


RESEARCH ARTICLE

A peer support and peer mentoring approach to enhancing resilience and empowerment among refugees settled in southern Spain

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Funding information

Lafourcade-Ponce Spanish Foundation for Psychological Well-being,
Grant/Award Number: 2017/INT; Universidad de Sevilla's Office for Development Cooperation, Grant/Award Number: 2017/04/02

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22338>

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the processes of resilience and empowerment experienced by refugees in southern Spain during their participation in a community-based intervention. Intervention design covered two phases over 15 weeks: (a) accompanying a group of 10 settled refugees to become mentors, making use of a peer-support-group format; and (b) holding four cultural peer-support groups made up of newly arrived refugees led by the previously trained settled refugees, following a peer-mentoring format. We analyzed the mentors' narratives and written evaluations produced over the course of the intervention program. Mentor resilience increased during the first program phase and remained high and stable during the second phase. Mentor empowerment steadily increased throughout the duration of the program, and was fueled when participants became mentors to newly arrived refugees during the second phase. This study highlights how a peer-support and peer-mentoring approach is useful for enhancing the resilience and empowerment of refugees in receiving societies.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The current transit of refugees across European Union (EU) borders is reaching unprecedented levels (Silove, Ventevogel, & Rees, 2017). This reality has become a symbol of the suffering of millions of people who desperately need to escape from the violence and poverty that devastate some of the world's regions. According to Eurostat, in 2018, Spain received more applications for international protection than in any other year, making it one of the

main access routes into the EU via the Mediterranean (CEAR, 2019). Most refugees arriving to the EU have experienced significant disruption to their community and family networks. This lack of social connectedness often leads to a low sense of control and low self-efficacy among displaced individuals when it comes to social change in receiving societies (Paloma, Lenzi, Furlanis, Vieno, & García-Ramírez, 2018). As a result, refugees are likely to develop a sense of powerlessness, through which they may eventually become passive and incapable of exerting more influence over the decisions affecting their own lives (García-Ramírez, de la Mata, Paloma, & Hernández-Plaza, 2011). For this reason, understanding the mechanisms at play and developing intervention programs for refugees that drive protective factors for positive and active development—that is, resilience and empowerment—are fundamental.

In this paper, we adopt Brodsky and Cattaneo's (2013) perspective on resilience and empowerment, which defines resilience as a process by which refugees develop *intrapersonal changes* that allow them to successfully adapt to and/or withstand inevitable adversity. This term is understood as "an ongoing process achieved daily over time and according to contexts, rather than an atypical static inner trait" (Lenette, Brough, & Cox, 2012, p. 639). Empowerment refers to the process by which refugees eventually *take action* to change those elements of the receiving context that hinder their well-being and that of their community (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013). Therefore, resilience entails internal change goals that improve the individual's functioning within the status quo, whereas empowerment involves transformative changes in the receiving society. Both processes feed into each other, producing a positive trend that helps to counteract the vulnerable conditions experienced by refugees in places of settlement.

Refugee health and social inclusion from a community-based perspective has received considerable attention in the literature, pointing to the effectiveness of intervention formats such as mutual learning and advocacy (Goodkind, 2005; Hess et al., 2014), peer-led community health workshops (Im, 2018), peer-support programs (Badali, Grande, & Kassabian, 2017), and community gardens (Hartwig & Mason, 2016), among other initiatives. However, interventions explicitly aimed at improving resilience and empowerment among refugees in receiving contexts are very scarce (see, e.g., Khamphakdy-Brown, Jones, Nilsson, Russell, & Klevens, 2006). It is therefore necessary to advance the development of effective community-based interventions that appropriately explore the best way to shape positive and active development among refugees at the postmigration stage (Alfadhli & Drury, 2016).

