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Kara E. Dempsey

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EMPOWERING CHANGE: REFUGEE AGENCY IN REFUGEE-LED GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS

KARA E. DEMPSEY

ABSTRACT. In recent decades, scholarly research on displacement and forced migration has increasingly shifted attention from primarily focusing on the legal and structural elements to also include the agency of forced migrants. While increasing attention is paid to migrant agency, most studies focus on their actions during a journey, their taking an active role in camp governance or camp design, and their personal experience(s) or those of their families. Less scholarly work studies how refugees exercise agency after leaving refugee camps. In this article, refugee agency is examined through the framework of political and social actions aimed at recognizing shared needs or injustices, and then addresses shortcomings that mark and "make" refugees different in society. This article draws from in-depth interviews with members of a refugee-led community support organization to explore how this organization assists newly arrived refugees in New Zealand. This organization's locally focused approach emphasizes establishing refugee advocacy networks, solidarity, and fostering a sense of belonging. Also discussed is how the organization's locally focused approach helps it to provide tailored support to address the immediate and dynamic needs of newly arrived refugees. *Keywords advocacy, agency, displacement, forced migrant, refugee.*

Refugees experience various forms of displacement, as individuals and communities are forced from their homes and homelands. With the growing number of people being displaced by conflict, climate change, and natural disasters, it is more important than ever to understanding the intricate realities and complexities of the lived dimensions of displacement. Much of the previous research on displacement primarily focused on categorizing these populations (that is, refugees, internally displaced persons, migrants) or quantifying their experiences (Fransen and de Haas 2019; Ty and Vu 2021). However, in recent decades, scholarly research on displacement and migration has increasingly shifted attention from primarily focusing on the legal and structural elements to a focus on the experiences, decision making, and agency of displaced people such as asylum seekers and refugees. This article specifically explores agentive actions of displaced individuals, including their efforts to shape their lives and the lives of others by creating opportunities after resettlement.

Liisa Malkki (1992) argues that many refugees actively negotiate their lived experiences by performing a certain form of identity that she refers to as "refugeeness." While some scholars categorize these practices as leading to victimization and the emergence of gendered subordinate, individuals (Gass

KARA E. DEMPSEY, Department of Geography and Planning, UNC-Appalachian State University, Boone. [dempseyke@appstate.edu].
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2014; Luker 2015), others challenge the notion that it inherently results in impotence and dependency. Instead, these critics assert that such performed identities should not be viewed as producing passive individuals or voiceless subjects. Rather, they suggest that such performances can serve as a pathway to empowered actions and possibilities (Rossdale 2015; Darling 2016; Häkli et al. 2017; Kallio et al. 2019; Myadar and Dempsey 2021). For instance, research has explored the various forms of agency exercised by forced migrants along migratory routes, including careful decision making, strategic networking, and acts of political resistance (Katz 2004; Kallio and others 2017; Triandafyllidou 2019; Dempsey 2020; Jordan and Minca 2023). Other studies emphasize how refugees and other displaced people utilize agency within camps to improve their living conditions (Oesch 2017; Rigby and Schlembach 2017; Dempsey 2021).

Increasing attention is paid to agency of forced migrants. However, most studies focus primarily on their actions during a journey, their agency in camp governance and design, and their personal experience or those of their families (Darling 2016; Kallio 2018; Kallio 2018; Paszkiewicz and Fosas 2019; Triandafyllidou 2019; Myadar 2023). My own research conducted in the European Union during the Migration "Crisis" is one example that highlights the agency of asylum seekers along migration routes and their solidarity work while living in camps (Dempsey 2018; Dempsey 2020). Nevertheless, fewer studies address how forced migrants continue to exercise their agency after leaving asylum and refugee camps, particularly in terms of how individuals strive to improve their lives and the lives of others after becoming permanent residents in a new state.

This article contributes to a growing body of work that examines the abilities of forced migrants to advocate for positive change, improvement, and dignity for themselves and others after they leave camp(s) (see Selim 2021; Smith and others 2022). While there are several conceptual avenues in scholarship on agency, I aim to move beyond the traditional structure-agency binary, which Vicki Squire (2017) argues frames "subjects in simplistic terms as more or less intentional, rather than as constituted through processes of subjectification that are embedded in dynamics of power-resistance" (see Hay 2002). Scholarship on migrant agency considers various avenues of performed identity and subjective negotiation (for example, Baines 2015). This article examines agency through the framework of political and social actions aimed at recognizing shared needs or injustices underpinned by their categorization as a refugee and addressing these shortcomings (Isin 2012; Häkli and others 2017; Kallio and Häkli 2017). More specifically, it identifies (counter)practices employed by refugees to foreground their political subjectivities to address the deficiencies in state policies that create societal divides between established citizens and newly arrived refugees.

Utilizing this conceptualization of agency, I aim to analyze the political capacities of resistance to difference—the institutional domains that distinguish and marginalize refugees from the rest of society. I examine efforts made by

refugees to establish advocacy and solidarity networks to aid others within the international refugee framework. For this, I draw on my analysis of several in-depth interviews I conducted with members of the refugee-led community support organization, ARCC Auckland/Aotearoa Resettled Community Coalition (ARCC) in 2023 in Auckland. By analyzing decisive efforts that ARCC takes to identify and address perceived shortcomings in state support and the categorization of newly arrived refugees, this article draws on experience-based work to examine refugee political agency (McNay 2014; Baines 2015; Häkli and others 2017).

