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Finding factors for resilience using a strength-based approach: Refugees and asylum seekers coping with life adversities

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Abstract

The strength or resilience of refugees is a less emphasized area as the discourse in refugee mental health study mainly weighs on pathologizing the effects of refugee experiences. Within the lenses of strength and resilience, this study explored how refugees and asylum seekers, who experienced violence and loss, coped with trauma and hardship in their newly established lives in South Korea. In this study we analyzed survey data collected from 100 participants (55 asylum seekers and 45 refugees) through open-ended questions. We analyzed narratives for both content and form and provided evidence for factors that reflect coping strategies used by participants to overcome their life adversities. The findings gave rise to; (a) character traits like strong religiosity, personal determination, patience to forbear, hopefulness, and peaceful acceptance of current circumstance; (b) relationships, in the sense of meaningful strong bonds within family members and the instinctive personal resourcefulness to utilize support resources within and outside of their communities; (c) learned skills after migraing to korea; (d) knowledge sets in how to get by in korea; (e) personal talents, and (f) extra abilities that gave power to pass socio-economic difficulties. The findings underscore the importance of considering the strength-based approach either in discussing resilience or intervention. Our approach will allow practitioners to acknowledge that refugees and asylum seekers potentially have a unique set of strengths and abilities that they rely on to overcome their immediate and future problems. It will also guide practitioners as they devise their intervention schemes.

Keywords: *Strength; Resilience; Strength-based approach; Refugees; Asylum seekers*

1. INTRODUCTION

70.8 million individuals are forcibly displaced globally, according to the UN organization for refugees. These individuals are either refugee, asylum seekers or displaced internally throughout the world [1]. The amount of asylum seekers and refugees displaced from their nation of origin and seeking protection in South Korea has gradually increased in the latest years. In 1992, Korea joined the UN Convention on refugees and became the first Asian country to enforce the 2013 Refugee Act to provide social protection and residence for international refugees. Because of that, the claims for asylum have risen dramatically since 1993. Especially after the enactment of the Refugee Act, the rate of applications soared from 1,574 in 2013 to 16,173 in 2018.

According to NANCEN's data, a Korean based human right protection organization for refugees and asylum seekers, from 1994 up to 2018, a total of 48,906 refugee applications have been filed nationwide. Out of this number 1,988 people have been recognized for refugee status. The refugee recognition rate is also among the lowest in the world, hitting 0.8% and 1.51% in the recent year of 2016 and 2017 respectively. It's only about 1 out of 220 refugees who receive refugee recognition through the administration and litigation process of the Korean government [2]. Not only a high rejection rate but the country is mentioned for minimal social welfare provision, discriminatory, and troublesome for asylum-seekers [3]. The follow-up process of application and the overall welfare arrangements for asylum seekers is also considered ill-equipped and understaffed [4]. Consequentially, the asylum seeker is not allowed to get a job for the first six months and they are without health insurance during this time. Besides, the Korean government support living expense to only 7% of the overall asylum seekers [5]. The current arrangement of hosting the displaced in the country is at its infancy of development. It is also evident that refugees and asylum seekers are far from any structural service and support mechanisms which is with its significant social, economic, humanitarian and health implications. Our study is concerned with how the mental health of refugees and asylum seekers are affected within these circumstances and it hopes to point out factors of resilience in their newly established life in South Korea. Also, our study aims to pinpoint these factors in light of the strength-based approach. The strength-based approach in mental health stresses the notion that mental health recovery could be maintained by focusing on a person's ability, helping them developing the confidence to embark on the journey of recovery and aiding them to progress towards recovery [6]. A strength-based framework could cover two bases. First, it will allow medical or social work practitioners to assess positive attributes including assets, aspirations, hopes, and interests that should be considered for the recovery process. Second, understanding of strengths can help to prevent or lessen the damage of disease, stress, and disorder [7].