Our aim is to bridge the gap in the literature, as well as to offer empirical support to the dynamic processes of resilience and empowerment experienced by 10 adult refugees before taking part in a peer-support group and subsequently acting as peer mentors in an intervention program aimed at supporting newly arrived refugees in Andalusia (southern Spain). First, we describe the vulnerability, resilience, and empowerment that refugees may experience in receiving contexts. We also review the peer-support and peer-mentoring formats as approaches of interest when engaging in community-based work with refugees. Second, we describe the participant data, the implemented intervention program, and the data collection and analysis procedure used. Third, we highlight the main results obtained in relation to the processes of resilience and empowerment experienced by the mentors. Fourth and finally, we discuss the findings in light of the literature, as well as their implications for conducting community-based work with refugees.

1.1 | Vulnerability, resilience, and empowerment among refugees in receiving societies

Vulnerability experienced during the premigration and transit phases pose major challenges for displaced persons' resilience (Martín-Baró, 1984). Upon arrival at their destinations, the potential migratory hardship and trauma associated with these initial stages are compounded by postmigration problems (Birman & Tran, 2008). Uncertainty linked to the asylum procedure and legal status, perceived discrimination, not being able to work, economic difficulties, and social isolation have been identified as the main problems in the literature (Carswell, Blackburn, & Barker, 2011; Ryan, Benson, & Dooley, 2008). Indeed, one of the main difficulties faced by refugees is the breakup or major disruption of support structures, including the family and informal networks of support

(Savic, Chur-Hansen, Mahmood, & Moore, 2013; UNHCR, 2017). Furthermore, the fact that newcomers often do not share the same language as their hosts increases their isolation after resettlement. Refugees also tend to find it difficult to access community resources belonging to the host society, thus causing psychosocial distress and a risk of social exclusion among the newly arrived (Ventevogel, Schinina, Strang, Gagliato, & Hansen, 2015). Yet, paradoxically, the organizations that offer refugee support services at destination often fail to encourage positive and active processes among their users; instead, they have sometimes been labeled as disempowering (Fernandes, 2015; Steimel, 2017). All this translates into refugees frequently feeling like outsiders, unable to make an impact on the receiving society and on themselves.

Despite these conditions of vulnerability—or rather because of them—people caught up in forced displacement usually develop strengths that help them to remain resilient in the face of adversity. Resilience refers to “internal, local-level goals that are aimed at intrapersonal actions and outcomes—adapting, withstanding, or resisting the situation as it is” (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013, p. 338). Following the model proposed by Gillespie, Chaboyer, and Wallis (2007), we view the constructs of hope, self-efficacy, and coping as the three defining components of resilience. We, therefore, consider that refugees involved in a resilient dynamic would exhibit hope about positive future outcomes and confidence that everything will be okay; would feel capable of dealing with adversity and with any difficulties head-on; and, as a consequence, would employ a series of strategies to overcome the daily obstacles they face in the receiving society (e.g., through seeking social support and accessing community resources). Resilience is associated with reduced depressive symptoms in displaced individuals (Yu, Stewart, Liu, & Lam, 2014).

In addition, empowerment represents an active process by which refugees attempt to make “external change to relationships, situations, power dynamics, or contexts” (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013, p. 338). As previously suggested by other authors (García-Ramírez et al., 2011; Paloma et al., 2018), we considered three key components of empowerment applied to the forcibly displaced population: (a) critical awareness and understanding of the oppressive conditions they endure in the receiving contexts; (b) self-perception of control in sociopolitical contexts that are important to their lives (e.g., belief in their ability to promote actions that influence the community); and (c) active participation that enables them to exercise control when tackling the inequalities faced by their community. Gilster (2012) argues that working for the good of the community is associated with an increase of a greater sense of control about life itself and the social context in which one lives, resulting in higher levels of psychological well-being. In fact, young refugees in Australia with a strong sense of control exhibited higher levels of psychological well-being compared with their peers with a weaker sense of control (Correa-Velez, Gifford, & Barnett, 2010).

Through this proposed theoretical framework, we define and operationalize the key concepts of resilience and empowerment in this paper, conceptually guiding the entire study. Our intention has been to offer an insightful proposal that would allow us to clearly discriminate “who is who” in these very close terms. Moreover, the suggested operationalization of three components within these concepts allows us to maintain a conceptual parallelism between them (hope vs. critical awareness, self-efficacy vs. sociopolitical control, and coping vs. community participation), helping to better present and understand the results systematically.