Established in 2006, the ARCC is a refugee-led local community coalition dedicated to helping newly arrived refugees transition to life as new residents in New Zealand. It intentionally rejects political categorical labels such as "refugee" or "former refugee," opting instead for the term "new resident," or whānau in Māori, to avoid perpetuating the distinction of "Other" (ARCC 2022). The categorical labeling of displaced people can have "immense personal, political and practical significance … that carry particular sets of assumptions that narrow the political and social capacities of those so labelled" (Sajjad 2018, 46). The organization works locally to identify specific key concerns and challenges in its collaboration with recently arrived refugees. With a diverse membership and range of programming, ARCC provides various strategies and avenues of support for refugee advocacy, physical and social support, and cultural cohesion, assisting others in navigating and adapting to their new lives. The support includes immediate needs such as safe and affordable housing, language training, guidance on local transportation options, grocery shopping assistance, and addressing economic concerns. Additionally, ARCC helps new residents who are struggling secure employment, understand their new legal rights, and cope with social challenges such as culture shock, community engagement, and feelings of isolation and marginalization. ARCC members provide personalized and culturally respectful support tailored to each individual's situation and specific needs.

This article contributes to investigations of refugees' political agency by providing a case study of how refugees exercise agency through the ARCC after migrations and beyond refugee camps. ARCC membership supports other forced migrants to thrive within their new environment. This local, refugee-led organization provides an effective model that enables it to adapt and respond more quickly to the immediate and dynamic needs of others, particularly during situations like the 2020 pandemic lockdown. This responsiveness has proven to be more effective and tailored than existing government mechanisms in place. The ARCC serves as a cultural and social advocate during refugee resettlement and integration processes for new refugee residents, facilitating their meaningful participation in the local community. My research identified five main avenues in which ARCC focuses its support efforts: 1) immediate, physical needs; 2) language skills and support; 3) understanding

laws and new rights; 4) job search and related skills; and 5) social support, for both new refugee residents and the larger community. Such avenues of support are critical, as Fizel an Outreach Coordinator, explained in an interview:

> ARCC strives to help whānau (recently arrived forced migrant) understand their new society and their new rights. Our model of practice is designed to help new arrivals resettle and thrive here. We want all individuals from forced migrant backgrounds to feel seen, heard, understood, valued, and supported with the necessary resources. (interview conducted May 3, 2023)

This article is organized into four main sections. First, it discusses theoretical perspectives on refugee agency and advocacy to provide context for the ARCC case study. The second section explains the methodology used in data collection and analysis. The third section places the case study within the context of New Zealand's refugee policies by examining the effective support and assistance that ARCC provides to new residents (whānau) from refugee backgrounds. The final section reflects on the case study and its implications for future research.

To respect the ARCC's preferred categorical terminology, this article will refer to refugees in New Zealand as "new residents" unless referencing a specific legal category or program.

Forced Migration and Migrant Agency

Forced migrants experience various forms of geopolitical control and violence during the displacement and asylum (Coddington 2019; Dempsey and McDowell 2019; McConnell and others 2017; Dempsey 2020; Myadar and Davidson 2020; Jordan and Minca 2023). States are increasingly monitoring, controlling, and preventing the arrival and mobility of "unwanted" migrants (Vaughan-Williams 2015; Jones and others 2017; Hälki and others 2024) through enhanced border enforcement, policing, and detention practices that extend beyond borders (Mountz 2011). Subsequently, scholarly work on borders and migration illuminates the power and violence exerted by states and global refugee regime on migrant bodies (Hyndman 2012; Davies and Isakjee 2015; Dempsey 2024; Morland and Kelley 2024). One of the more ubiquitous conceptualizations of forced migrants presents individuals as powerless, voiceless, passive victims of state and nonstate actors (Ong 2003). Others link a perceived subordination to a gendered position, rendering all refugee bodies as a "weaker" gender(s) (Gass 2014), while some follow Agamben's "bare life" framework (1999) to suggest a permanent state of exception (Darling 2009).

In recent decades, approaches that highlight refugee agency through the lens of intentional mobilization for collectively empowered actions to force societal and political change have begun to gain ground. Such investigations of forced migrant and refugee agency often challenge the portrayal of displaced individuals as passive recipients of government aid, controlled and subjugated by state governance. Instead, this work emphasizes these individuals as capable decision-

makers navigating challenging circumstances (Anderson and Ruhs 2010; Triandafyllidou 2017; Skop and others 2019; Myadar and Dempsey 2021; Myadar and Dempsey 2023; Bose 2024).

Indeed, forced migrants demonstrate numerous forms of agency throughout the journey and make choices along migration routes (Mainwaring 2016; Squire 2017; Newman and others 2018; Dempsey 2020). While some studies may idealize or exaggerate forced migrants' ability to resist structural control implemented by refugee administration (Fresia 2007), research must continue to examine and highlight examples of their agency to challenge oversimplified conceptions (Puumala and Pehkonen 2010; Triandafyllidou and others 2024; Wright and others 2022; Groutsis and others 2024).

