul. = Compulsory.

child activities and experiences outside home/school. Demographic questions (e.g., education level, number of children) were posed at the beginning of the interview.

2.4. Analyses

We applied content analysis to the interviews (Bengtsson, 2016; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). More specifically, we adopted an inductive approach, where we created categories from the raw data without a predetermined theoretical framework. The interviews were analysed in their entirety and an active, iterative process was used to code them. Initially, three interviews from the same language group were read by three of the authors: PE: a clinical psychologist/researcher; MV: a clinical psychologist/PhD-student; BK: a teacher/licensed psychotherapist/researcher. Preliminary categories and subcategories were searched for, the content discussed, and a first draft of a coding manual constructed. Thereafter, the first author (MV) organised the text of the three interviews into quotations, and identified meaning units, condensed them, categorized them, and attached a label to them (Bengtsson, 2016; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The codes were then discussed with the other two authors (BK, PE) until all three agreed on the coding manual. The authors continued to code and discuss a subset of the remaining interviews in one of the language groups to reach agreement on how to interpret and describe the codes and coding manual. When a high level of agreement was reached, the coding was continued by the first author until saturation was met and no more codes were identified. When analysing the other language groups similar codes appeared and therefore the same coding manual was used for the two remaining language groups. Some of the categories were slightly revised and merged according to new information that appeared. Finally, the concepts present in the interviews were identified, and meaningful relationships between the concepts, both latent and manifest, were explored. A structural model with an overarching theme, categories and sub-categories was then formed (see Table 2). The interviews were read again in their entirety to ensure closeness to the raw data. Final inter-rater agreement on the concepts was evaluated for six of the interviews (21 % of all interviews), with three persons in the research group coding four interviews each. The overall inter-rater agreement was 76.8%, with a range of 73-89%.

3. Results

One overall theme emerged: “The new language is the key for entering social networks and society and for helping your child in a new country”. This theme represents an assumption that seems to underly all the categories. The four categories were: “parents’ motivation and hope as driving forces”, “navigating among past and present culture and values”, “loneliness as a risk factor” and “a new way of being a parent and relating to an acculturation gap”. The theme is described below, whereafter we detail the categories and sub-categories that emerged in the analysis.

3.1. Theme

Based on the synthesis of all the categories, one theme, named “The new language is the key for entering social networks and society and for helping your child in a new country” emerged. The results suggest that the struggle to learn a new language was extensively apparent in all the contexts discussed; learning a new language was described as a key to becoming a part of society.

“Nothing but language. Language is the most important thing, once you have learned it, life will be easier. You can say, language is the key.” (Arabic-speaking mother)

The parents related their strong desire/motivation to learn the language to a wish to become part of society and adapt to the new culture, and also to a wish to contribute and become independent. Language was thought to be a major resource once learned, e.g., by allowing active parenting, even in a new country. On the other hand, not knowing the language was experienced by some as a barrier, giving rise to feelings of inadequacy and being left out. Several of the obstacles that parents experienced were due to not knowing the language, such as needing an interpreter, or having difficulties communicating with medical doctors or their child’s teachers. Generally, lack of Swedish language skills created obstacles and difficulty in interpreting social situations, e.g., understanding whether others have said something pleasant or unpleasant to or about you. Our interpretation of the data was that the integration process involved a constant dialectical fluctuation between a variety of positive and negative experiences. For example, parents described hope for the future, and faith in the new country with the possibility to access education, healthcare and democratic rights. However, they also missed their homelands, including being able to speak the language, and some experienced a challenging and consuming loneliness. Parents wished to preserve their heritage culture and mother tongue (and had active strategies for this) while simultaneously being motivated to learn the language and things about their new culture. Relatedly, parents described a lot of frustration about not being able to assist their children with schoolwork, or being able to discuss their child’s development with teachers, participate in

Table 2

Unit of analysis - from quotation to theme.

Theme	Category	Sub-category	Quotation
Language is the key to becoming a new member of social networks and society and to be able to help your child in a new country	A new way of being a parent and relating to an acculturation gap	A shift in power	“You can’t exert your role as a mother. They do as they want. At home parents are highly respected but here they don’t respect their mother or their father, they do as they want.”

parent meetings, or develop contacts with other parents.