1.2 | A peer support and peer mentoring approach to enhancing refugee resilience and empowerment

We used the peer-support format in our study. Specifically, refugees in a similar situation of adversity would meet regularly to share their migration experiences and establish equitable, reciprocal supportive relationships among members. Povlsen (2012) explored the perceived benefits of regular participation in a mutual support club made up of displaced women in Denmark. The club was described as a resilient space for well-being where they could satisfy the need of feeling part of a family or community, cope with loneliness, as well as offer and receive support from other people from a similar background. As such, this peer-support-group format helps move the participants' resilience process forward (Badali et al., 2017; Stewart, Simich, Shizha, Makumbe, & Makwarimba, 2012).

Furthermore, the literature suggests that community-based interventions that deliver a comfortable and safe space for sharing narratives of migration in a peer-support-group setting are associated with empowering processes among displaced persons (Hung, 2012).

To complement this, we also employed the peer-mentoring format. Specifically, trained volunteer refugees would be teamed up with other, more vulnerable refugees whom they would assist through regular face-to-face contacts during their transition period. When it comes to best community-based practices aimed at encouraging resilience and empowerment processes among the refugee population, the potential benefits of the peer-mentoring format—where the refugees themselves act as agents of change—remain very much unexplored. This might be because refugees are typically seen as recipients of help rather than as service providers (Handy & Greenspan, 2009). The literature suggests that community engagement is associated with the development of resilience and empowerment among displaced people (Paloma, García-Ramírez, De la Mata, & Amal, 2010; Taurini, Paloma, García-Ramírez, Marzana, & Marta, 2017), meaning that the peer-mentoring format is potentially useful for activating these processes in mentor refugees.

In recent years, there has been growing interest in understanding how one's environment may impact on resilience and empowerment experienced at an individual level (Frounfelker, Tahir, Abdirahman, & Betancourt, 2019). We adopt this ecological approach in the present study, in our endeavor to explore the role that participation in a community-based intervention plays in the degree of refugee resilience and empowerment. Specifically, we place ourselves in the position of refugee mentors to analyze how peer-support-group participation followed by peer mentoring of others in a more vulnerable situation affects their resilience and empowerment.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | A peer support and peer mentoring intervention

For the purpose of this study, our research group established a collaboration agreement with the Spanish Commission for Refugee Aid (CEAR), the leading nongovernmental organization in Spain that works to promote the development and inclusion of refugees. This community partner has been key to joining our research team in developing an intervention design that responds to community needs and values, as well as in gaining access to the participants.

Intervention implementation covered two phases over 15 weeks from March to June 2017 (for more detailed information about the project, see Paloma, De la Morena, & López-Torres, 2020). During the first phase, the sessions followed a peer-support-group format facilitated by a researcher, who guided a group of 10 settled refugees to become mentors during an 8th-week period (two sessions a week, 2–3 hr per session). All sessions followed a similar structure: (a) guided relaxation; (b) individual reflection; (c) the sharing of migration stories; and (d) the presentation of community resources found in the city by the participants related to the session content. The topics addressed were the reasons behind forced migration, challenges raised by the “migratory mourning” (e.g., social network, language, culture, and status), and identifying personal strengths and community resources to cope with them. The final 2-week period was set aside to train the participants in mentoring (e.g., working on skills for group revitalization and creating material adapted to each cultural group).

Following a peer-mentoring format, the second phase saw settled refugees now trained as mentors working as cultural peer-support-group facilitators in their native language for newly arrived refugees, recreating the previously received peer-support sessions. All but four of the 10 trained mentors, who accepted job offers, ended up performing this role. As a result, the following groups were established: two groups led in Spanish by a mentor pair for each group (composed of 15 newly arrived refugees coming from Honduras, Venezuela, El Salvador, Cuba, and Colombia; 21–63 years old; 10 women and five men); one group led in Ukrainian by one mentor (eight newly arrived refugees from Ukraine; 30–50 years old; five women and three men); and another group led in French by another mentor (13 newly arrived refugees from Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Gambia, and Ivory Coast; 18–40 years old; one woman and 12 men). The duration, frequency, and format of the sessions were the same as that used during the first 6 weeks

corresponding to phase one. The project ended on Week 15 with a closing ceremony involving all the participants, the members of the research team, and the community-partner professionals.

