Long-Term Adaptation Among Naturalised Bosnian Refugees in Sweden—Existential Preoccupation, Spirituality and Resilience

Selma Porobić

1 Introduction to the Resilience of Refugees and the Adaptation Process

Refugee experiences have been documented ever since the earliest scriptures across the world, such as Hindu Eposes, Old and New Testament and the Koran, thus indicating the trans-historical and trans-cultural presence, continuity and universality of such experiences. Regardless of the causes of displacement, war-induced or triggered by natural disasters, being forcibly displaced is a traumatic experience that by and large produce multiple stress, loss and suffering. It is a well-documented fact that those who are affected may suffer greatly before, during and after displacement, as their losses and traumas accumulate (Bogic et al. 2015). Besides stressful pre-and post-migration experiences impacting refugees' lives, shared and communalized traumas of violent changes in the home society's structure and functioning due to often irreversible social, economic, political and demographic consequences, further complicate the recovery and adaptation processes (Hamburger et al. 2018). As a result, individuals, families, social groups, including the whole societies (home and recipient) find themselves dealing with effects and adjustments to such multi-layered disruptions for decades and generations after the actual events occurred.

S. Porobić (✉)
Palacky University Olomouc, Olomouc, Czechia
e-mail: porobsel@gmail.com

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In general, the longitudinal psychosocial accommodation of such intricate life changes like forced migration, and in particular recovery and healing from its multipart stresses and traumas, has not been afforded enough research so far. On the other hand, a considerable amount of psychiatric and clinical research has been conducted in the area of conflict situations and displacement, studying pre- and post-migration indicators of health among refugees, pointing to an inevitable link between the refugee experience and mental illness. This research indicates that prevalence rates of mental disorders are frequently increased in long-settled war refugees across studies and countries explored (Mollica et al. 2001; Fazel and Wheeler 2005; Silove and Steel 2007; Bogic et al. 2012), and that pre-displacement and post-displacement factors influence the psychosocial wellbeing in a long-term perspective (Porter and Haslam 2005; Bogic et al. 2015). In Bogic et al. (2012) mental disorders were assessed in war-affected refugees from the former Yugoslavia in Germany, Italy and the UK, with results indicating that socio-demographic characteristics, war experiences and post-migration stressors were independently associated with mental disorders in long-settled war refugees. The risk factors varied for different disorders but were consistent across host countries for the same disorders.

However, critics have argued that the mental health approaches are inherently geared towards the pathology of war-affected and refugees (Summerfield 2000; Pupavac 2002; Boyden 2010; Boyden and Mann 2005) which "obscures some very real protection issues, neglects people's capacities and resilience, undermines their existing resources for self-protection, and creates operational strategies ultimately disempowering" (Gozdziak 2002: 121). Although it is established that posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in refugees appears to be commonly observed reaction phenomenon, it is not the primary pathological sequence nor does it capture the diversity in trauma reactions around the globe (Hobfol and de Jong 2014). Different cultures in different historical times have developed various coping strategies of reactivity to trauma, and ever-changing traumascapes show that there are universal similarities and significant differences that constitute the 'human' responses to trauma (De Jong 2007). Therefore, it has been suggested that the various clinical studies with the dominant operational (and humanitarian) emphasis on an individual's vulnerability in a forced migration context, have made people more susceptible to danger by portraying them passive victims rather than active survivors of adversity.

A considerable amount of qualitative data is available that highlights the behaviour and responses of refugees as appropriate under the circumstances. The large body of research from the fields of anthropology and sociology suggests that several social and cultural resources are relevant to refugees' positive adaptation to trauma (Porobić 2012, 2018; Ahearn 2000). In his first of a kind, longitudinal and qualitative

study of Cypriot refugees' adaptation to forced displacement, Loizos (2008), drew attention to the conceptualization and continuity of social life goals and their practicalities as the source of resilience for this population. He pointed out that few of his informants (1400 internally displaced Greek Cypriots from 1974 conflict with Turkey) have had extreme reactions. He suggests that most can be described as emotionally scarred and embittered, but not socially disabled or incapacitated.

Similarly, in the more recent study of long-term effects on the mental health and psychosocial well-being of forcibly displaced women in Bosnia, Serbia and Kosovo, concluded as part of the two-year-long, multi-methods and cross-country project, the plethora of social resources for the positive readjustment practices have been identified. Among these, the sociocultural ones, including strong community ties, healthy family relationships, gainful employment and child-centred life, top the list (Porobić 2016a, b).

Thus, one needs to acknowledge that a destructive reality of war and forced migration is often counterbalanced by the variety of resources (individual and environmental) and protective coping processes available. Importantly, it is noted that specific protective and adaptive processes, such as those involving social and cultural resources (Ahearn 2000; Gozdziak and Shandy 2002; Ai et al. 2003; Loizos 2008; Porobić 2012, 2015, 2016a, b, 2017, 2018), open up opportunities for a meaningful and potentially positive accommodation of forced migration adversities.

These findings suggest that the effects of social upheavals causing massive scale displacement should be studied concerning both traumas inflicting stressors as well as longitudinal social and psychological processes of coming to terms with these in an adaptive manner. *How well are these processes researched so far? How much do we know about wellbeing and resourceful accommodation of refugee traumas from a long-term perspective?*

1.1 Refugee Narratives—Hearing the Voices of Resilient

Research on the topic of forced migration and health almost exclusively gives the impression that there is an inevitable link between the refugee experience and mental illness. However, as Baker (1990: 65–66) insightfully pointed out in 1990 in the *Journal of Refugee Studies*, which had a common focus on refugee voices, "*… it would be naive to conclude that the refugee experience makes all those who have gone through it more vulnerable to stress and mental illness. Much of the research and literature available on this topic comes from psychiatrists and psychologists, and the danger is that perceptions and interpretations can be skewed to favour a 'clinical' view.*"

Many different pathways in the "psychosocial transition" from crisis to either a positive or negative aftermath are possible so that people can "remain unharmed" or even "do well" in the context of a refugee crisis. In the emergent positive psychology literature, the relationship between active cognitive coping strategies, personal dispositions (such as optimism) and social and cultural resources (such as religion and spirituality) has been extensively discussed and related to human resilience in the face of adversity, thus addressing the juxtaposition of well-being and thriving in the aftermath of such events (see e.g. Tedeschi and Calhoun 1995; Tedeschi et al. 1998; Koenig et al. 2001; Keyes and Haidt 2003; Bussey and Wise 2007).