Scholarship on migrant agency explores various avenues of performed identity and subjective negotiation (see Baines 2015). For example, Judith Butler (2010) describes performative agency of resistance as when a subject breaks out of the established framework within which the political order exists. An alternative reading of performative includes those influenced by the work of Ervin Goffman (1959) that suggests room for greater intentionality in the efforts of performative agency (see, for example, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011). Häkli and Kallio (2018, 192) present a more dynamic approach that forges a plurality in which one may choose to employ "becoming a refugee" through a combination of "socio-political and socio-material relations." Such interpretations of the performative aspects of "refugeeness" do not suggest they produce refugees as subjugated victims. Instead, as Häkli and others (2017, 191) argue, "This heightened attentiveness toward the figure of the refugee, we argue, lies at the root of performative refugeeness, which provides asylum seekers opportunities for meaningful identity building and political agency." Such attentiveness is dynamic—fine-tuned with time and experience and shared with others in individual or collective supportive ways as part of political agentive action.

Cindy Katz (2004, 242) presents three types of agency "recuperation, that is, the autonomous initiative of the individual who aims at solving her/his own problem and addressing her/his own situation without necessarily changing the overall context; resilience, which includes not only changing one's own situation but also attempting to rework one's circumstances, opening up new possibilities; and resistance which is an action that seeks to subvert and disrupt the conditions in which one finds oneself." Cetta Mainwaring (2016, 5–6) urges us to focus on migrant agency as the "agency used to negotiate mobility' in intersection between migrant agency and sovereign power' in terms that demonstrate migrants are not victims or villains."

Fearing that simplifying the structure/agency framework in the analysis of migrant agency could lead to reductive conclusions, Squire (2017, 272) argues such over simplifications can be "analytically reductive and can be employed in terms that feed into processes of criminalisation or victimisation based on

assumptions about the excessive or reduced agency of unauthorised migrants." Instead, Squire argues for an analysis that focuses on migrants' acts, choices, interventions, and effects, to better reveal relations of power-resistance inherent in migration politics. Triandafyllidou and Triantaphyllidu (2016; 2019) examines migrants' agentic responses by incorporating an acceptance or rejection of preexisting structures. This analysis is informed by Honneth's (1996) notion of intent and strategy, framing agency through actions taken to effect change and reshape their environment, political context, or situation.

In this article, agency is interrogated through the framework of political and social actions aimed at recognizing shared needs or injustices and addressing these shortcomings (Isin 2012; Kallio 2018). More specifically, this article builds on frameworks of active political agency, which emphasize experience-based conceptions of migrant agency that foreground their political subjectivities. These subjectivities identify and seek to ameliorate state processes that create distinctions that mark refugees as "Other" (Baines 2015; Häkli and others 2017; Dempsey and Myadar 2023). Utilizing this conceptualization of agency, I aim to analyze the political capacities of resistance against such differentiation—particularly the institutional domains that categorize refugees as separate from the rest of society. By highlighting refugee practices that identify and work to address state institutional shortcomings and categorizations related to recent refugee arrivals, these actors demonstrate mobilized political capacities for resistance.

The willingness of forced migrants to challenge an unjust political subjectivity is also a critical aspect of their agency, particularly as many seek recognition as valuable members of their new society (Groutsis and others 2020). They demand respect, a voice, inclusion, and a role in decision-making that impact their lives and the lives of other displaced individuals (Ataç and others 2017). Calls to include their meaningful insights in implementing asylum aid are not new (Milner and others 2022). Numerous studies demonstrate that displaced migrants can articulate their own needs, advocate for changes, and seek solutions to the challenges they face (Isin 2012; Kallio and others 2019; Selim 2021). Some researchers argue that a lack of meaningful participation of individuals with lived experience as a displaced person can contribute to examples of ineffective aid programs for forced migrants (Crisp 2001; Paszkiewicz and Fosas 2019).

This article contributes to the growing body of work that considers the alternative spaces and avenues of refugee political agency. While much of this work focuses on displaced persons without confirmed formal rights, in New Zealand, refugees arrive as permanent residents through their quota program, which grants them essentially the same rights as citizens, albeit with additional requirements upon arrival. This is not the case for asylum seekers and individuals who do not arrive through the government's "quota" system, as they face numerous legal, political, and social barriers

during resettlement. Furthermore, even quota refugees in New Zealand described during my interviews that they often sensed a societal hierarchy of belonging, where they existed on the bottom tier. This contributes to feelings of disconnection and marginalization from the wider community. In order to improve their own lives and the lives of other refugees, organizations such as the refugee-led ARCC work with new arrivals and the wider society to help establish connections and a greater sense of belonging for the newest New Zealanders residents (quota refugees) and other forced migrants.

Methods

This article is based on the fieldwork I conducted with the leadership of ARCC New Zealand, several ARCC members, and new residents at the Māngere Resettlement Centre in Auckland 2023. All interviews were semi-structured and strictly followed the Human Subjects Protocol set by the Institutional Review Board for this project. I conducted interviews with twelve members of the ARCC leadership team, which were arranged prior to the start of the project and took place at their main office. These individuals' ages ranged from 27 to 67 years old and were originally from 11 countries, including Myanmar, Congo, Cameroon, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Syria, and Uganda. Additional interviews with ARCC members resulted from the snowballing techniques based on the leadership's recommendations and attendees at ARCC hosted social events at the ARCC center. These interviews included individuals originally from Burundi, Sudan, Eritrea, Egypt, Kurdistan, and Iran.