“We met a lot of teachers and parents. We couldn’t even come up with our opinions as we didn’t understand, so we just remained silent.” (Somali-speaking father)

The parents also felt that their children had more influence than before, and that they learnt the language and entered the society more quickly, which created a power shift. The parents’ narratives indicated that they put a lot of effort into trying to learn the language (e.g., through structured training at home, translation exercises, watching Swedish television, visiting the library with their children, reading Swedish children’s books, visiting language cafés or the church, or participation in other organised activities). Parent meetings at schools, and contact with teachers were also seen as opportunities to practice the language. Many parents also clearly expected their children to learn the language as a way to become a member of society. In contrast to their own language struggles, some parents described how their children suddenly, and unexpectedly, knew the language fluently.

“They have friends and speak Swedish, when my youngest daughter speaks, you think she is Swedish and you would not think that her parents are Arabs. She has the same dialect and ... when you come here as a child you learn faster and more correctly. Sometimes when I talk, she says: mom, you’re talking wrong. I’m telling her you’re young so you can learn faster.” (Arabic-speaking mother)

3.2. Categories

The categories and subcategories are shown in Table 3, along with a description of each subcategory.

Category I. : Parent’s motivation and hope as driving forces.

Table 3
Theme, categories, subcategories and a brief description of each subcategory.

Theme	Categories	Subcategories	Description
The new language is the key for entering social networks and society and for helping your child in a new country	Parent’s motivation and hope as driving forces	Encouraging to be in a safe country with democratic rights, new educational and healthcare opportunities.	<i>Positive aspects of coming to a secure and safe country and the experience of peace. Freedom and opportunities through access to education and medical care. Democratic rights and the experience of being treated equally.</i>
		A longing for own independence and for becoming a part of the society	<i>Parents’ desire for their own and the youth’s independence. A wish for the youth to realise their future goals. A perceived expectation from society but also an inner striving to become a part of the society and contribute. Wanting to access information, guidance and support in order to become a part of society.</i>
		School engagement	<i>Parents express the importance of being involved in the child’s schooling. The parents feel that their children face high demands and that they need extra support. Contact with teachers and parent meetings are described as a bridge via which to have insight into and receive information from the school.</i>
	Navigating among past and present culture and values	A desire to maintain the heritage culture while adjusting to the new	<i>Striving to keep and remember their heritage culture while learning, adjusting and adopting the best parts of the new culture.</i>
		Active strategies for teaching your children about their native country and culture	<i>The parents have active strategies where they tell and teach their children about their home country, traditions, customs and mother tongue.</i>
	Loneliness as a risk factor	Not having the social network you are used to	<i>Loneliness is a contrast to the life in the home country and affects well-being. The colder climate is described as an obstacle to socializing.</i>
		Parenthood in solitude	<i>Experiencing loneliness in parenthood, and increased burden and responsibility in the absence of support and help from relatives.</i>
	A new way of being a parent and relating to an acculturation gap	A shift in power	<i>The children have more agency and rights in the new cultural context which leads to a shift in power. Children’s rights and perspectives are experienced as positive but they can also make parenting more challenging.</i>
		Good relations and communication	<i>It is important to have a good relationship with youth and to spend time with the family. Also, good communication is paramount.</i>
		To be aware of the child’s whereabouts	<i>Knowing what children are doing is described as an important aspect of parenthood in Sweden. Worrying about the child’s whereabouts.</i>
		To encourage and give support	<i>A central aspect in parenting is to encourage and support children, especially in areas such as integration and realizing dreams.</i>

This category has three subcategories. The first, “Encouraging to be in a safe country with democratic rights, new educational, and healthcare opportunities”, shows that several parents expressed gratitude about being in a safe, secure, and peaceful country. They felt welcomed and hopeful about the future, with promising opportunities for them and their children. The second subcategory, “A longing for own independence and for becoming a part of the society”, captures a desire for the parents’ and their youth’s independence, even though there is also a wish to adapt to, become part of, and contribute to the society. Finally, the third subcategory “School engagement” refers to the importance of being involved in the child’s schooling.

3.2.1. Encouraging to be in a safe country with democratic rights, new educational and health care opportunities

Safety and security were emphasized as important and encouraging. In particular, the Somali participants emphasized the importance of coming to a country in peace, and the feeling of relief that comes with this.