For instance, several studies (see Weine et al. 1998; Steel et al. 2009), report a stabilization or a decline of psychopathology in adult refugees after settlement in the asylum country confirming that the act of resettlement and its stability was a particular resiliency factor (Hobfol and de Jong 2014). Likewise, the ecological resilience, conceptualized "*as those assets and processes existent on all social-ecological levels that have shown to have a relationship with good developmental outcomes after exposure to situations of armed conflict*" (Tol et al. 2011), points to the importance of understanding the particular contextual factors involved in the resilience processes.

Further to that, the British social psychiatrist Summerfield (2000), notes that the mental need dimension of refugees is exaggerated and notes that trauma work in humanitarian operations is rooted in the way that medicine and psychology have displaced *religion* in western culture. He argues (2000: 11)

> *How pain and suffering were to be understood has always been at the heart of the relationship between human consciousness and the material world. The religions of the world traditionally provided frameworks to capture pain, and the terminology with which to express it; over the last century in the secularizing West, this role passed to medicine and psychology. But, human pain is a slippery thing if it is a thing at all. Mental health frameworks and the discourse of 'trauma' can contribute to its elucidation, in particular when it is too much for a person as a biopsychological organism to bear. Nonetheless, the transcending reality is that counting the human costs attached to adverse experience invokes not technical considerations but philosophical and socio-moral ones: these differ radically across cultures, but also do not stand still over time in one culture or indeed in an individual life course.*

Indeed, the faith-based reactions are not exceptional human experiences in adversity, notably reported by those who suffer from the traumatic consequences of war-displacement and refugee experiences. Psychiatrists like Brende (1993), who has written about PTSD and spirituality, have argued that unresolved symptoms of PTSD can occur when trauma survivors do not resolve their emotional and spiritual

responses to experienced trauma. After all, even in the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition of health[1] it is acknowledged that a multidisciplinary conceptualization of a framework for health should address complex human needs in which spirituality forms a vital part of the social and psychosocial make-up of the individual.

However, studies in faith and religion in relation to forced migration adversities have only by few been discussed as vital to include in an understanding of refugee resilience (Gozdziak 2002; Ai et al. 2005). Rare studies have examined the link between religious meaning-making and adjustment to forced migration adversities (Porobić 2012, 2015, 2018).

To date, voices of refugees demonstrating wellbeing in the aftermath of displacement and relocation which fall outside the interventionist—humanitarian or recipient country's immigration-frameworks for the psychosocial support are scarcely present in the literature. My view is that this absence not only reflects a lack of willingness to understand the people who have been exposed to this adversity but even the very nature of the actual adversity.

In an attempt to bridge this gap, emic data collected in this study reflects the person's inner worlds i.e., their innermost thoughts, emotions, beliefs and behaviours throughout the constructive dealing with experienced forced migration adversities and the role of religiosity as a resilience agent i.e. resource factor in a positive adaptation process to forced migration adversities.

1.2 Long-Term Adaptation and Its Existential Aspects

The process of adaptation to forced migration adversities is commonly depicted as highly complex. Various psychology researches suggest that being forcibly uprooted and becoming a refugee is a process that has lifelong psychological effects and adaptation implications (Bustos 1995; Silove 2005). Refugees are often survivors of systematic torture and strategies aimed at inflicting harm on the physical and psychic body of the individual, his or her family, relatives and social surroundings, commonly supported by ideological, political and historical motifs that legitimize abuse and oppression. Adaptation is closely linked to the reactions and ruminations of such distressing exposures and is expected to involve complex coping processes related to experiences of humiliation, helplessness and extinction

[1]As a "*state of complete physical, mental, (family), social and (spiritual) well-being and not merely an absence of disease or infirmity*" (see WHO's official website at www.who.int).

(Bustos 1995; Silove 2005). Experienced physical and psychological pain is, therefore, often associated with *degradation and dehumanization.*

Swedish psychology researchers like Bustos (1995: 63) argued for specific refugee-related traumatology in which attention is given to organized oppression and torture and typical experiences of people in repressive political systems, which further result in three main features: (1) attack on the *body*; (2) attack on the *self* (identity, inner life with stored memories, self-esteem, self-reflection, self-perception etc.); (3) attack on an individual's *world view* (universal perception of the world, personal security, integrity, invulnerability, social coherence, central life values etc.). He particularly underlined that no matter which symptomatology is detected, the central dilemma in the refugee experience involves the interaction of psychodynamic processes and the intentionality of these in that they meet the existential quest of each.

Thus, as an advocator of a psychodynamic-existential approach to refugee experiences—starting from an exposure to war, violence, torture and oppression and extending into the post-migration context—he emphasized that the inner world of the exposed, with its dynamic processes, will lay the foundation for possible *existential interpretations* of these complex life experiences.