1.1 The strength-based approach in refugees and asylum seekers setting

Among the types of different migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are known for their resilience and their willingness to face a multitude of challenges to find safety and build a future, for themselves and their families. Understanding this potential in them is one way of enhancing any type of intervention. The inclusion of a strength-based approach in mental health interventions would also yield a resourceful outcome. Although many refugees experience and witness traumatic events, the majority of those who survive do not develop significant mental disorders [8]. Refugee people show enormous "courage and strength by coping with conditions of extreme deprivation and surviving against adversity" [9]. Once refugee status is established, a person has to deal with the demands of resettlement in a foreign country and loss and separation from their family and culture [10]. Despite this turmoil, researches suggests many refugee people go on to thrive in their new country and surroundings [11]. Professionals, however, continue to utilize a western medical model that places refugee experiences of hardship, deprivation, and distress in the terrain of psychopathology, rather than seeing it as a 'normal' response to an abnormal situation [12]. As a result, refugee resilience is often obscured by the pervasiveness of the trauma narrative in refugee people's lives [13]. While definitions of resilience differ, it is often associated with a person's ability to bounce back "following adversity and challenge and connotes inner strength, competence, optimism, flexibility and the ability to cope effectively when faced with adversity" [14].

1.2. Objectives of the study

There is an apparent need for more research and further evaluations of the strength-based approach. The objective of our study is to provide evidence for the potential of this approach in pointing factors for resilience in refugees and asylum seekers' setting. Further, studies are needed to understand how refugees and asylum seekers could cope with trauma and hardship and to develop ways of promoting well-integrated and optimal functioning in their host society. All in all, the Specific aim of the study is to identify factors that gave refugees and asylum seekers the mental strength to cope with their adversities. With this objective in mind, depression,

anxiety, and stress test is also included to highlight the actual mental health status of the participants. The severity distribution of the test could be used to underline the adverse circumstances of the participants.

2. METHOD

2.1 Study Design

A survey questionnaire with open-ended questions and basic demography questions was distributed among the participants. The open-ended questions explored the opinions of the participants within the array of 'self-report of how hard it is to adapt to the life in Korea' to 'what gave them the mental strength to go through the hardships faced'. The open-ended questions gave freedom for the participants to express the peculiar characteristics of their personal experiences. The data gathered through the open-ended questions also appear exceptionally useful to mine factors and their essence that contributed to resilience. In addition, our study employed the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Test from a 'Manual for the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales' [15]. The test is a questionnaire designed to measure the three related negative emotional states of depression, anxiety, and stress. The test is based on participant responses to a set of 42 questions, made up of questions relating to each of the three scales.

The test uses a three scale rating system to measure the severity of a range of symptoms related to depression, anxiety, and stress. In effect, the test is a depression test, anxiety test, and stress test all in a single test. Participants are asked to work through each question indicating the extent to which they have experienced a particular symptom or state. Each question uses a 4-point severity/frequency scale to rate the presence of one of the negative emotional states for a participant.

2.2 Research Setting

Locating the participants for the study was made possible by local two NGOs (PNAN and NANCEN) located in Seoul, South Korea. These organizations are working on legal and settlement assistance for refugees and asylum seekers within south Korea. The gathering of data for the study was made possible by the collaboration of these organizations and the research team. PNAN helped to locate refugees and asylum applicants under its care and distributed the questionnaire. The research team also accessed relevant social media addresses to connect directly to refugees and asylum seekers in the country. The data gathering was conducted between May-December of 2018. The necessary IRB approval was also maintained before recruiting the participants and the actual data analysis.

2.3 Selecting Participants

The eligibility criteria for the study are determined after assessing the participant immigration status within the country and their duration of stay. Asylum applicants and already recognized refugees were separated into a separate group and the minimum duration of stay within south Korea was set for three months. For accessibility convenience, the questionnaire was primarily converted into a google form format with the necessary confidentiality precautions. The questionnaire was also translated into Amharic, Arabic, French, Swahili. The test result was directly recorded in the email address of the research team. For participants who were unable to access the google form, printed questionnaires were distributed.