“The best thing about living in Sweden is peace. There is peace and we have been given freedom.” (Somali-speaking mother)

Our interpretation was that when the parents felt safe, they could leave their earlier sometimes burdensome experiences behind and start thinking about building a new life. Parents arriving in the new country with their family expressed gratitude at being together. There were new opportunities for their children to obtain an education, and for themselves to study. This was described as a contrast to the lack of schooling and education in some of the home countries, where neither the children nor the parents could get an education.

“Sweden has given the children a lot of freedom. It is very good that the children can go to school and learn things.” (Kurdish-speaking mother)

The parents also expressed gratitude at the right to good and free healthcare, which had not always been available to them. They emphasized aspects like free medication for the children and a well-functioning healthcare system. Parents also emphasized the positive experience of having democratic rights and the goal that people should be treated equally. Having more rights as a woman was also highlighted, such as opportunities to study and work. Overall, a feeling of being welcomed in the new country was described, particularly in the Somali interviews. Thus, the parents described feeling hopeful and thankful, giving a positive foundation to build upon.

3.2.2. A longing for own independence and for becoming a part of the society

Another subcategory that emerged concerned parents’ desire to gain independence. This included having an occupation and being able to earn a living, to avoid being dependent on the society. Simultaneously, parents expressed a desire for guidance regarding how to achieve such independence (e.g., in the earlier process of getting a residence permit, finding suitable accommodation and/or employment). The wish for independence also applied to their children. The parents hoped their children would become independent, have a profession and make a living of their own. Parents encouraged and supported their children to become engaged in the activities and plans they were passionate about. They wanted them to realize their dreams and have a meaningful future. Parents hoped that their children would achieve their goals through having the opportunity to decide over their own future lives. They hoped that their children would “be something” and succeed in the new country. Some parents also wished that their children would embrace the opportunities they themselves had never had. Furthermore, getting a job and embracing available opportunities were suggested as ways to avoid ending up in the wrong situation, and ensure future independence. The current feeling of dependency was new for parents and contrasted with their previously established independence in the home country.

“Yes, in my home country I felt a different kind of independence. I had my own business. Here it feels like society shapes you and you are not as free (...).” (Somali-speaking father)

The parents felt expectations from the society to learn the language and get a job. This was in line with their own wish to contribute to and be part of society.

“Swedish people expect us to adapt to society and its laws and regulations. That we study diligently and learn the language, both me and my children. So that we can contribute to society in this way. So that we can pay taxes and follow the country’s rule system.” (Somali-speaking mother)

A picture emerged where parents wished to express thanks and gratitude for being welcomed. The parents found that meeting new friends through extracurricular activities was a good way for their children to gain access to the new society. Good values were seen to emerge from these meetings. Some parents appreciated that their children met people born in Sweden, and from other countries, during these activities. The Somali parents, in particular, considered these activities as positive pathways to reducing the risk of their children ending up in undesirable and unlawful contexts.

“It prevents the child from going to bad places, ending up in the wrong company. In football, they can find good friends.” (Somali-speaking mother)

The parents said that cost was an obstacle to young people’s participation in additional activities.

“I wish it was free for them. We as parents really wish our children could do it for free. It would be encouraging for the children to do other things than just hang out. We really, really want help with that.” (Somali-speaking father)

The parents thought that to speed up the integration process they needed information about the society’s constitution, laws, working of the system, guidance in the new society and knowledge about whom to contact in different situations.

“That you as a newcomer should adapt to the society with the support of the society. That both children and parents receive support. That you not only get a residence permit and an apartment, with kids thrown into school and then forgotten. You should take your own responsibility and learn about Swedish culture and way of life. But guidance is everything.” (Somali-speaking father)

3.2.3. School engagement

The third subcategory captures the parents emphasizing a need to get involved in their child’s education. Parents strived to stay

updated, to keep track of their child's homework and to help. Even though several parents reported that it was difficult for them to help the child with the tasks, they expressed encouragement at the child's education and desire for being involved.

"To communicate with the school, i.e., to give my daughter a feeling that I am always with her, always in contact with the school and her teachers, and that I know everything about her" (Arabic-speaking mother)

When it was difficult to assist with schoolwork, the parents tried to support the child practically with cooking, asking other people in the neighbourhood for help, and taking the child to the library to get support with the homework. Parents with no formal schooling perceived their lack of education as frustrating and as an obstacle to being involved as much as they wanted in their children's schooling.