Similarly, Silove (2005) proposed the broader conceptual model of mental health in post-conflict situations, in which he draws attention to *the existential-meaning system of refugees* as an essential dimension in studying survivors' mental health and adaptation in the aftermath of distressing experiences. According to Silove (2005), the exposure to inexplicable evil and cruelty tends to shake the survivor's faith in the beneficence of life and humankind and trigger *existential preoccupations,* in which the person strives to find a coherent reason for his or her endured suffering. Individuals and communities thus face a crisis of *trust, faith and meaning* that may intensify feelings of alienation and emotional isolation in the post-conflict or post-displacement phase. However, in his understanding, the overcoming of this sort of mistrust and feeling of alienation is not a dynamic intrapsychic process, but a gradual process primarily connected to the social environment of the exposed. In this process, the re-establishment of religious institutions and the rediscovery of faith, spirituality or social engagement in a common purpose and meaningful political activities may help individuals and communities to cope with existential dilemmas.

Likewise, earlier psychology studies (particularly within humanistic and existential psychology) indicate that the act of transcendence of the accumulated losses and grief is a plausible possibility towards a progressive movement from a negative to a positive perception of the world, life and its meaning. Bettelheim (1950) suggested that political, social or religious ideology-driven groups were able to

successfully cope with Nazi camps due to their commitment to transcendental meanings and solidarities. This same notion was recognized and further developed by existential psychologist, Viktor Frankl, in his later works, in which the will to meaning was discussed and proposed as a survival resource (1969, 1984).

Following the various reasoning on trauma, study of war and displacement experiences in this research was confined to the subjective experiences and perceptions of a person's life as a whole (through a life history approach) and less to a particular situational context of distress commonly referred to as refugee trauma, demarked by either pre-migration or post-migration temporal phases and their typically identified stressful content. My temporal approach to experiences of refugee trauma is thus *holistic and process-oriented*, focused on a particular cognitive and affective processing of forced migration experiences and the positive nature of the process as perceived from the present time perspective of the informant, i.e. constructed during the course of narrative life history interviews conducted for the purpose of the research.

In this approach, attention is drawn to *the existential meaning system of the individual* that has been challenged by war-induced displacement and relocation, in that there is a central focus on an individual's religious meaning-making in relation to his or her suffered adversities. The research focused on *religiosity* as a socio-cultural resource in gradually dealing with displacement adversities and their resultant existential preoccupations—an aspect of health that is often neglected in refugee studies. Existential preoccupations involve experiences that bring to the fore the limits of human powers and capacities in the face of adversity and concern life's meaning, suffering, trust in the world and faith (Silove 2005). In other words, such preoccupations reflect an individual's underlying assumptions and beliefs about the world.

1.3 About Interviews

Data collection using personal interview involved the narratives of 20 Bosnian refugees, today residing in different regions of Sweden. Sporadically, already recorded memoirs and personal reflections on the war and post-war experiences were also collected from a few informants when they made these available.[2]

[2]It is worth noting that many individuals from this group tend to ventilate their life experiences through writing them down as a diary or making them known at various internet sites that serve as a meeting point for the dispersed Bosnians all over the world. This type of

Interviews were conducted with individuals who became refugees as a result of the war that engulfed Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) from 1992–95. According to the Bosnian Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees, approximately 1,200,000 people sought international protection in foreign countries, and approximately one million were internally displaced.[3] Many of the 1,200,000 who had initially fled abroad were offered asylum and permanent residence in their country of refuge or by a third country. At the centre of attention in this chapter are those Bosnian refugees who settled in Sweden (approx. 54,000) and for the most part, were given humanitarian asylum.

All the informants had permanent residence and Swedish citizenship by the time of the interviews. They belong to the refugee population that was given collective asylum as a result of the Swedish Government's decision in 1993, amid the war in BiH, when Sweden already hosted a considerable number of Bosnian refugees. The same year a visa requirement was introduced for Bosnian citizens, imposing control and restrictive measures regarding the reception of the additional number of war-fleeing persons from BiH. However, the policy of reuniting refugee families and the right to settlement in Sweden based on family reunification continued for a few more years. Eighteen of the informants arrived in the country in the period of war in BiH, 1992–95, and two, who came through family reunification, arrived in the country in 1995 and 1996, after the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement that put an end to the war in BiH.

The interviews conducted are *in-depth* interviews of general and detailed nature and of *semi-structured* type, characterized by an informal, conversational style that enabled the participants to engage in the process more freely (Denscombe 1998). The semi-structured nature of the interviews, in which the various aspects of their life stories were constructed or re-constructed, allowed the respondents to create their stories in personally meaningful and acceptable ways thus reflecting the subjective selection of their lived experiences.[4] The researcher guided the interview and asked probing questions.

(Footnote 2 continued)
data is not presented in this chapter but instead served as a complementary comparison for the researcher in the analysis of the interview-based data collection.

[3]By 31st August 2000, 360,749 refugees had been repatriated to BiH, and 321,730 IDPs had returned to their pre-war homes of origin (UNHCR 2000). See www.unhcr.org

[4]From a metatheoretical standpoint, human beings are viewed as (co-)authors of their life stories, struggling to compose a meaningful account of the critical events of their lives and revising, editing or even dramatically rewriting them when the presuppositions that sustain these accounts are challenged by unanticipated or incongruous events (see Neimeyer 2010).

All the interviews were carried out in the informants' homes and took between one to two hours, with variations of 60 min to three hours. The interviews were conducted in the informants' mother-tongue, i.e. Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, tape-recorded, transcribed and translated into English by the researcher.

The majority of the interviews were conducted in the Skåne region of Southern Sweden, both for practical reasons and in accordance with the Statistics Sweden (SCB)[5] from 2006, which show that Skåne has the largest concentration of inhabitants originating from BiH. These statistics also indicate that the majority of refugees from Bosnia have resettled in the three most urban and populated regions of Sweden—the Skåne region, followed by the Gothenburg and Stockholm regions.[6] Twelve of the informants live in the Skåne region (eight of them in Malmö, two in Helsingborg, two in Lund), six in the Gothenburg region (four in Gothenburg and two in Värnamö) and two in the Stockholm region (one in Stockholm and one in Norrköping).