2.4 Data Analysis

First, an individual test for depression, anxiety, and stress were conducted. The scores for each of the negative emotional states are calculated by summing the scores from each of the relevant items. An individual's levels of depression, anxiety and stress are assessed on levels of; Normal, Mild, Moderate, Severe, Extremely severe. The cut-off scores in the normal range are 0-9 for depression, 0-7 for anxiety, and 0-14 for stress. The

data analysis for the open-ended questions was conducted using Hyper research 4.0.1software [16]. Initial data analysis involved immersion in the data as a whole; reviewing, categorizing themes and analyzing the complete collection of narrations within the framework of participants' strengths. The assumption in the template coding is; refugees and asylum seekers as an individual will have strengths: skills, knowledge, talents, character traits, relationships, and abilities that they will utilize to cope up with their daily challenges. The analysis then moved to note recurrent topics and themes and recruiting similar issues. Data were examined not as exact representations but rather to elicit the participant's interpretations of their experiences and their social worlds. The focus of the narrative analysis was on identifying their migration experience as a refugee and any coping mechanism during the settlement process. Throughout the analysis, proper intellectual input was given on the meanings, interpretation, and overall intellectual understanding of the issues at hand. The author's epistemological perspectives, as well as scholarship standpoints, were utilized throughout the data analysis.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Participants

As we can see on the table 1, participants for the study comprised of asylum seekers and refugees. The asylum seekers lived in South Korea for an average of 20 months whereas the refugee participants lived in South Korea for an average of 91 months. The average age for both groups is between 32 and 34. The geographical origin for the participants is from Africa and the Middle east region. North Korean refugees are intentionally excluded from the study because of their inherent characteristics as a refugee and their circumstances in South Korea are different from the rest of the refugees. On the other hand, the number of Ethiopian participants in both groups composes the highest percentage. It is first due to the convenience of sampling and second, in the case of accepted refugees, Ethiopian nationals are comparatively among the accepted nationals despite their fewer submission of applications. For instance, in 2017 alone out of 62 applications 26 (46.9%), Ethiopian nationals were given a refugee status while almost all the other national's acceptance rate remains between 0% - 3%.

Table 1. Participants description

Item		Asylum seekers (N=55)				Refugees (N=45)			
		N	%	M	SD	N	%	M	SD
Sex	male	42	76.4	-	-	28	62.2	-	-
	female	13	23.6	-	-	17	37.8	-	-
Age		-	-	34	6			32	4
Duration of stay (month)		-	-	20	20	-	-	91	19
Nationality	Cameroon	2	3.6			-	-		
	Egypt	22	40.0			2	4.4		
	Eritrea	2	3.6			1	2.2		
	Ethiopia	15	27.3			41	91.1		
	Iran	1	1.8			-	-		
	Jordan	1	1.8			-	-		
	Liberia	1	1.8			-	-		
	Pakistan	1	1.8			-	-		

Senegal	1	1.8			-	-	
Tanzania	4	7.3			1	2.2	
Yemen	5	9.1			-	-	

3.2 Overall severity test

The individual depression, anxiety, and stress test were performed to determine the severity distribution among the whole participants and with a subsection of asylum seekers and refugees. Participants with Normal Mental health status are in ample percentage in all subscales. 27% of the participants experience a normal level of depression and 37% of them also experience a normal level of anxiety as well. Also, 66% of the participants' stress level is at a normal level.