All interviews were conducted in English, per the interviewees' request. I also interviewed the newly arrived refugees at the Māngere Resettlement Centre while accompanying ARCC leadership to the Centre during their informational session. Interviews at the Centre were conducted with adults aged 21 to 46 years old, originally from Colombia, Somalia, Congo, Myanmar, Eritrea, and Afghanistan. If the interviewees spoke a language other than English, Spanish, or French (languages I speak fluently), members of the ARCC leadership served as translators. The research design for all interviews was underpinned by interpretivist epistemology (Bryman 2016) and focused on key challenges that new residents face during resettlement in New Zealand, methods that the ARCC leadership utilizes to address these challenges, and new residents' perceptions of the impact of ARCC efforts.

Interviews ranged from one to three hours and were recorded with permission and transcribed for analysis. These interviews were preceded by ethnographic fieldwork that combined participation observation with new residents and ARCC leadership at community centers (for example, ARCC and the Māngere Resettlement Centre) and archival and contextual research (such as legal documents pertaining to refugee resettlement in New Zealand) conducted

at the New Zealand Refugee Resettlement Office in Auckland. I then conducted a content analysis on all transcribed interviews and document data (Charmaz 2014).

I am keenly aware of the power hierarchies and vulnerabilities inherent in the interview process, particularly when interviewing refugees (Fritzsche 2024; Frazier and Fritzsche 2024). In order to unsettle some of the power relations, I designed a methodology (Dempsey 2018) that modified a form of reciprocal interview technique utilized in classrooms to create a safe and supportive learning environment (Case and others 2008). By empowering participants to generate their own list of inquiries about the researcher's personal experiences and the New Zealand refugee research project, I aimed to shift some of the scrutiny onto the researcher. Examining research methodologies and a researcher's self-reflection on positionality can help reveal how power operates in the research process. By highlighting refugees' agentive practices, this methodology also sought to amplify their political capacities to resist the status quo and work for specific improvements in refugees' lives. My approach aligns with Maillet and others (2016), who argue that research should resist dominant narratives about vulnerable populations. Ethical considerations, power dynamics, and self-representation were present throughout this research project, especially as I worked with potentially marginalized individuals.

Resettlement in New Zealand

The state's goal for refugee resettlement in New Zealand is for individuals to become productive members of society. The ARCC adds that new residents should thrive and gain a sense of belonging in their new home. This is especially important as legal status does not guarantee inclusion and a sense of belonging. While the state provides support that ranks high in the Global Peace Index, it is important to recognize that individuals may need additional assistance (Institute for Economics and Peace 2018). "While legal status undoubtedly helps in developing a sense of belonging, acceptance and inclusion presents a range of potential additional negotiations, compounding and entangling a former-refugee's past turmoil with the everyday exclusions and potential marginalization in their new society" (Staeheli and others 2012, 71).

New Zealand's asylum policy differs from some other host countries in that the state proactively works with the UNHCR and offers permanent residency to accepted refugees. The UNHCR works with the state to recommend already documented refugees, most of whom live in an UNHCR refugee camp. New Zealand's "refugee quota programme" is the principal mode of entry for refugees in the country. Subsequently, few arrive independently for asylum and very few receive asylum if they did not arrive via the "refugee quota programme." Prior to its establishment of this quota program in 1987, much of the resettlement procedures were informal and largely managed by volunteer organizations and

church-based groups. One of the strategies of this program is to accept "clusters" of refugees with the same ethnic background who could be paired with language and societal support translators in New Zealand.

Before arriving in New Zealand, accepted "quota refugees" receive permanent resident status within New Zealand. This grants these individuals the majority of rights citizens enjoy, including the right to work, study, and vote. Five years after their arrival, they are permitted to apply for citizenship and a New Zealand passport (Immigration New Zealand 2016). On the other hand, individuals granted refugee status after arriving as asylum seekers (outside of the quota program) are classified as "convention refugees." They do not have a guaranteed pathway to citizenship and cannot participate in the Refugee Resettlement Strategy, which includes a six-week orientation at Mangere Centre in Auckland (Yzelman and Bond 2020).

In 2012, the government launched the New Zealand Refugee Resettlement Strategy to help these new residents "participating fully and integrated socially and economically as soon as possible so that they are living independently, undertaking the same responsibilities and exercising the same rights as other New Zealanders and have a strong sense of belonging to their own community and to New Zealand" (Immigration New Zealand 2012, 3). The strategy evaluates the integration outcomes in terms of self-sufficiency through paid employment, participation in local life, health and well-being, education and language skills, and safe and affordable housing.

When quota refugees arrive in New Zealand, they attend a six-week orientation at the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre in Auckland. After completing the orientation, they are resettled in various areas across the country and provided government-appointed support for an additional year. This includes government case workers, paralegals, social workers, and trained volunteers who assist the new residents in understanding local culture, and tax matters, obtaining employment and work benefits, navigating the school system, and connecting with support services (New Zealand Red Cross 2017). However, if a quota refugee does not like the location in which they are relocated after Māngare Resettlement Centre (most report preferring to live in Auckland due to job opportunities and diversity of inhabitants). In that case, they forfeit the year of government support if they move away from their appointed location. Despite the institutional support provided, research suggests there are still gaps in the organized support and individuals' needs, especially after the government resettlement support ends (Kate and others 2019). Many reported feelings of isolation and were unaware of what rights they possessed or what support services were available (Yzelman and Bond 2020; Groutsis and others 2024).

The challenges are even greater for those who arrive "convention" refugees (on a visa) and do not have access to the six weeks of support at the Māngare Resettlement Centre or the year of institutional support for orientation. They

also must apply for permanent residency after living in the country for three years, unlike the quota refugees who receive residency upon arrival. Despite the marked differences between quota and convention refugees, my interviews with new residents reveal that even those who go through the Māngere orientation and receive government-sponsored institutionalize support express the need for additional assistance.