1.4 About the Informants

The informants chosen for the interviews and the purpose of gathering life stories were arbitrarily selected through the *snowball sampling method*. Historically, this method has been widely used in qualitative studies of hidden populations. The identification of such populations requires knowledge from insiders who can locate people willing to participate in the study. This method appears to be particularly applicable when the focus of interest is an area of coping with adversity (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981, 2: 141–163).

Initially, 25 informants were contacted for an interview, although in the second phase of selection, 20 interviewees were *purposely selected* (Patton 2002). The criteria used for such selection involved *variation* (Eneroth 1984), represented

[5]This is the leading Swedish administrative agency tasked by government, different agencies, private sector and researchers with producing and communicating statistics for decision making, debate and research as well as coordinating the Swedish system for official statistics. See www.scb.se.

[6]According to SCB 2006, out of a total number of 56,800 resettled Bosnian refugees in Sweden, 12,385 Bosnians live in Skåne (Malmö: 5,502), 12,250 in the Gothenburg region (Gothenburg: 6,053) and 5,418 in the Stockholm region (Stockholm: 2,571). The rest of the Bosnian population is spread throughout the country's less populated regions, although the main concentration is in cities and larger urban centres. See www.scb.se.

through variety in socio-demographic characteristics along with talkativeness and openness in recounting religion's role in *war-related displacement.*[7] The chosen informants reflect the variety of socio-demographic characteristics, such as ethno-religious background, education, gender and age.

Out of 20 informants, nine are females, and eleven are males. I strived to reach a feasible balance in the gender break down, but the overall gender division of the informants is a result of the random and unsystematic selection process. In contrast, age break down was achieved through more intentional selection in favour of interviewees older than the age of 30. This age bias was due to intentional access to personal experiences, views and memories of the life before war and displacement. I estimated that those, who upon arrival to Sweden were in young adolescence age, from fifteen onwards, are eligible candidates. The average age of the informants in the study is 41, with ten informants being over the age of 40 and ten being under the age of 40. The youngest informant is a 25-year-old female, while the oldest informant is a 55-year-old male.

The school-based education of the informants is reasonably high with the majority, thirteen of them, holding university degree. Besides these thirteen with a university education, two were students at the university, four had vocational training, and one was a factory worker. Occupations represented amongst vocationally trained are electrician, chef, hairdresser and health worker. All besides the health worker who works in the home for elderly persons have brought their vocational training with them from BiH and managed to keep their occupations by working in the private sector.

Following university educated categories are present among the interviewed: two artists, kindergarten teacher, high school teacher, primary school teacher, social pedagogue, journalist, architect, economist, nurse, mechanic engineer, agronomist and a research fellow. The employment situation for this group in the sample is more complicated than for the above mentioned vocationally trained group. Although employment rate of these informants is also very high with only one person (a high school teacher in English) being long term unemployed in Sweden, many do not work according to their university degrees acquired in the homeland and have re-educated themselves in order to adjust to the labour market in Sweden. Unusual for this group, however, seems to be the persistence to keep the same education level acquired in the homeland, but flexibility and willingness

[7]Only members of the BiH's war refugee population resettled in Sweden were eligible informants out of a total of 56,400 members of the Bosnian population resettled in Sweden (SCB 2006).

to negotiate career ambitions and degrees/professions in order to find work under the existing labour market conditions in Sweden.[8]

The majority of the interviewees, typically, come from the area where ethnic cleansing was committed to the non-Serb population, such as Eastern Bosnia: towns Foca (1), Zvornik (1) and Gorazde (1) and Northern Bosnia: towns Banja Luka (2), Prijedor (1), Bihac (1), Bosanski Brod (1), Doboj (1), Derventa (1), Kotorsko (1). Other informants originate from regions, such as Central Bosnia: towns Sarajevo (2), Travnik (1) and Novi Travnik (2), and Southern Bosnia: towns Capljina (1), Mostar (1), Stolac (1) and Trebinje (1), which were all affected by massive warfare during 1992–95. Twelve of the informants lived in, what is today the Republic Srpska (RS), three of them lived in dominant Croat cantons of today's Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH Federation), and five of them lived in Bosniak cantons regions of today's Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This geographical distribution indicates that the majority of the interviewed for this research today constitute ethnic minorities in the regions of BiH that they formerly come from.

Finally, regarding the ethnic background among the interviewed, there were eleven of Bosniak/Bosnian Muslim origin, three of Serb/Orthodox origin, two of Croat/Catholic origin and four of ethnically mixed background. Although unsystematic, these socio-demographic characteristics could be paralleled to the general ethnic breakdown of the total Bosnian refugee population in Sweden. As a result of the war's character, ethnic cleansing and subsequent mass expulsion and displacement, individuals of Bosniak ethnic origin constitute a majority of the received refugee population from BiH in Sweden.

2 Religiosity and Resilience Among Bosnian War Refugees Settled in Sweden

In this part of the chapter, the relationship between existential preoccupations and meaning-making, in particular a religiously informed one that leads towards positive adaptation to forced migration adversities, is presented and discussed.

Various environmental, organizational, cognitive, affective and assumptive stress dimensions of displaced person's experiences were found in the informants' narratives. They demonstrate an intensive search for meaning and its (re)construction in the aftermath of war-displacement and relocation experiences and

[8]For the employment situation of the Bosnian refugees in Sweden, see Bevelander (2009) and Povrzanovic-Frykman (2009).

account for individual characteristics, potentials, capacities and resources in the process of adjustment to these. In the discussion below the focus is placed on the parts of informants' narratives that reveal their ongoing existential preoccupations during the integration of the strenuous life experiences into the continuing course of their lives.