2.2 | Participants

The mentors were 10 refugees—six men and four women aged between 20 and 64 years—who were chosen by CEAR staff based on the following criteria: (a) asylum seekers residing in Spain for at least a year; (b) proven Spanish language proficiency; and (c) demonstrable leadership skills or a degree of social awareness that enables them to help other people in a similar situation. It was important to select participants equipped with these latter skills (e.g., with previous experience leading groups and having volunteered in social projects) to guarantee a high commitment to the project, a faithful delivery of the program's content, and a close interaction with and sensitivity towards newly arrived refugees. In fact, these skills were a key element for the intervention program's feasibility (Paloma et al., 2020). To embrace the diverse background of asylum seekers in Spain, we selected people from different countries or regions: El Salvador, Colombia, Venezuela, Cameroon, Somalia, Western Sahara, Morocco, Palestine, and Ukraine. Seven participants held university degrees, and three were educated up to high-school level. At the time of intervention, participants were awaiting a decision on their asylum application, meaning that they were receiving financial support assigned to asylum seekers and resided in CEAR temporary housing. Most asylum requests were made for reasons of political persecution or at the hands of criminal organizations, armed conflict, or situations of extreme violence back home. Three participants had a family support network in Spain, whereas the remaining seven had embarked on their migration journey alone.

The study was approved by the organizational unit responsible for the protection of human participants attached to the CEAR. All participants signed an informed consent form which explained the intervention's aim and procedure. They agreed that information shared by peers over the course of the sessions would remain confidential. Furthermore, it was made clear to them that the data collected would be for purely research purposes, safeguarding the participants' right to anonymity at all times. To reinforce session attendance, mentors were awarded a diploma and a letter of recommendation.

2.3 | Data collection and analysis

The data analyzed in this paper include (a) transcripts of all 12 peer-support group sessions during the first phase; (b) participants' written evaluations after all 12, first-phase sessions, and after the sixth and 12th second-phase sessions; (c) the comments shared in a WhatsApp group over the course of the intervention; and (d) the field notes a researcher took throughout the project. The written evaluation administered after the first phase posed seven open-ended questions: (a) Did you find the sessions useful? In what way? (b) To what extent do you think the sessions changed you? (c) Do you feel stronger now and equipped with more strategies to face life's difficulties? In what way? (d) Do you think that the sessions have helped you to acquire the resources and skills to help other people? (e) Do you think that the sessions have helped you to build relationships with other people? (f) Do you feel more aware and able to help other people as well as to change your reality?, and (g) What were the program's main contributions? What would you improve? The second and third written evaluations included six questions, five of which referred to their perceptions of how their assigned group evolved. For the purpose of this study, we analyzed the feedback to question six, referring to their own changes as mentors: Do you think that leading these sessions as a mentor is having a beneficial effect on you? How do you feel? Hence, data generated from written evaluations were more structured around the provided questions and were analyzed as a complement to the more spontaneous narratives and open-structured data coming from the in-person sessions, WhatsApp group, and field notes.

Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we illustrate the development underlying the mentors' resilience and empowerment processes throughout the intervention program. Based on the resilience and

empowerment definitions given in this paper, three of the authors started working with the data using NVivo 12. All three met in person bi-weekly over 4 months to compare and refine the analysis. The definitive categories and subcategories presented in this paper were reached by checking and rechecking each other's data and their groupings numerous times via an iterative process. This process followed an inductive approach by grouping narratives into similar themes, although they were later placed under the umbrella of our theoretical framework for reasons of simplification and conceptual adjustment. Thus, we performed a hybrid thematic analysis, namely, a combination of inductive coding and deductive thematization, allowing us to apply theory-driven concepts to data-driven themes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). One author quantified the results using NVivo 12 by calculating the percentages of coded data (i.e., quotes) for resilience and empowerment. The percentages for each concept were then averaged for each month to illustrate the development of both processes throughout the program, as shown in Figure 1. The x-axis shows the month and y-axis the percentage. Months 1 and 2 correspond to the first phase (peer-support format) and Months 3 and 4 correspond to the second phase (peer-mentoring format).