For example, many new residents lack proficiency in the English language, making it crucial to learn English, but it may take a significant amount of time to become proficient. Many new residents also require assistance in finding childcare support, understanding transportation options or accessing them, and building social networks (such as friends and socializing), among other challenges. This is particularly true for women (Kale and Kindon 2016). Additionally, reports indicate a lack of sufficient funds for financing the organizations that connect these new residents with necessary support and advocate for their needs to the government and media (Stephens and Dutta 2018.) Furthermore, the government chose to contract a local organization for casework instead of continuing its contract with the Red Cross, and some suggest that the new organization is not as effective or thorough (interview conducted with ARCC Board on 3 February 2023).

Many new residents also face barriers to integration and forging a sense of belonging, which include cultural and ethnic discrimination (Kale and others 2020). Evidence suggests that skin color or religious clothing can impact their treatment within society, leading to feelings of marginalization (Groutsis and others 2024). This discrimination may be influenced by the Treaty of Waitangi (1840),[1] which recognizes Māori (indigenous) and European decent New Zealanders ("Pakeha"), making assimilation difficult for those who do not fit into those two categories (Kale and others 2018). Many interviewees indicated the perception of feeling excluded from what some identified as "ethnic privilege" that belonged to those two communities at the expense of other cultures and ethnicities. As one interviewee explained, "I was born in Burma. I don't look like a Māori or Pakeha—you know, a white New Zealander, and I have experienced verbal discrimination. There have been times when people come up to me —people from both of those groups—and specifically told me I don't belong in New Zealand when I was out doing the shopping or on public transport. It's not always easy to be the newest citizen in a country, especially if you look different from the majority of people living here" (interview conducted with a Māngere Refugee Resettlement Employee on February 15, 2023). Additionally, there is evidence of economic and social discrimination, particularly against non-Christian individuals (Marlowe and others 2014; Groutsis and others 2024). Evidence of violence against non-Christians include the 2019 mosque shootings in Christchurch which resulted in 51 dead and 40 wounded individuals.

Instead of accepting the situation, many actively advocate for themselves. For example, Groutsis and others (2024) provide a case study of how a Syrian refugee "utilized her skills, qualifications, and professional experience and played an active role in formal and informal networks to navigate choices and emancipate herself from the stigma of being a refugee." There were also several examples from my interviews. Ahmed, an Iraqi man struggled to find employment through traditional job-opening avenues during the first three years after arriving in New Zealand. In response, he learned how to craft a tailored LinkedIn account to showcase his skills and experience online for future employment opportunities. Within a month of establishing this new account, he was invited for an interview with a business in his field and subsequently offered a full-time job (personal interview on February 6, 2023).

Not all examples are based on employment. For example, Faisal, a member of the ARCC leadership team who originally lived in Sudan before moving to New Zealand, advocated for the government to avoid labeling new residents as refugees. Faisal's efforts reveal an example of agentive attentiveness and political capacity of resistance to difference assigned to refugees. In this case, the institutional label "refugee" applied to certain citizens (that is, those not born in the country) even after these individuals became official citizens of New Zealand not only works to define these individuals by their geographic past but "marks" them as different from the rest of society. By insisting that new residents be identified not by their refugee-past, but as new citizens (for example, "new residents"), Faisal political subjectivity as a former refugee, current citizen, and employee of ARCC worked to raise awareness and eliminate some state practices that create distinctions that mark refugees as "Other." In fact, after several meetings with local and regional governments, some legislators and politicians now utilize more inclusive terminology such as new resident or whānau in Māori.

Another example of agentive attentiveness and resistance to differences that are often "assigned" to new residents include actions by Muhammad, a member of the ARCC community. Born in Iraq, Muhammad moved to New Zealand two decades ago and today lives with his family, including his two children in Auckland. Even though his daughter was born in Auckland, she had been bullied in school and often called a terrorist. In order to address the bullying and hopefully create a safe space in which his daughter's classmates could ask questions about their ethnicity and current life as New Zealand citizens, Muhammad volunteered to speak to his daughter's class about new residents from the Middle East. Initially, students were reluctant to ask questions, so he told a story about what he does on a daily basis as a New Zealander in Auckland and told them about his favorite local sports team, movies, music, and favorite park in Auckland. He then asked each child to share something about their own interests and began listing their responses on the board in the classroom. Eventually, he had a lengthy list of hobbies and interests that he employed to describe some of the cultures and people(s) of the Middle East (such as common

culinary dishes, sports, hobbies, and games). After that background, he invited students to ask any specific questions about Muhammad or his country of origin.

Ultimately, he told me in an interview that he believed they had a productive dialogue in which he addressed and helped to dispel rumors students heard from others or on social media, which they had then perceived as truth. While the performative agency undertaken by Muhammad may appear mundane, he understood his role as an approachable source to help dispel mistruths about individuals of Middle Eastern descent. Indeed, his talk resulted in such a productive dialogue that the principal subsequently asked him to speak to other classes in the school and connected him for similar visits to other schools throughout the region.