2.1 New Lives: Construction of Meaning and Accommodation of Life Changes

Forced uprooting due to war, subsequent reconstruction and continuation of life in the country of asylum are complex life experiences that are characterized by all informants as multifaceted stresses demanding long-term processing and adaptation. Informants' reflections over these experiences bring to the fore a variety of existential questions and the importance of rebuilding a shattered sense of meaning in life (see even McIntosh et al. 1993). The following comment of an informant who was exposed to war and forced migration during her teenage years illustrates this:

> *... significant things such as losing your home and the security that parents provide, both during the war and after ... living here [in Sweden] and not knowing language at first, helping my parents to deal with their losses, seeing how many innocent people were killed in the war and how destroyed our country was, makes you think more deeply about the questions of life and what to do in your life; what is important, what stays with us and what just easily disappears. (Lejla)*

Furthermore, as a mean of adapting to the new, psychologically demanding life situation, a person's view of self, life's purpose and goals are central components that are investigated (Camino and Krulfeld 1994). For the majority of informants, this process involved reworking many of their pre-war perceptions and the creating or adapting of new ones promoted by the refugee experience and formed in response to experiences and demands of relocation. Some describe it as a self-distancing and changing process with an effect on the view of reality:

> *It is all different now comparing to my life in Bosnia. I think that I also became more flexible and more open to the changes that come my way. Before I was a person of principles, maybe too judgmental as well, and this also harmed my environment many times. Today I am happy for tons of small things and less concerned about some things (...) This experience changes you. You gain greater distance to yourself, and you even start to evaluate and question the reality around you a bit more. (Amel)*

The dissolution of the former Yugoslav state and its replacement with a structurally different society has been mentioned as a potent trigger for personally observed changes and a questioning spirit that Amel describes. These changes on a social, political and cultural level of informants' lives have had a significant influence on their values and views that throughout the process of Yugoslavia's dissolution undoubtedly lost their support by break down of the plausibility structure (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Therefore, the personal stories of the informants lengthily account for the unpreparedness, shock and disappointment with war realities witnessed but also inevitable challenges to their personal beliefs and social norms. Their stories almost exclusively firstly focus on the shocking experiences of being forced to face the breakdown of the home society with its social structures:

The collapse of Yugoslavia and the Communist system did not shock me as much as the collapse of human qualities, moral, and things that I believed we all had built-in us. To have a neighbour attacking you, confiscating your belongings, abusing you and expelling you from your own house is something that shocked me, and this is what I perceived as a collapse of the system. I did not see it coming. I did not see when someone pulled the trigger… All that disappointed me terribly. I am not disappointed with the system and how it fell down but with people and their behaviour. … It was a shocking collapse of the moral values above all. …It hurt me… Primarily the behaviour of people, former neighbours and former friends hurt me… and I am not referring only to my personal experience here but the stories I've read in papers, the things that media broadcasted. (Selver)

It is clear from the stories that the brutal reality of the war and a socio-political collapse not only prompted a questioning and re-evaluation of the internalized life values but even brought to the fore the issues of ethics and human nature in general. Maja, for example, condemns those who did not reflect deeper on such issues after having experienced the war in Bosnia and even moved beyond 'commonly held' materialistic values:

I have severe issues with those who kept the same view of people and the world and did not re-think what is important in life and what not. How can this be the case after the war and all that we have been through in Bosnia? How can they not re-think the human being, good and evil, life and death and our world, and how can they go back to same convictions that money, cars and apartments are worthy of their energy? (Maja)

Anes, one of the informants, tried to explain this by underlining how various perceptions of reality that emerged as a result of war, forced migration and relocation experiences in Sweden, are the most critical changes that one should embrace and understand. Unique strength, in his opinion, is derived from the

existential character of these very experiences in which the individual's sense of belonging is renegotiated through the process of self-examination and a free choice in changing one's views. According to him, finding solutions to everyday life stresses of relocation through modification and changes in central perceptions of life is a necessary sequel in the positive adaptation. Here is how he reasons:

I could, for example, opt for being an altruist without religious ideology or affiliated to a religious ideology which would provide me with strict guidelines regarding my behaviour and my thoughts. In my view, my struggle to adapt equals the process of change in my approach to living. I both value life differently and live life by different rules than before. My process of change is tightly related to the outcomes of the war in Bosnia and my perceptions of life here. The war brought about radical changes to our society and our own lives. We became refugees, the displaced, dispossessed, the resettled, immigrants but still we make choices and live our lives as the best we can. (Anes)

The war-induced displacement of Bosnian refugees interviewed involved not only facing refugee and relocation experiences, but also the re-negotiation of previously held values prompting by dramatic and permanent changes in the home society. How their personal views became affected by the process of adjusting to a new life situation was often explained by referring to personal cognitive capacities to deal with life-shattering experiences. The majority refers to working through these as an enriching process in which they have managed to preserve their own set of central life assumptions. However, they had to adjust these to fit their new life reality. Emir well exemplifies this:

My leading positions regarding the world and my mission in it are the same, just more enriched by the experience. The process of finding the answers on war and migration enriches you and you gain the new perception of your life, but there must be the inner strength and willingness to embark on such a journey. (Emir)

For the majority of informants, the self-preservation efforts—in which proving or emphasizing the veracity of the society or plausibility structure that once provided the individual with an acquired set of beliefs is thus intrinsically connected to the stresses of a life in exile. Among these, the central place takes the 'lost sense' of home. The process of re-defining or re-negotiating a sense of home and belonging is manifested many times by referring to religious and cultural references, which provide continuation of specific previously internalized values, and even a sense of recognizable personal identity:

My home became what I had brought with me from my past life but I had to adapt that to the society here and my life here. In the end, only my culture and my faith remained closest to the home that I can get. Keeping Islamic Bosnian [here he

accentuates Bosnian] traditions alive within the family by adhering to important values of respecting differences among people of different social class or culture and being a decent human being is something that helps me to know that I am still, in a way, at home. (Amel)

These generally discussed modifications of inner convictions, views and values as introduced above, are further discussed in the next section by focusing more profound on the changes in the informants' *world view, view of self, human relationships and life's meaning*. Such modifications take a central role in their life stories.