As it is demonstrated in figure 1, extremely severe mental health condition scored sizable percentage in all of the subscales (10% Depression, 14% Anxiety, 4% stress). 22% of all the participants had severe or extremely severe depression. This percentage was 28% for anxiety and 7% for depression. These scores could be an indication for a situation that these portion of the participants have significant mental pressure and potentially in need of immediate mental health assistance.
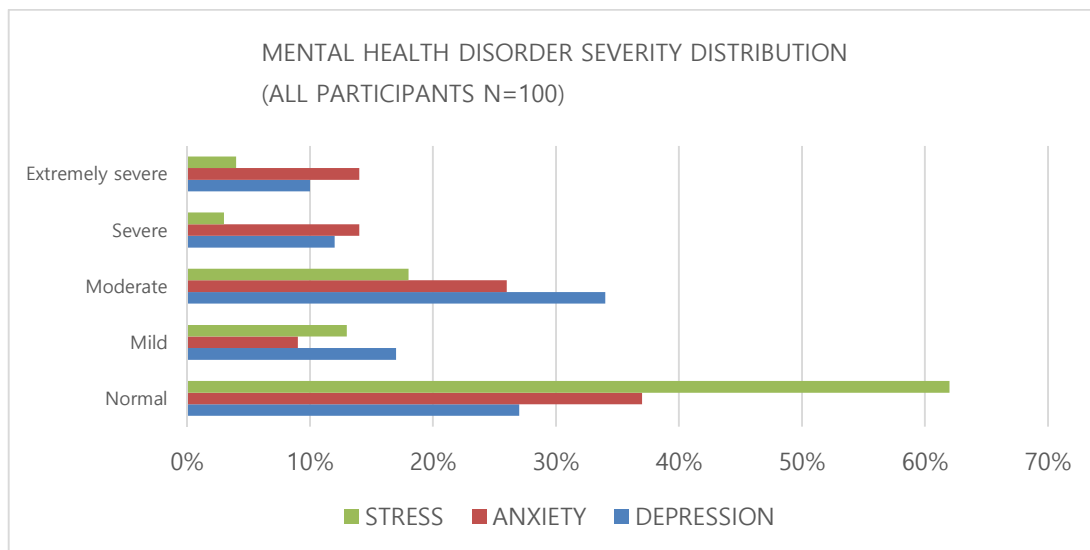

Figure 1. mental health disorder severity (whole participants n=100)

The severity distribution within the asylum seeker group and the refugee group is also different. As it is seen in figure 2, the refugee group appears in a relatively better mental health status than the asylum seeker group. In this result, there is an indication of the existence of relatively higher mental health challenges in the asylum seeker community. In the same line of thought, the relatively better mental health scores of the refugee group could also indicate the existence of factors that contributed to resilience.
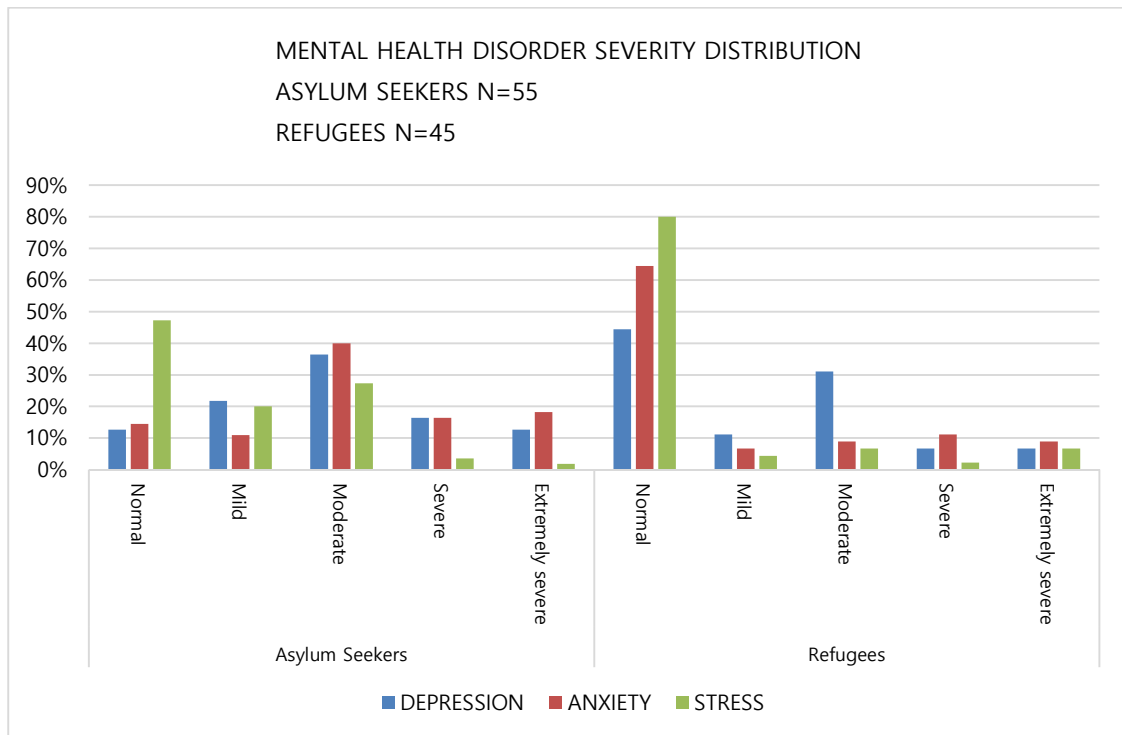
Figure 2. mental health disorder severity (Asylum seekers n=55 Refugees n=45)