3 | RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the results obtained after quantifying the coded data for “resilience” and “empowerment” throughout the program's implementation (see Figure 1). Participants' resilience levels kept changing over the course of the program, increasing significantly by the end of the first phase and remaining high during the second phase, which is when participants became mentors to newly arrived refugees. As of session six, participants' sense of empowerment started to grow, peaking at the end of Phase two. While resilience rose sharply at the end of Phase one, empowerment rose shortly afterwards, as participants were utilizing their strategies and skills as mentors themselves. To illustrate this evolution from the perspective of the stories' protagonists, the paragraphs that follow show the narratives of the mentors themselves during their time on the program.

3.1 | Resilience

3.1.1 | Hope

This category includes narratives that make reference to growing hope and optimism about the future and envisaging greater opportunities thanks to the program. The seventh session of the first phase proved important

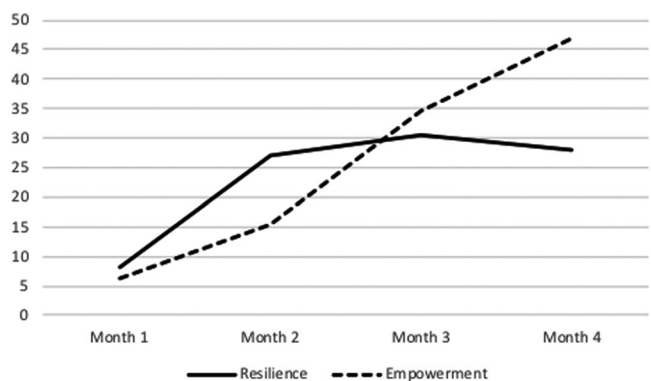


FIGURE 1 Evolution of the processes of resilience and empowerment experienced by the refugee mentors over the course of the intervention program

when it came to promoting a positive outlook on the future. Participants were asked to draw a river that would represent the timeline of the three life stages: the past, the present, and the future. When sharing feedback on this exercise, one participant expressed a changed view about his present and his future, adopting a more positive outlook:

The river was very good, from its source very good, it was very good, up to here, and it got to a point where now...it closed and it encountered many difficulties and this has been very traumatic, right? But I think that, well, the course only has a beginning and an end, I know that this won't last much longer and I'm here, that's why I did this line, I'm starting to go out, these difficulties are behind me, thank God, then you can see that there aren't any more rocks, there are no more difficulties, as my colleague said, I made a decision, we are here and moving forward, so here I am seeing that the river is opening up a lot more because I see many opportunities [...] And so in this respect I am very happy that we are now here, I see a bright future.

[37-year-old Colombian man]

Another session that had a positive influence on a growing sense of hope was the last session corresponding to Phase one. During this exercise, participants had to imagine a day like any other in 5 years' time, describing what their life would be like. Most accounts were positive and hopeful, partly thanks to their participation in the program, as reflected later on in their final feedback:

It seems that I now have more ability and strength to face difficulties as well as more positive thoughts now about the future.