2.2 Pro-religious and Pro-spiritual World View

Changes in the world view of resettled Bosnians are often described as a necessary process affected by broader socio-political changes in their home society and experiences of forced migration (Miller et al. 2002a, b). With the loss of an environment that was a part of the individuals' social identity, many perceived that aspects of personal identity also lost their value and came into question.

For example, the internalized social norms could not be sustained through the war and its logic of mass violence and killing. What many believed could never happen in their surroundings, in fact, happened to them. One informant, Selver, wrote in his memoirs, "*you have heard that people are confronted with such things, but you never imagine that it could happen in such a manner. It was a collapse of humanism. Everything you believed in was brought into question.*" During the interview, he further explained:

That was so humiliating. It was such a disappointment with people, human moral, global moral, on micro and macro plan, disappointment with individuals. I cannot recall all the details now, but that was to sit and cry for days. Everything you believed in has failed like trust in people, trust in some world humanitarian organizations and institutions, the purpose of which is to prevent such things [war] and they all failed… It was not so hard for me to run away to save my life, but generally, everything that happened affected me very much. Globally, everything is burdened to our shoulders. I am Bosnia. We are all Bosnia. Those are the traumas that I will bear my whole life. All that makes you even more disappointed and hopeless, but a human being cannot accept to live in such an abyss of constant disappointment and hopelessness. You have to find the way out. If nothing else, I can at least calm down and look for the answers. Why is this the way it is? Maybe Koran can help me find the answers. That was my story. (Selver)

Often these changes are characterized by non-materialistic and more pro-spiritual disclosures about life's meaning and identifications. Zehra connects these changes in her life view to the accumulation of the endured losses:

> *My beliefs did earlier give me this view, but it was not until I felt it on my skin, in the war and life after the war, that I could realize the meaning of this message. When you experience material losses, then you become smarter not to think that this is what we are and what things make us what we are. We may live in a material world and use material goods, but they are not a goal in itself. They can never be the purpose of our earthly lives. (Zehra)*

A sense of a higher power guiding life, especially in enduring the mentioned moral, social and emotional hardships became essential to all. Some went through a process of "purification" and distance from previously "irreligious world view", now replacing it with a new spiritual one that offered answers to their ruminations on the refugee experiences. This is well illustrated in Sasa's case:

> *I went through an in-depth process of cleansing and was able to achieve the beauty of understanding the real inner self which has nothing to do with the culture, society, language and other. It is a pure feeling of inner beauty and happiness and a very spiritual journey in which everything around me became filled with meaning. (Sasa)*

This shift in world view could also be described through stronger reliance and belief in a God-assigned destiny, which is noticed among all informants regardless of their religious background. Statements like "it was meant to be", "only God knows what the destiny holds for us" are typical in this regard.

In general, the changed perception of the world amongst the informants from the Bosnian resettled population in this study illustrates a more pro-religious, pro-spiritual world view. However, four informants have become more critical towards religion and adopted a spiritual standpoint instead. These criticize religion as a newly adopted world view for many Bosnians today and explain this in political terms by illustrating the causes of the identity crises that arose amongst Bosnians in the Diaspora, but also Bosnians in general due to political and social transitions that the post-Yugoslav countries faced. In their understanding, this religious identity is explained as a collective identity forced onto citizens by a politically manipulative new order during the war and post-war BiH society, while spirituality is deemed as a development coming from self-examination and inner transformation—more genuine than one involving ethnicity and politics. For these, the forced migration experiences are related to spiritual transformations that have little to do with the broader structural changes and context and more to do with amelioration of suffering endured on a personal level. These are more described below.

2.3 Spiritualized Self-view

In continuously dealing with the irretrievable loss of home and the irreversible changes that the war and the new displacement situation brought to them, the majority of informants adopted a new perspective on reality. The return to society, as they knew it, is impossible, and the loss of part of the self with it created a space in which the "past is processed in an abstract way" (McMichael 2002). As many explained, this space involves self-distancing and contemplation—a change which has positive connotations, as it leads to renewed perceptions of the world.

This sort of experience and a shift in self-perception has been described as a form of "universal conversion" (Pargament 1997). It involves reworking old perceptions of the self and adopting new—a process which implies a deepened transcendent connection with others and a desire to devote oneself to their wellbeing.

Anes's engagement in the betterment of the world could be viewed as a type of "spiritual conversion" because he primarily stresses the self-cognition and self-awareness related to being conscious about one's importance and power in contributing to the betterment of the world. In his case, the social milieu became a religious expression that is most important to personal identification:

> *I believe that the real salvation for the world lies in the new identity, some cosmopolitan identity, where everyone has several identities – one national, meaning that you are loyal to your state and political systems, institutions and constitution. That means that you are a Swedish citizen, but at the same time, you are a Bosnian citizen too if you feel loyal to both countries and if you have citizenships. However, you can develop an affiliation with the whole world at the moment when you start caring for the entire world. (Ames)*

Mato, who comes from a Catholic background, described a similar process of a spiritual search that resulted in a shift of self-identification in which he gained insight into the self as a transcendent category. To him, the divinity of the self-connected to God could provide comfort and safety in turbulent times, thus ensuring a safe base for exploring the world and re-discovering the meaningful continuation of life when existential crises occurred. This transformation decreased the spiritual struggle triggered by war empowering him to pursue a spiritual path which, today, involves support in Buddhist teachings.