In addition to advocating for themselves and their families, some new residents also articulate refugee agentive actions by collaborating in alliance to aid New Zealand's newest refugee arrivals. One such organization is the ARCC Auckland/Aotearoa Resettled Community Coalition, which have a long history of securing funding to launch their local support programs. Through a shared attentiveness to the needs of the newest arrivals to New Zealand, ARCC leadership aims to both the newest arrivals with immediate needs while also working to resist markers of "difference." For the later, the ARCC coordinates with members from the larger community by organizing information sessions with new residents (newly arrived and those more established), police, immigration officers, and non-refugee members of the larger community. My research analysis highlights five main avenues of focus: immediate, physical needs; language skills and support; understanding laws and new rights; job search and related skills; and social support (for both new residents and the larger community). In doing so, the ARCC, a refugee-led organization, aims to address the needs of new residents and work toward combating ethnic and social discrimination against New Zealand's newest community members.

ARCC Auckland—the Aotearoa Resettled Community Coalition

The ARCC was established to address the significant gaps between needs of new residents and government support. It also aims to tackle the presence of a stratified hierarchy of belonging in society, where displaced persons resettled in New Zealand are at the bottom tier. ARCC works to engage and empower new arrivals and wider society to build bridges, creating a greater sense of belonging for the newest New Zealanders. The organization's vision is to create "an inclusive, integrating, and equitable society in Aotearoa New Zealand where resettled communities are thriving" (ARCC 2022). The leadership board comprises 27 new residents from diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, all of whom have lived-refugee experience. Through their detailed feedback surveys and reports, ARCC continues to finetune its locally focused

support services. My research analysis highlights five avenues of support, starting with the immediate physical needs of these new residents.

IMMEDIATE (PHYSICAL) NEEDS

ARCC members meet new residents at Māngere at the end of their six-week stay to offer support services to assist with their immediate needs. This typically consists of helping these new residents find affordable and safe housing, which is particularly challenging in Auckland after its housing crisis that inflated housing costs throughout the metro area. When beginning a search for housing, many new residents were unaware or surprised that they would no longer be living in government housing. Having lived (usually for years) in UNHCR refugee camps and then entering New Zealand's Māngere Centre, their new housing accommodations may be their first experience with privately owned rentals. As a result, they may be unfamiliar with aspects such paying rent, potential rent increases over time, the responsibilities of tenants and landlords, and such. Identifying difficulties, sharing helpful local knowledge with incoming citizens, and acting through advocacy to support new residents' needs is built upon their own self-reflection of "refugeeness" that draws on their own experiences regarding differences in procedures, cultural norms, and regulations in a new country. Häkli and others (2017, 192) suggest this is a process of "political becoming where people gain awareness of refugeeness as an identity to relate to."

In addition to explaining the renting and owning of private housing, ARCC leadership acts as a liaison for new residents, helping them establish rental leases —particularly if landlords are hesitant to rent to new residents—and setting expectations for renting in New Zealand. These agentive efforts are intended to both help empower new residents and gain support from landlords. They also hope these efforts forge positive impressions between new residents and the larger community. As Outreach Coordinator, Pwint, a new resident originally from Myanmar, explained in an interview:

> I arrived here in 2006 when I was 17 years old. I lived in refugee camps in Malaysia for six months before coming to New Zealand as a quota refugee. Today, I have my own family and I run my own business in the city here [Auckland]. But I grew in a very rural part of Myanmar, so I faced many adjustments when I arrived in Auckland and I didn't always understand how everything works here. Similarly, there is a lot of things that the newest residents may not understand. For example, we find that most new residents do not understand New Zealand's renting regulations. This includes how and when to pay rent dues as well as the importance of paying dues on time. We have to explain that rent dues must be paid before or on the rent day. Also, we explain that rent can and usually does increases over time. Many also don't understand that possibility when they make a budget. Many also don't understand that you must re-sign a lease if they want to stay in their rental location after the initial lease period ends. We also help physically facilitating their move into their rental flat. We help many find the nearest grocery store to their new housing. We show them how to use public transportation and understand transportation maps, and apps

> to find the best routes to school or work. We even help them arrange to buy and deliver a refrigerator for their kitchen. In New Zealand, you take your refrigerator with you when you leave a rental flat, so new tenants are responsible for bringing their own when they arrive. (interview conducted February 2, 2023)

The rise of concern and attentiveness of difference for new resident is a social development through which ARCC leadership shares their personal knowledge and experience with newest citizens to help address challenges that arise from new and unfamiliar situations. ARCC's local focus also allows them to identify time-sensitive, "immediate need" crises and respond quickly to the needs of new residents. For instance, during the pandemic lockdown, ARCC contacted individual households to check in on the status of individuals. The board quickly discovered that many were struggling to obtain food while being sequestered. Some found it difficult to access government-sponsored or charity donated food resources during the lockdown, while others were unable to take advantage of these resources due to dietary restrictions. In response, ARCC launched its COVID-19 household Voucher Assistance Program to provide emergency relief for those in need. These vouchers, in the form of gift certificates for grocery stores, were especially helpful when food banks were overwhelmed with food requests. Additionally, if a new resident had specific dietary requirements, these vouchers enabled community members to make their own decisions about their priority needs.

LANGUAGE

Other avenues through which refugee agency manifests include recognizing a shared need or shortcoming regarding language skills. ARCC recognizes that not all new residents are proficient in English. For those who may struggle with English language skills, it can be a more challenging resettlement process and lead to feelings of isolation, a lack of autonomy, and a sense of not belonging. Although quota refugees receive English language classes at Māngere, the six-week duration may not be sufficient for them to become proficient in English.