"I think they expect me to help with homework. Honestly, I can't. It is difficult! I need someone to help me (laugh)." (Arabic-speaking mother)

Contact with teachers and parent meetings at school were described by the parents as key to getting insights and information, and to meeting other parents. Having contact with teachers and attending parent meetings was an important strategy to be able to follow the child's progress and behaviour in school as well as to knowing what was going on there.

"These meetings are good so that you as a parent can keep track of your child's schooling. Get to know the teachers. I think it is very good to participate." (Somali-speaking mother)

3.2.4. Category II: Navigating among past and present culture and values

This category consists of two subcategories about living with two cultures. The first, "A desire to maintain the heritage culture while adjusting to the new" reflects the desire and aspiration to adapt and learn about the new culture while also not forgetting the culture of origin, with its customs and traditions. The second subcategory, "Active strategies for teaching your children about their native country and culture", describes the engagement and active strategies parents use to encourage and support their children in maintaining their culture of origin.

3.2.5. A desire to maintain the heritage culture while adjusting to the new

The will and effort to preserve, understand and remember the heritage culture while adapting to and learning from the new culture were consistently expressed by the parents. They presented an approach where they embraced the best of both cultures. Parents wanted their children to feel confident, proud and knowledgeable about their heritage culture and avoid a feeling of distance. By embracing their cultural heritage and preserving their cultural roots they hoped that their children might achieve a sense of security and community with their heritage culture. The parents were careful to avoid alienating their children in their own cultural context, and tried to facilitate and encourage the child to be a part of both the heritage and the new culture. They hoped that the children would not forget habits, traditions and religion from their home country and would try to get in touch with youth in the new country to learn about their culture.

"I want my children to get to know ethnic Swedes and their culture. This also applies to me, so that we can learn from them. At the same time as we preserve our culture and religion. That they preserve both cultures with respect." (Somali-speaking father)

To summarize, parents stressed the possibility and significance of learning from each other's cultures. In general, there was a cultural curiosity.

3.2.6. Active strategies for teaching your children about their native country and culture

The second subcategory describes the active strategies parents use for maintaining the family's culture of origin. Heritage customs and traditions were preserved when coming to Sweden. Children were encouraged by their parents to participate in celebrating holidays of the heritage country, as well as keeping in touch with relatives and visiting their country of origin if possible.

"We take the children to our cultural evenings, celebrate holidays and meet relatives or countrymen so that they do not feel alienated." (Kurdish-speaking mother)

Furthermore, parents actively taught the children about their homeland, through stories and practicing traditions and holidays, to give them competence regarding their heritage culture.

"I talk about my culture, yes. About my ancestors and about our upbringing. So, I urge my children to learn about our people and culture." (Somali-speaking father)

3.2.7. Category III: Loneliness as a risk factor

This category describes the loneliness parents experienced in the new country. The first category: "Not having the social network you are used to", describes the stress, as well as a fear of being alone and excluded. The second category: "parenthood in solitude" refers to a loneliness in parenthood due to lack of support from relatives and barriers in the new country.

3.2.8. Not having the social network you are used to

Some parents experienced loneliness and a feeling of not having the social network they were used to. This was a consuming loneliness, not self-chosen, which seemingly affected parental well-being. This was described as a contrast to the situation in the home country where people usually spend more time together. Parents said that it is difficult to make friends in Sweden, and some even felt that people do not want to spend so much time together. Some of the parents experienced feelings of isolation, due to staying a lot at home. Some even described experiences of psychological ill-health, such as anhedonia, and worried about the current situation or about relatives left in their country of origin. The burden of earlier experiences, before or during flight could be difficult to bear in combination with social isolation and trying to get established in the new country.

“Yes, it’s lonely. That’s the hardest part, loneliness. Here you only have your family, if you get ill or whatever. But in your homeland, you have your people, and you don’t feel limited.” (Somali-speaking father)

The cold weather was described as an additional obstacle for socializing and enhanced the feeling of loneliness and isolation. This diverges from experiences in the home country where it was more often possible to meet outdoors.