Generally, the increased self-analysis, self-confidence and self-reliance, as well as better self-knowledge and more interest in exploring oneself, were consistently reported as related to the forced migration experiences and religious means of making meaning out of these. For some informants, reliance on faith in the reconstruction of their self-view is even related to the preservation of their

sociocultural and ethnic background, as well as a reminder of the causes for their displacement. Mina well exemplifies this:

> *You feel safe with your faith and knowing who you are. You never forget where you came from, and you are consistently connected to your roots being aware of the reasons for uprooting. Wherever you go, your faith is with you, and it cannot be crushed, stolen, taken away from you. Faith is a pillar of our self-knowing and knowing the world around us. (Mina)*

There is even a somewhat judgmental and critical attitude regarding fellow citizens who did not go through the process of questioning and modifying or completely changing their views and perceptions of themselves as a consequence of the forced migration experiences. Mirsad explains:

> *Some people came here for the same reasons as I did – like war refugees. They have been through the same ordeals, but now they are ashamed of this and do not want to be associated with this background. They moved here and forgot about everything that happened. They do not care. None of their beloved ones was killed and it does not affect them so much. They have no reason to change anything about themselves. They are even proud to say that they remained the same. To me, that is horrible. (Mirsad)*

2.4 Life's Higher Purpose and Meaning

For the majority of informants, reliance on faith in making meaning out of adversity generally involved a greater appreciation of life. This is well demonstrated by Emir, who, in the immediate aftermath of the war during his refugee status period, at first adhered more strictly to religious practice and prayer in particular, including fasting, but then gradually abandoned his religious practice and today finds comfort in his faith by acknowledging its most significant contribution to life's sacred character:

> *Well, at specific periods, I was more praying and celebrating Eid, for example. I do not know if it had to do with Swedes celebrating Christmas and me wanting to have something of my own or genuine faith. In those first years, life was tough here, and I often went to the Bosnian Islamic Association. Many would gather there and pray for the victims of war or for the loved ones who were still in the war. We also sent much aid to Bosnia, and I was quite active in helping people. I fasted each Ramadan, but then somehow I moved away from religion. What is still important to me today is that I have a faith which I can rely on in times of pressure. I am a believer in that regard and know that life is sacred, not just given to us to waste it. (Emir)*

Selver explains this similar insight by referring to necessary inner changes—a result of forced migration being reinterpreted through his Islamic convictions.

For him, exile provides distance and space for introspection, as well as an urge to re-evaluate previously held life values with a possibility to transform oneself spiritually. He explains his spiritual transformation as a feeling of being reborn with new moral obligations:

> *First, you need to re-create yourself in this new environment. I placed Islam as an important component of my new life and who I am here. There are some of our fellow countrymen who still live in the same manner as they did back then. The only difference is that they moved. However, their eyes have not opened. They still go to the coffee bars, stuff themselves with food, run after material things and continue to live by low moral standards… Their eyes have not opened… To open your eyes is to get disappointed. In the first phase, you see what a man is like, but you do not give up. The next phase is Islam. It helped me to leave everything I disliked by lifting the stigma from myself and reforming completely. My life today is different from the one before. I shredded my former life, and in a certain way, I was reborn. It is not that I feel more free or untrammelled. I simply go in a different direction. (Selver)*

The appreciation and elevation of life to the sacred level is a typical interpretation of forced migration experiences from the context of today's post-migration reality. Their life view became shaped by the interpretation of these experiences, primarily through the process of regaining what was lost in social, cultural, spiritual and other domains. Maja describes how her internal capacity to make sense of and deal with forced migration losses stems from a reliance on God, which makes her different from other young Bosnians she meets:

> *I think we should not waste our lives and that we should appreciate living more. I don't think this chance is given to us twice and we must grab it here and now. I am thankful that we, first of all, got out from the war-affected Bosnia in time and that my parents survived the war [pause], that we were able to reach a haven and that I know of ways to inner strengths helping me to rise when I fall. I fought for my rights here in this country and it is only through the determination that I have won back my life. Living on the bottom can give you incredible determination and strength to rise up and fight. I am thankful to God for this being my story. Many others from my generation stayed at the bottom. Some are drug users. I meet them every day in the streets of Malmö. They tried but could not cope with life here. (Maja)*

For Nerko, engagement and contribution to the cultural and social development of the community life are directly related to a new life orientation as a means of constructively dealing with the personal losses endured:

> *Flight and leaving my home, as well as refugee days in Croatia and in Sweden, are difficult things. Life here outside my country is involuntary but it is hopeful. I can still use my capacity and be useful. To be a part of the world and to contribute to the enhancement of culture as an important human expression that can save us from primitive yearnings has become my lifetime dedication. (Nerko)*

2.5 Development of Hope and Optimism

When informants shared their life experiences of the war, refugee and new settlement reality, they also expressed general sentiments towards life and the world in which they interact with other people, as well as their sense of belonging. They acknowledged that the stressful experiences at first generated more pessimistic feeling and distrust in people and the world, and involved a process of dealing with emotional turbulence, leading to re-negotiation and re-investigation of their general attitudes towards living. However, for the majority, this emotional struggle resulted in newly found or re-discovered optimism and hope.[9] Thus, prevailing affective attitudes were increased hope, faith and optimism, tolerance, empathy and openness towards life.

Hope as an underlying mood communicated by the informants in this study is often contrasted with a loss of hope during particularly stressful situations. Regained hope is thus a result of the religiously informed meaning-making strategy to overcome different stressors resulting from this life situation. In Selver's case, the process of regaining hope was crucial to his psychological survival through the affective turbulences he faced:

> *In those darkest moments, hopeless and meaningless, I could only diminish, and for the moment I felt as if I was diminishing, disappearing from the face of the earth… but I reinforced myself through Koran, and the hope that it brought back to me is sometimes as a whole new life. It is a new life that grew out of the old one as a new spirit eager to live and learn about life anew. (Selver)*

For other informants, hope is the inner strength and only capacity to deal with cumulative refugee hardships:

> *Whoever has been through life changes like these has hope in life. How can we not? First, you find your ways around surviving in the war, then you find yourself in an extremely insecure flight situation and later on new threatening situations keep coming your way. If I did not see anything positive I would not have survived all that. (Mila)*

In the same way, Nerko, for example, was able to realize his strengths while being reliant on his beliefs, which made him more capable of dealing with the stresses of resettlement and exile. He managed to come out from his crises with more optimism:

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[9]This could be compared to the extensive review conducted by an international expert panel in 2007 which identified the promotion of hope as an evidence-based intervention principle following mass trauma in adults (see Hobfoll et al. 2007: 820).