Indeed, the ARCC leadership employs their political agency through their own actions to identify and address state constitutive deficiencies that forge societal divides—in this case, lack of long-term language support for new residents. For example, ARCC arranges a variety of paid and volunteer language classes offered regularly as well as more tailored classes upon request. Indeed, ARCC believes that greater proficiency in English represents a key way to help foster a sense of belonging, speed the pathway to meaningful employment, and gain a greater understanding of the diverse culture(s) in New Zealand.

The organization also receives numerous requests for language translators for appointments. However, translators can be costly, especially those who have specific vocabulary for medical appointments, banking and business language, or legislative knowledge. As a result, ARCC maintains a list of volunteers who may

be willing to assist individuals and what languages they are proficient in as translators. Some need assistance with reading, as a few new residents arrive with poor or no reading comprehension. In addition to tutors and classes, the ARCC offers "reading circles" led by volunteers who read in English for individuals across various age groups.

UNDERSTANDING THE LAW AND THEIR RIGHTS

After ensuring that new residents' immediate needs are met in a culturally responsive and respectful manner, the ARCC shifts its focus to long-term integration goals, helping new residents gain better knowledge of their rights and resources to foster empowered actions and new agentive possibilities. This attentiveness and political agency draw on sharing their own gained knowledge and experience forged when they were the newest residents in New Zealand. Thus, the ARCC can act as a liaison between new arrivals and the social resources, agencies, (non)governmental organizations, and other necessary support to help them navigate their new societal systems. Here, one can see political resistance to various forms of difference that would mark new residents as distinct or "Other." For example, ARCC offers general information sessions covering New Zealand laws, cultural "norms," and the rights of new residents.

This is not to say that ARCC's aims to remove unique elements of a new resident's culture, beliefs, or practices. Instead, by providing key information about local practices, ARCC's efforts demonstrate an avenue of empowerment for new residents who are now able to make their own decisions and performative practices based on knowledge gained about New Zealand. Like the example of Muhammad talking to students in schools, new residents can utilize their knowledge of what is different in New Zealand to selectively negotiate how they choose to interact and perform their own unique identity. Additionally, many of these sessions often feature guest talks from the local police, providing an opportunity for positive interactions between police and new residents. This is particularly important for many from a forced migration background. As Abdul explained in an interview:

> I am originally from Pakistan and arrived in New Zealand as a young adult, I was a quota refugee – who arrived via camps in Thailand, where I lived for four years. For most new residents, we lived in refugee camps for years, where you learn to be afraid of the police and suspicious of government and other authorities. It is important to demonstrate here in New Zealand how different things are for them now. New residents have rights, but they may not know what that entails or how and where to report if their rights have been violated. When questioned, some new residents admitted they were afraid to report any violation of their rights because they feared they would be deported. So, we explain their rights, which are protected by the government. We want to help new residents feel safe and empowered so they can feel like part of New Zealand society." (interview conducted on February 5, 2023)

While acknowledging government support for quota refugees, ARCC recognizes that it is not complete and such state short fallings have the potential to

discriminate against new residents and delineate them from others in society. Subsequently, it serves as a liaison to advocate for better support for new residents. This is especially true in cases where xenophobia impacts their access to public resources. For example, some research suggests that the state health care system (WINZ) is less inclined to help certain refugees (e.g., particularly convention refugees) and may treat them poorly for using the health care system (see Jacobson 2018). ARCC members and volunteers have accompanied new residents during appointments to ensure that their rights are respected and they are treated with dignity and respect, particularly within the unevenness of treatment within state health care system. Through their own nuanced understanding of empowering new residents, the ARCC works to raise awareness of inequalities and injustices through their mobilized performed agentive actions (Isin 2012).

EMPLOYMENT AND RELATED SKILLS

The ARCC is dedicated to assisting new residents in finding meaningful, gainful employment opportunities in New Zealand. The organization acknowledges that new residents may face numerous challenges when searching for employment and subsequently provides various support services. Drawing from their own experiences as well as other challenges reported by other new residents, ARCC members' agency includes helping others who may face similar roadblocks, lack local "know how," or do not understand the bureaucracy of employment regulations in New Zealand. In order to address these common challenges by sharing their acquired knowledge and place-specific skills, ARCC now offers workshops covering how and where to find job openings and advertisements. The workshops cover how to identify the skills and experiences that may be required for a particular job based on the advertisement. Additionally, ARCC offers group and one-on-one training to help individuals develop and refine their résumé for specific job applications as well as general job searches.

The ARCC also offers practice job interviews, allowing new residents the opportunity to practice and receive feedback on performances. It also assists in arranging volunteer and internship opportunities to help new residents gain skills, build connections, and make meaningful contributions to society as they begin their job search. Throughout these workshops, members encourage individuals to engage in community involvement and pursue new employment opportunities. For example, as the workshop leader emphasized:

> I often remind my fellow new residents to be patient and remain hopeful during their job search. I tell them to remember to make efforts to engage with the larger society, it will only help them feel like a part of society and foster new connections and understandings of New Zealand, our new home. (interview conducted on March 4, 2023)

In this regard, ARCC members' political agency manifests through their collective skilled-based training, which helps empower the newest residents to thrive through self-reliance in their new society.

Furthermore, the workshops provide examples of successful employment paths, such as flow charts of various potential employment stages. They also arrange invited lectures from professionals in various fields to offer advice and answer questions. More recently, the organization collaborated with other new resident support organizations to offer a 12-week workshop on starting a new business. This workshop focuses on training individuals to seek funding, understand business regulations, and manage logistics for launching new business in New Zealand.