“The weather and the constantly scorching sun in my homeland. Joy. Going over to the neighbour whenever you want. It’s cold here and you cannot move around in the same way. Sometimes it rains, summer is not the same. Here you will be happy if your neighbour even says “hello” to you.” (Somali-speaking mother)

3.2.9. Parenthood in solitude

The second subcategory describes the loneliness that the Somali parents, and to some extent the Arabic-speaking parents, experienced in their parenthood in the resettlement process. They described an increased perceived burden, due to the lack of help and support from relatives that they had been used to relying on, in combination with the barriers in the new society. Parents missed a setting where people help each other more. There were also experiences of feeling limited, locked indoors with the children in their apartment.

“I also grew up in a society that I miss, where you help each other. Our parents supported us, as did our neighbours and relatives. But I have left it and feel alone” (Somali-speaking father)

Category IV. : A new way of being a parent and relating to the acculturation gap.

Some parents expressed that they saw few differences between being a parent in the new country compared to their home country. However, most parents seemed to feel there were major differences and that new strategies were required to handle the challenges in the new cultural context. This category includes four subcategories. The first subcategory “a shift in power” refers to challenges where the child learned the language and adapted to new contexts faster than the parents, creating another dynamic in the family. The second subcategory “good relations and communications” emphasizes the significance of working to develop and improve the communication with the child to create a stronger bond. Further, in the third subcategory “to be aware of the child’s whereabouts”, parents describe a wish to have insight into the child’s everyday life. The fourth and final subcategory “to encourage and give support” includes active strategies to support the youth in different areas.

3.2.10. A shift in power

In this subcategory parents described a shift in power between their children and themselves. The children now had more influence and more expressed rights. This shift in power was reinforced when children both learned the language and adapted to the new environment faster than their parents. This created an emotional distance, where parents perceived that their children thought that they, as parents, did not understand them, and were silly. Parents experienced this as a contrast to the home country where parents usually received more respect and kindness from all young people. This change made it difficult to be a parent.

“Here children are encouraged to do what they want and you can’t resist it. Everything is allowed.” (Somali-speaking father)

Children’s rights were seen as positive but at the same time difficult, since the children did not respect and listen in the same way as they had in the home country. The parents’ previous methods for showing what is right and wrong could no longer be used. The latter was clearly expressed by the Somali parents.

“The biggest difficulty you can face is that the children do not listen and they think they are right. They know their rights here. If you are strict, they threaten to call the police.” (Somali-speaking father)

3.2.11. Good relations and communication

The parents described it as important to have a good relationship with their youth and to spend time together with the family, having fun together. They emphasized creating a strong attachment to each other in order not to drift apart. This might lead to good relationships, with mutual understanding and respect. Parents emphasized good communication with their children, trying to listen actively, staying calm and asking probing questions regarding the child’s well-being, what he/she needs, and whether you as a parent can help. An effort was made to be friends with the child, and some parents described the relationship with the child as fundamental.

“It is important that children and parents have good communication so that they can be aware of what’s happening. The relationship between parent and child is the most important thing.” (Somali-speaking father)

3.2.12. To be aware of the child’s whereabouts

To know what their youth were up to and doing was described as an important aspect of the new parenthood and reflected in the third subcategory. Parents wanted to have insight into the child’s social network, and know whom they met and what they were doing. They described doing this to reduce their own worry, and to help their child avoid being recruited into gangs and relating to friends that might lead them astray. The Somali parents described the importance of having insight into their child’s life, while in the Kurdish and Arabic interviews there was more concern for the children. The new country was unfamiliar, which increased the worry among parents.

“Being a parent is not just about having children. You must always keep an eye on your children. You have to keep track of everything. I have to know everything about my children and what they do and so on.” (Kurdish-speaking mother)

3.2.13. To encourage and give support

Finally, in the last subcategory the central aspect of parenting was described as encouraging and supporting youth. This could be

achieved by being committed and available, and having an active dialogue in the child's everyday life. Parents were aware that they may not always be able to give concrete support for a particular problem, but strived to be practically or emotionally supportive. Parents' encouragement and supportive attitudes appeared in various ways, such as integration into the new setting, seeing friends, and being involved in education and the realization of their child's dreams.

"The family should give him support to study and fulfill his potential." (Arabic-speaking mother)

4. Discussion

This study investigated the experiences of living, and being a parent, in a new country for Arabic, Kurdish, and Somali-speaking refugee parents. The analyses of the interviews with parents revealed that mastering a new language was seen as the key to integration and to being able to shoulder parenthood in the new context. Moreover, not knowing the language could be the main barrier to social contact and societal integration. The challenges associated with learning a new language may affect the integration process. In a Swedish study learning the language was expressed as the most important task for integrating and becoming part of society (Mangrio *et al.*, 2020). In earlier research, the language barrier has also been identified as the most important obstacle to a positive parenting experience (Deng & Marlowe, 2013).