3.3 Factors for resilience

The participants' responses were full of tales of challenges and sufferings from the point of fleeing their respective countries to the acculturative challenges within their host country, South Korea. Individual narratives expressed the intensity and frequency of dangers, experienced violence, and constant hardship, and the coping strategies that gave them the mental strength to survive. The participants' exile stories are inherently different. However, their experience within their host country shares a common plot based on their shared sociocultural context. Most of their descriptions of the refugee experience circled the hardship and adversities they faced while living in South Korea. In these individual responses, the unique way each participant interpreted their experiences was given extra attention in the analysis process.

The focal point of analysis was mining self-reported factors that gave the participants the mental strength to go through the challenges they faced while in exile. The analysis is also driven towards finding evidence for a strength-based approach. Within the strength-based approach, the term 'strength' refers to different elements that help or enable the individual to deal with challenges in life in general and in meeting their needs and achieving their desired outcomes in particular. In our study the initial assumption in the template coding is; the refugee or the asylum seeker as an individual will have strengths: skills, knowledge, talents, character traits, relationships, and abilities that they will utilize to cope up with their daily challenges. The process of analysis followed mining the frequency of these pieces of evidence within individual responses.

In considering points every designated factor for resilience or coping were assigned the following criteria's;

3.3.1. Character traits:
- *Strong religious belief:* in this character trait the analysis selected participants' display mental strength due to their strong belief in a supernatural power that positively controls their destiny. A typical religious participant displayed their strength to go through life difficulties is due to their devotion to

their respective religion and their frequent religious practices such as prayer, fasting, and participating in religious activities.

- *Determination:* in this character trait, the analysis focused on understanding and mining firm intents and strong decisions reached to persevere in difficult circumstances. Commonly all the refugees passed through the arduous status determination process and currently the asylum seekers are facing the same process. All the responses selected in this trait are somehow related to all types of personal hardships to go through the refugee status determination process, re-applying and persistence in the case of rejections, and strong will to remain in the country.

- *Patience:* in this character trait the analysis selected traits that resemble forbearance to endure difficult circumstances such as perseverance in the face of delay of the status determination process, tolerance of multiple rejections without responding in annoyance or anger, or forbearance when under any type of strain. A typical patient participant will be someone who didn't display annoyance or anger in common circumstances like long-term difficulties, multiple rejections, family and bereavement issues, and unfamiliar sociocultural differences.

- *Hopefulness:* in this particular character trait, the response analysis observed if there is an optimistic state of mind that is based on an expectation of positive outcomes concerning events and circumstances in one's life in South Korea. In a typical state of the hopeful state of mind, the participants will probably be an individual who is grateful for the current protection and optimist on the future protection, better treatment, safety, and even better prospects.