> *Self-confidence, self-reliance and a belief in God, which I more firmly believe in now have always been my strong sides. God has given us so many blessings; it's only that we do not know how to make use of them and how to share them among us. With negative attitudes and deeds, humans can only endanger themselves and others as well as ruin all the blessings given to them. Besides all hard moments in life that each human goes through, I think we can all find the optimal meaning in life by looking at the things as they are in reality – more positive than negative. (Nerko)*

The experiences of being a refugee have also led to increased tolerance, empathy and openness in an understanding of marginalized populations. It is often expressed as being compassionate towards people who have been through the same or similar adversities. Vesna explains how her own experiences of becoming a refugee are something that she shares with other individuals who experienced the same, regardless of their background. She emphasizes, in particular, the experience of being "unwanted as a refugee", which increased her empathy towards all the world's refugees. "*To experience being nobodies, homeless, dispossessed and disempowered, can be a remarkable strength*" she emphasizes.

3 Conclusion

The Bosnian refugee informants included in this study were exposed to massively disruptive events in their lives which further caused them to question and doubt many of their previously held beliefs about the world, although not to the point of being unable to function normally in society or becoming chronically depressed and unable to continue their lives. On the contrary, the doubt and distrust of the world as a result of war and displacement had a transforming effect and made them strive more actively to rebuild their shattered worlds. As it was made evident from the narrative data presented in this chapter, they became resilient in facing the constant challenges that came their way as a result of forced migration. Therefore, the most significant aspect of trauma in this study was placed on their means of bearing with the adverse experiences described.

Furthermore, the findings generated by this research describe resilience as a meaning-making process through the interaction of self-capacities (related to earlier socialization, relationships, cultural and religious resources) and construed religious belief (related to the cumulative and existential character of forced migration experiences and the attribution of meaning to these) that shapes the perception and experience of an individual. They point to the crucial role of the individual's self-capacity—the capacity to recognize, tolerate, reorganize and integrate affect and cognition in order to sustain an inner connection with the self

and enable self-survival; use of cognitive and social skills to protect self; and use of cultural resources in dealing with adversities. What became clear from this study is that the individual's adaptation to forced migration adversities involves *religious or spiritual meta-narratives* as necessary means of bearing with the long-term effects of the forced migraiton experiences which can or may involve the existential pre-occupations. More specifically, the religiousness involved in the accommodation process of the suffering and stresses endured by informants in this study could be summarized through its three dominant reforming or reconstructive aspects:

(1) It enables informants to view themselves as *survivors* of adversity and not helpless, incapacitated victims—which is manifested through strengthened self-reliance and confidence, and a sense of increased overall capacity and self-efficacy in dealing with hardships. Here the central aspect is the struggle for self-preservation or ongoing survival of the self. This also involves a notable capacity for the development of assertiveness in seeking useful support sources and declining those that are less helpful in a variety of stressful situations.

(2) It assists in the development of *self-complexity* as necessary capability for dealing with this situation. Self-complexity involves acknowledging that certain parts of the self are lost with forced migration. In particular, these include certain economic, material, social, and cultural aspects that were part of their lost life in pre-war Bosnian society, but which they have preserved and re-discovered as other aspects of the self. These might include previously neglected religious and spiritual resources that emerged as cognitively and affectively supportive in the process of working through the endured society losses and subsequent restoration of self-identity. The informants could thus make use of the domains of self that were not affected by life-shattering changes, such as spiritual and religious resources, which survived the changes.

(3) It led to *spiritual development*—a view of the world and life that involves a greater sense of being connected to something transcendent, in ways that were not necessary nor relevant before the struggle with the stressful life experiences of war and displacement. This involves a more significant presence of God, an increased sense of commitment to the spiritual quest, and learning or having a clearer understanding of one's own religious beliefs and increased religious observance. Although some have understood their (re)-emerged spiritual connectedness within the context of their specific religious belief systems, the majority of informants report an overall awareness of spiritual

> elements in their world view and self-identity, without using a reference to traditional religious language or the background they belong to. The movement of the sacred in the central position of their world view—thus apart from God—also involves life, the self and others as spiritual categories. The spiritual development means that, over time, all of the informants have engaged in a spiritual quest (Batson et al. 1993: 169), i.e. an open-ended dialogue with existential questions raised by the contradictions and tragedies of their life.

The research on resilience in trauma suggests a variety of ways in which individual's self-evaluation, life philosophy, social ties, spirituality and religiousness can be significantly changed and even enhanced throughout the encounter with adversity (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1995; McMillen and Fisher 1998). Although these identified factors are part of the growing resilience literature, they are still to be supported by more empirical evidence. For the majority of refugees, the *adaptation process* is a lifelong project and a central task in their ongoing lives. It is well known that long-term consequences of war-related stress, both that observed and personally experienced, evolve around a resource loss—from losses of loved ones to the loss of one's safety or invulnerability (Hobfol and de Jong 2014). However, this research demonstrated that various personal means of the search for and reconstruction of meaning around losses is a longitudinal and open process also reflecting the existential nature of forced migration traumas.

Rather than pathologizing the experiences of forced migration and reducing them to traumas, informants in this study demonstrated how the use of religious narratives could nurture the phenomenological aspects of their complex refugee hardships, locating these experiences within their meaning-making processes further anchored in their religious and cultural background. In conclusion, this study indicates that resilience, or the indigenous human potential to overcome complex adversities, does not lie in turning away from adverse events and their impact, but in reconstructing them in ways that are personally and contextually more constructive and adaptive to the individual.

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