Four categories of experiences that receiving countries should be aware of and address in the development of future parenting support programs emerge from the current study. The first category relates to parent's motivation and hope as driving forces. The second includes navigating between past and present culture and values. The third describes loneliness as a risk factor, while the fourth captures a new way of being a parent and relating to an acculturation gap where the child acculturates to the new cultural context faster than the parents. Consistently, we found few differences between the three language groups in the categories and subcategories that emerged. However, parents from different language groups emphasize some of the experiences within a category slightly differently.

4.1. To cherish parents' motivation and hope in order to fuel resilience

Based on the findings in this study, it is suggested that a future promotive parenting support program could include a focus on already existing resilience factors and coping strategies. Very little resentment appeared in the parents' interviews, despite the potentially traumatic events they may have experienced. They described their experiences of coming to a new country as challenging and difficult, especially the learning of a new language. But for many parents, parental hope and motivation was evident.

First, the parents could be described as very active in trying to support their children and adjust their parenthood to the new context. They were motivated to learn the language, and the new culture and society, and wanted to find ways to both contribute and understand their parenthood in relation to the new country. This is in line with recent findings regarding Somali parents in Sweden (Osman *et al.*, 2021), where parents after participating in a parenting programme were described as active agents, striving to learn new skills to cope with their family life in the new cultural context, such as making decisions together, and negotiating with and trying to find ways to improve their relationship with the child.

Second, in the present study, there was a focus on the positive societal aspects in the new country. Similarly, the Migrant World Values Survey (Puranen, 2019) also reported that most migrants appreciated the new, better opportunities for education, freedom of speech, financial conditions, housing, access to healthcare and ability to make more free life choices in their new countries.

Third, consistent with previous research (d'Abreu *et al.*, 2021), the parents had an ability to positively reframe difficult circumstances. They expressed gratitude about coming to a safe place that brought hope for a better life. Altogether, this positive attitude may fuel parental resilience and strengthen efforts to build a new life and succeed in the new country (Merry *et al.*, 2017).

Parents in the present study also expressed a focus on the past and present, as well as the future. Thoughts and plans for parents and their children's futures can be conceptualized as cognitive coping strategies to maintain well-being and overcome adversities. A recent qualitative German study (Walther *et al.*, 2021) showed that parents who displayed cognitive coping strategies could maintain their well-being and functioning despite adversities. Some example strategies were finding acceptance, having a focus on the present and the future, and making favorable comparisons between the home and the receiving country (Walther *et al.*, 2021). Focus on the future could also be seen in the wish for involvement in the child's schooling. Furthermore, the present study supports previous findings (Merry *et al.*, 2017), in indicating that education is considered an important path to a better life. In summary, helping parents to focus on the opportunities in the new country may strengthen their resilience and facilitate successful adaptation of the families (Walther *et al.*, 2021).

4.2. Navigating among past and present culture and values

The parents in the present study emphasized the importance of maintaining relations with their past. They used a range of strategies to uphold their culture, values and language of origin, and stay in contact with family and friends in the home country. The importance of these aspects has also been described in previous studies (Merry *et al.*, 2017). A key factor in a family's ability to strengthen resilience is to preserve the language, culture, values and religion of the country of origin (Merry *et al.*, 2017). This has also been associated with improved coping and feelings of strength and pride (Merry *et al.*, 2017). The Migrant World Values Survey (Puranen, 2019) underlines how parents in a new context have to navigate their parental role around the prevailing values in the receiving countries as well as around their heritage values. This was reflected in the stories in the present study, where parents described how they navigated parenthood around both past and present values. Some of the previous strategies could no longer be employed,

implying that the parents were forced to find new ways.