- *Peacefulness (acceptance of current circumstances):* this character trait in the participants' response refers to the state of being calm and tranquil in circumstances which might lead to frustration and long-term anxiety. In this trait the analysis selected responses that resemble a tendency of the participants' acceptance of the current circumstances as refugees or asylum seekers in this country as well as communally accepting other peoples' similar circumstances.

3.3.2. Relationships

- *Children's/ family's future:* in this section, the direction of analysis was mining responses that gave a reason for resilience solely based on participants' parental or familial bond. For this section, the analysis asked if worries about Children's future majorly created stronger parental instincts to go through challenges and difficulties. Also, it asked if the need to provide opportunities and the need to create a better future for family members created resilience.

- *Resourcefulness:* resourcefulness could appear a character trait but this section of analysis focused on how much a participant appears resourceful in the utilization of their social networks (social capital), their respective communities, or government support systems. It is proper to assume that since the circumstances of the refugees and asylum seekers in the country are similar, the resources at hand are also similar for these groups. However, individual resourcefulness in utilizing resources provided within the country might differ.

3.3.3 Other factors

- *Skills:* in the response analysis, this particular section focused on selecting responses that mentioned a learned skill set that helped participants to navigate through difficult circumstances. These skill-sets could include learning the Korean language or indulging in Korean culture in general.

- *Knowledge:* in this section, the response analysis checked if familiarity, awareness, or understanding of how refugees and asylum seekers are getting by in the country helped the participant to shape their own experiences. A knowledge in participants' responses might refer to the utilization of any set of information of knowledge that helped them; avert danger, set priorities, plan ahead, or know their ways around policies and regulations regarding refugees and asylum seekers.

- *Talents:* unlike skills, talents are a special ability to do something possessed by a person naturally. In this section of response analysis, the focus is on selecting responses that mentioned personal talents that helped a participant to go through difficult circumstances.

- *Abilities:* The ability in this section is not referring to the skills and talents that are mentioned above. But, ability in this section refers to the capacity or means to go through difficult times. An example could be having enough money and personal resources to respond to necessities.