SOCIAL SUPPORT

The ARCC recognizes the importance of helping new residents feel a sense of community and engagement with members of the larger community as pathways to fostering a sense of belonging in New Zealand. The organization aims to support and evaluate previously marginalized groups so that they feel connected and are making a meaningful contribution to society. It provides social groups, networking opportunities, sporting events, celebrations, and media outreach (that is television, radio, social media, and magazines) to engage new residents and the larger community. The ARCC also coordinates social and friendship groups for elderly, youth, and women. These groups are particularly helpful as research suggests that elderly and women from a forced migration background often report higher susceptibility to feelings of isolation. ARCC's youth group often pairs with its Leadership Network so that young individuals have an opportunity to network and work on leadership and communication skills.

The ARCC also believes that the organization is responsible for all New Zealanders, not just those with lived-refugee experience. It organizes cultural celebratory performances in which new residents can demonstrate their culture, music, food, and history. These events are widely advertised to new residents and the larger community members through local radio, television, and social media to join the celebration and food to celebrate diverse cultures and foster greater social acceptance and cohesion in Auckland. Members also arrange soccer tournaments, block parties, "pot-luck" communal dinners that are available to new residents and larger community members to foster a sense of social cohesion. Despite the informal nature of such events, the impact of these demonstrations of social agency should not be underestimated. Indeed, much of the scholarship that examines refugee agency in urban settings highlights the importance of urban settings and local populations as sites for forms of informal politics and agentive practices that enable "minor" political acts (Crisp and others 2012; Darling 2016). By facilitating the newest residents' ability to forge meaningful connections with local community members, the ARCC efforts

underpin politically minded practices to mobilize refugee agentic activities for successful contributions to the new resident community and society as a whole.

Indeed, in 2021, ARCC launched its commemorative campaign, "When We Became New Zealanders," to celebrate new residents' testimonial "success stories." Participants share their experiences before arriving in New Zealand and about their life as new residents in New Zealand today. They describe what efforts they made to foster a sense of belonging as a New Zealander. These stories are widely shared in the ARCC's New Resident Magazine, ARCC Newsletter, social media, website, on Resett Radio (Planet FM 104.6), its Resett Television Talks, on its YouTube channel and in open forum discussion station. It also recently published a book of stories highlighting forced migrant voices and multinational identities in Auckland. Ultimately, the ARCC hopes to promote inclusivity and solidarity among all individuals in Auckland, regardless of background or citizenship status.

Conclusion

ARCC is a local, grassroots coalition initiated and led by refugees that helps new residents in New Zealand negotiate a new society and foster a sense of belonging in their new community. The organization provides a wide range of support, including meeting immediate physical needs as well as offering social, legal and employment assistance. One of the benefits of local-based community support groups for refugees and other forced migrants, like ARCC, is their heterogenous natures and personalized approaches (Vianelli and Nienaber 2024). To further improve its best practices for local community support, ARCC recently launched a three-year research project called "Bridging the Gap." This project aims to identify existing gaps in support for new residents through its evidence-based study. By actively involving those whom they assist, ARCC seeks to empower new residents and ensure that their needs are acknowledged.

This article examines the refugee political and social agency of refugees through a case study of ARCC, highlighting how individuals and the organization work to address systematic state deficiencies that underpin societal divides, marking refugees as different from the wider community. By raising awareness of how refugees are not always granted equal opportunities in society, and by working to eradicate barriers refugees encounter, ARCC demonstrates that self-reliance and collective solidarity are key components of refugee political agency in New Zealand. Refugee political agency manifests in various avenues, including the identification of shared needs or injustices that refugees confront in New Zealand. Members of ARCC demonstrate political capacities of resistance to difference—structural, bureaucratic, social, cultural, and perceived—as they strive to eliminate practices and processes that categorize or present refugees as distinct from society in New Zealand. This article explores examples of how ARCC members and its programming provide targeted support for refugees via

physical and social support, as well as political advocacy, to foster refugees' abilities to thrive through collective political agency.

Their efforts are never aimed at erasing elements of a refugee's culture, past, or identity. Instead, their programming and liaison efforts with agencies and (non) government organizations provide new residents with location-specific information, training, and lived experience. This empowers the newest arrivals to become capable decision makers who can navigate the challenging circumstances of a new society. The organization's diverse membership and programming offer various strategies and avenues for refugee advocacy, physical and social support, and cultural cohesion to assist other refugees in navigating and assimilating into their new lives.

Despite being a successful and effective organization, ARCC is also vulnerable. As a volunteer-led initiative, it relies entirely on grants and external funding. The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has made funding for agencies like ARCC in New Zealand scarcer, resulting in increased competition for grants, government funds, donations, and sponsorship. This is particularly challenging for the organization, as its director explains: "The government often asks ARCC to help with the most difficult and long-term cases because we are so skilled at what we do. But it does not compensate us for our time, skills and support for our community newest residents. We feel this places an unfair burden both on our organization and on the new residents we serve" (interview conducted on 4 February 2023). To support a diverse and productive society, there needs to be additional support available for organizations like ARCC, which not only demonstrate refugee agency but also serve society by focusing on meeting the individual needs of residents and the broader community alike.

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[1] The libertarian ACT Party presented a controversial bill in parliament in November 2024 that would alter the interpretation of the Treaty of Waitangi.

Orcid

Kara E. Dempsey http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4176-6569

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