Parental values and norms around the world have been explored since the 1980s, and Swedish parents stand out as secular with libertarian values which can be seen in the Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map (World Values Survey 7, 2022). For people who come to Sweden, these values may differ greatly from those in their original countries (World Values Survey 7, 2022), although an adapted version of WVS for migrants (Puranen, 2019) indicates that people often change their values after coming to Sweden. The results from the translated and adopted WVS together with interviews of Swedish migrants emphasize dual identities, being both proud of their origins and simultaneously feeling that they belong to the new country (Puranen, 2019). This is reflected in the current study where parents described a cultural clash with the individualistic society, reduced interpersonal helpfulness, and children's extended rights and influence, but, at the same time, a willingness to become part of the society. This willingness, together with a welcoming society with policies and practices promoting cultural diversity, seems to be a way to enable integration (Berry, 2006). Moreover, it has been suggested that a resilience factor at societal level is support for cultural diversity (Masten et al., 2021). Thus, a question intervention developers must ask is: How do we address and embrace cultural diversity when we develop parenting interventions for refugees? A review summarizing interventions for immigrant families emphasizes the importance of a needs-based approach, as well as culturally relevant programs to improve recruitment, engagement and acceptance of the interventions (Hamari et al., 2021). For example, this could mean that participants are able to use his/her mother tongue and that the program has an awareness and cultural sensitivity regarding cultural beliefs, manners, and traditions (Hamari et al., 2021). Results from a meta-analysis of various child prevention programs and psychological/social interventions in Germany and Sweden, respectively, suggest that new, novel programs or culturally adapted programs were more effective than adopted/transported programs (Sundell et al., 2016). According to these findings, programs need to be culturally adapted. In a recent qualitative study of immigrant mothers' experiences of raising teenage children in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Sweden, the participants expressed a wish for culturally tailored parenting programs (Lindén et al., 2022). However, extensive and deep-level adaptation has not been found necessary for the success of clinical parenting interventions when implemented in countries culturally different to where the intervention was developed (Gardner et al., 2016). Interestingly, interventions were even found to be more effective when transported to a more distant cultural context. In the present study, there was saturation in the material and clear similarities in the experiences of the different language groups, despite the heterogeneous cultural backgrounds of the parents. This may indicate that there is some homogeneity in experiences of parenting in the new country.

4.3. Loneliness as a risk-factor

A pendulum seems to be swinging between the experience of hope and a consuming and non-elective loneliness. The difficulty of creating social contacts in the new country, together with a lack of family and relatives from the home country, was highlighted in a majority of the interviews. These findings are similar to the experiences of immigrant mothers in the study by Lindén et al. (2022), who described feelings of abandonedness in their parenthood due to the loss of social support from extended family and relatives. Inhabitants of the recipient country were also perceived as not being so interested in socializing. The parents had difficulties finding social entry points, such as interest or hobby groups, where they could meet others. This is in line with a recent Swedish study of newly arrived parents who described it difficult to adjust to a new social situation and language barriers making social interactions and employment difficult (Mangrio et al., 2020). Moreover, it has been shown that individuals with adequate social relationships have a 50% higher likelihood of survival compared to those with insufficient relationships (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). The authors likened the negative outcome to those of smoking and alcohol consumption, well-established risk factors for an increased risk of early death. This emphasizes the importance of reducing loneliness to increase well-being. Similarly, for refugees, loneliness was one of the most important predictor of mental ill-health several years after resettlement, in addition to economic stressors and adjustment to life (Wu et al., 2021). This includes emotional loneliness due to the absence of family, and social loneliness associated with a poor social network (Wu et al., 2021). Therefore, the combined value of structured parental support and informal social support should not be underestimated (Lindén et al., 2022). An important area of focus is how to facilitate social contacts, networks, or support groups to help reduce loneliness throughout the resettlement process. It is not unusual for interventions for immigrant families to be conducted in a group-based format, which might in itself enable social support and integration (Hamari et al., 2021).

4.4. A new way of being a parent and relating to an acculturation gap

The parents in the present study expressed a need to find new ways of being parents, and said that earlier parenting strategies might need to be replaced. The loss of cultural, social and financial capital may delay parents' integration into the new society and give rise to feelings of disempowerment in their identity as parents (Baghdasaryan et al., 2021; Lindén et al., 2022). An earlier study (Baghdasaryan et al., 2021) described parents' struggle to navigate through two different cultural paradigms, and how acculturation challenges undermined their role as parents, threatened family cohesion and led to an increased feeling of alienation between child and parent. The pace at which the acculturation process in the family occurs may differ between children and parents. It is not uncommon for children to adapt and acculturate faster, which affects dynamics and relations in the family (Deng & Marlowe, 2013) and may create an acculturation gap between parent and child (Birman, 2006). In the study by Baghdasaryan et al. (2021) as well as in Lindén et al. (2022), parents described an unfamiliarity with local parenting norms that contributed to feelings of disempowerment, passivity and a shift in power dynamics with regard to the child. In the present study, the change in power relations and a feeling that parenthood was being undermined were also described, but, in contrast to Baghdasaryan et al. (2021), a passive parenting-style was not. To the contrary, the parents described an active parenting style, with parents trying to be involved and a part of their children's everyday life. Some parents described a change in parenting style, becoming more of a friend to the child, trying to find time to invest in the