According to the above criteria's, the frequency of these factors for resilience were counted and resulted in the frequency distribution demonstrated in figure 3.
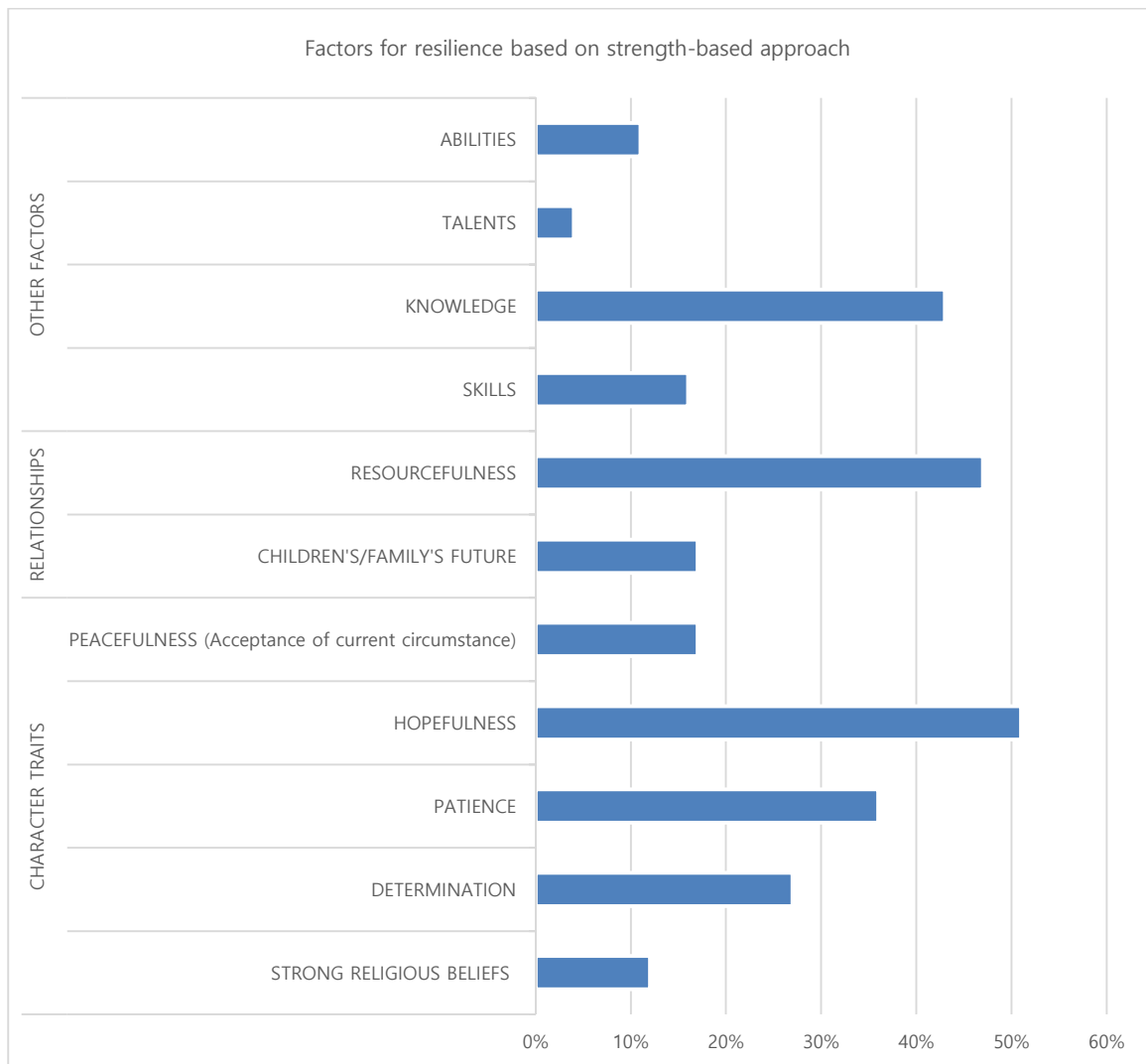

Figure 3. factors for resilience based on strength-based approach

4. DISCUSSION

   Based on the prior mental health test result, it is evident that a significant number of participants are considered having poor mental health, i.e. asylum seekers: 87.3% on depression, 85.5% on anxiety, 52.7% on stress; refugees: 55.6% on depression, 35.6% on anxiety, 20% on stress. however, despite their poor mental health status, the findings of our study suggest they are also significantly utilizing coping strategies.
   The finding of this study pointed out a hopeful character trait that appears significantly in the narrations of the participants. Participants who mentioned this character trait as their source for resilience mainly

displayed a positive and highly optimistic attitude about their future in their responses. Multiple responses mentioned their endurance is attributed to their young age, the anticipation of better economic prospects, and success stories of others in similar circumstances.

Patience and peacefulness character traits are mentioned being utilized for enduring unfavorable working conditions, socio-cultural barriers, and multiple rejections in the refugee status determination process. These character traits are mentioned within or together with hopefulness traits. For instance, several participants mentioned the need to be constantly hopeful and patient in work conditions that are harsh and disregard their previous qualifications. In addition, being patient and hopeful is mentioned as important to navigate through the initial stages of the settlement process, language barriers, and managing a stable livelihood. Peacefulness (acceptance of current circumstance) mentioned as the only prevalent response of asylum seekers participants' who were unable to work and provide for their families in the first 6 months of arrival in South Korea. peacefulness also expressed having to increase endurance for the dirty, difficult, and dangerous working conditions where refugees and asylum seekers usually find employment.

Although it is mentioned impliedly within and together with other character traits, determination appears the strong suit for almost all the participants. this finding only reported responses that used the word 'determination' in their answer. for instance, one participant mentioned: " I'm determined to get back what I lost because of my journey as a refugee". for most of them their frustrations and anger because of their exile is translated into a determination to redeem what they have lost in their lives. This type of determination also created a persona that is tolerant, industrious, prudent, and conscious about their future. Strong religious beliefs or spirituality, mostly coupled with hopefulness and peacefulness character traits, created a sense of control when faced uncertainties. Strong religious beliefs created meaning in instances of bereavement and for existential dilemmas caused because of their experience. religious ceremonies and gatherings also created support communities. Among the religious participants, Prayer is mentioned as a natural response when faced with difficulties and hard times. For participants with children or family members to support, this relationship type mentioned as a source of determination and 'the reason for all their struggles'. For some, providing a better future for their children is a reason why they left their country.

Resourcefulness is highly related to the shared experience within refugee and asylum seeker communities. Participants who followed an existing chain of migration are fairly aware of what they should expect within South Korea. Within this chain, refugee and asylum seekers community members share knowledge of what to do and where to go for help. Apart from informal communal solidarity among refugees and asylum seekers, available resources of support are obtained through NGOs, local churches, or government programs which are well known among the participants and fairly utilized. Participants from Ethiopia and Egypt mentioned the significance of having an existing respective community and already established countrymen for the initial settlement process. Newly arrived asylum seekers mentioned being highly dependent on experiences and advise of previously arrived countrymen for initial accommodation and employment arrangements. This type of informal resourcefulness of the participants is repetitively mentioned in the responses as having a significant impact on the mental stability of the participants. formal resourcefulness like utilizing government reception centers, welfare programs of NGOs and local Churches were also mentioned as having a certain impact on resilience however it is also mentioned as an insufficient or unsustainable source of support.

Other factors for resilience mentioned like skill, knowledge, talents, and abilities contributed a significant share for the mental strength of the participants. the skill developed after coming to South Korea like learning basic Korean language was mentioned improving relationships in workplaces. Indulgence and adaptation to the Korean way of thinking and work traditions mentioned as important to ease workplace-related stress and troubles in daily life in general. Skills mentioned as important to enhance resilience are more or less related to skills that are used; to avoid cultural barriers, to fasten integration to the wider Korean society, and that improved personal life within the country. As it is partially mentioned in the resourcefulness section, knowledge of previous refugee experience helped newly arrived asylum seekers properly navigate through the refugee status determination process sufficiently. Although stressful by itself, keeping track of policies and regulations concerning their cases is, in fact, the major task in all the asylum seekers' life. thus, most of the

asylum seeker participants mentioned proper knowledge and understanding of how the legal system works in the country gave them relief and a chance to plan ahead. Among the recognized refugees, knowing the value of their legal status not only helped them to know they do's and don'ts in the country but gave them a clear vision of what they can do in their lives.

Some natural talents as; self-management, decision making, enthusiasm, future thinking, financial planning, ability to make friends, focus on health and fitness, adaptability, positiveness, ability to handle change, and self-assurance were mentioned as having a significant contribution to the participants' enduring resilience. However financial abilities were mentioned having a positive impact at only at the time of arrival to the first phase of the settlement process.

5. CONCLUSION

It would be common to conclude this study after the result of the mental health status with a pathology framework of conclusion. However, our study aims to look into factors of resilience beyond refugee trauma discourse. As a result, the framework of a strength-based approach not only allows an array of factors for resilience to appear but also point a direction to the proper choice of treatment. Based on this particular result, working with these factors for resilience would yield a better treatment plan than starting a diagnosis with an assumption of traumatized background and poor mental health status.

As these results framed the strengths of the participants, it hopes to assist and direct practitioners to identify these factors that might be essential for building resilience in refugee and asylum seeker communities. The result of our study will allow practitioners to acknowledge that refugees and asylum seekers will probably have a unique set of strengths that they rely on to overcome their immediate and future problems. Again this result will provide practitioners a stepping stone to ignite the power within refugees and asylum seekers to face and overcome their problems.

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