relationship, and communicating effectively. Unlike in [Lindén et al. \(2022\)](#) where parents described experiencing a fear of the social services and thoughts about what would happen if they were not good enough parents, the parents in the present study described a focus on how to help their children prosper in the new country. A promotive parenting program might include a focus on how to find ways to relate to each other in the family.

In summary, this study supports previous studies regarding the importance of language and finding a balance between two cultures ([Merry et al., 2017](#)). The current study adds to the literature by describing parents' attempts to find new ways of being a parent in a new context. Based on its findings, the motivation parents have for learning the language, building a new life and becoming a part of society while maintaining their heritage culture, and adapting their parenting in the new culture, should be valued. Group-based interventions can act as a platform to reduce loneliness, and existing resilience factors should be emphasized and strengthened. A future parenting program might include both evidence-based parenting skills, such as how to strengthen relationships and improve communication between parent and adolescent, and helping parents on their way to being bicultural parents.

4.5. Strengths and limitations

The main limitation regarding the validity and reliability of the study lies in the bias the researchers may have introduced in presenting and interpreting the data. To ensure trustworthiness of outcomes, credibility, dependability and transferability have been considered ([Graneheim & Lundman, 2004](#)). Regarding the credibility of the study, our sample reflects participants of various cultural backgrounds, different language groups, ages and levels of education, and has 32% fathers. Future studies could conduct subgroup analyses of gender and level of education to understand possible differences in parental perceptions.

A strength is the inclusion of different language groups, and examining whether experiences differ between them, instead of limiting ourselves to a specific language group. We see the analysis of the entire material as a strength, since we have maintained an inductive approach throughout. Selective reduction of the data may increase the risk of focusing on a limited aspect and prevent novel insights. Moreover, by considering the data as a whole we were able to see inter-connected categories and themes.

Further, there was open dialogue and discussion between the three coding co-authors throughout the whole process of data collection, analysis and interpretation, to ensure credibility. We used an iterative process, with repeated coding and recoding, together with stepwise replication, to reinforce dependability. A strength is that the interviews were conducted in the participants' mother tongues, to capture the nuances in their languages and avoid possible loss of information through interpreters. This improves the data's credibility.

It can be considered a limitation that the research group was not directly involved in the interviews, but a strength may lie in the insider-perspective and double cultural competence of our interviewers. The insider-perspective might, on the other hand, give rise to bias if personal experiences affect the interviewing process. Thus, the structure of the interviews, with pre-defined probing questions, together with training of the interviewers, was a way to reduce the risk of bias. Additionally, cultural awareness among interviewers may create a stronger alliance in the interview situation, and help frame the questions in a cultural appropriate way. Caution and respect regarding transferability was needed to interpret and draw out the implications of this study, since the data needed to be seen in light of the specific characteristics and contexts of the participants.

5. Conclusions

The present study suggests that strengths and motivation exist among refugee parents and can be capitalized upon. A way to enhance well-being and fuel resilience may be to ensure that refugee families are able to find ways into new social networks, thereby reducing the effects of loneliness. Strengthening parents' motivation to learn the new language, enabling ways to become independent, and fully mastering the parental role in the new cultural context are central aspects. It is also relevant to validate the experience of living in and between two cultures, and help identify the value and resilience associated with having access to two cultures. Culturally different ways of being a parent should be considered in relation to what is known about risk and protective factors for children's positive development. Further, a future parental program should strengthen parental self-efficacy by offering alternative positive parenting strategies, as the parents expressed the view that their earlier strategies may not be applicable in the new cultural context. The opportunity to positively affect both parents' and the next generations' well-being and integration may be seen as a motivation for strengthening parental resilience (cf. [Southwick et al., 2014](#)).

Declaration of interests

None.

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