[31-year-old Ukrainian woman]

3.1.2 | Self-efficacy

This category includes narratives that make reference to increased self-confidence, self-assurance, and the self-perception of having the ability to cope with any difficulties thanks to the program. One participant highlighted the importance of knowing one's strengths and weaknesses to cope with life's adversities as one of the contributions that the program has made:

The thing is that I value myself a lot more through this experience... I feel that I am stronger, more confident, I trust myself more and I know my weak points and my strong points and so I can use them for whatever I need, because... I was in a difficult situation and I have to search within, how I can do it, because the only thing that's going to help me is myself and therefore, this thing. [the program] is very good

[27-year-old Sahrawi woman]

Furthermore, the role that the peer group performed to identify personal strengths was seen in a very positive light. For example, the dynamic established during the 10th session of the first phase was important when it came to facilitating self-efficacy development. Specifically, participants were asked to describe each other using positive adjectives and then to assess themselves according to the descriptions given. One participant reflected on the assessment made by the rest of the group, who described him as brave:

Another thing that strikes me, well, what everyone mentioned is that they identify me as brave and good, one doesn't realize how brave one is until one faces things, because in my country, I had been through a lot of things, but they had never described me as brave [...] and well, in fact, to be sitting here today and now,

well, I have been brave... so thanks to everyone for the definition, because I just didn't realize what I am made of but it helps me to keep going and to work on it to always keep it up.

[29-year-old Salvadoran man]

3.1.3 | Coping

This category includes narratives that allude to an increase in coping strategies thanks to program participation. Among those observed, we can highlight a perceived increase in knowledge and use of community resources in the immediate environment and enjoying a wider social support network to help face adversity.

Information on community resources available in the city shared at the close of each peer-support session enabled the participants to build their knowledge of the environment around them while also improving their outlook on the opportunities that the host society offers. One participant used these terms to describe the program's main contributions in their final feedback:

The sessions have changed me to gain more knowledge, to better understand the context that I want to tackle as a foreigner in Spain, and to have less uncertainty, to improve openness toward other cultures and to know who to trust. I have a greater understanding of other institutions and of the process we should go through as asylum seekers and meeting people from similar situations. It has helped me to understand my rights as an immigrant.

[35-year-old Salvadoran woman]

One of the most important things that the program promoted and which the participants valued the most was the action of building a social support network. With the passing of each session, a more cohesive environment among the participants took shape. As reflected in the narrative cited below, the second session of the first phase, based on sharing one's grounds for asylum with the group, was highly relevant to create a space for understanding and support among people who have gone through similar traumatic experiences:

It is very important what you are all doing [...] because, look, I did not have the privilege of knowing my peers and this enriches me as a person, that they can listen to me [...] that here, look, we are all the same and we talk [...] so thanks to everyone for sharing this little piece of their life, of their story... and the truth is that it has helped me a lot, getting to know you and for them to have told me their experiences.

[37-year-old Colombian man]

3.2 | Empowerment

3.2.1 | Critical awareness

This category includes narratives that allude to the identification and understanding of the social problems that plague the refugee community. To develop critical awareness, it was essential to identify, as a group, the main difficulties they encounter in their daily lives, which was addressed during the very first session. The exercises of collective reflection that dealt with similar experiences of suffering were crucial to encourage participants' critical awareness. For example, the eighth session of the first phase involved sharing experiences of discrimination and analyzing the reasons for it and possible actions for combating it. One participant reflected on universal human rights after sharing an experience of discrimination in which he was denied healthcare and banking services because he presented an asylum-seeker identity document:

Not only have I had this problem at the medical center but at the bank, I once had a problem because I was sent money from home and they said no, because this isn't a document, and I said "but it's the document that the police gave me" and they said "it doesn't matter who gave it to you, it's not valid". [...] Then social discrimination is infringing the right to universal human rights such as health and other things, so equal opportunities!

[29-year-old Salvadoran man]

On another occasion, the participants discussed the influence that the media has on promoting discrimination among the host population. One participant reflected on the discrimination that the Arab community experiences due to the negative image that the media portray:

Now I can travel by bus and I just say "Alhamdulillah" and everyone is afraid. Why? Because I have a bomb. And this word literally means, its exact meaning is that there is no God except Allah, only Allah, it's a religious name.

[28-year-old Palestinian man]

Faced with this reality, some participants discussed the possibility of controlling the media through legal measures so they remain neutral when conveying information. The media should also place emphasis on civic responsibility when it comes to influencing policies. At the end of this discrimination session, participants were invited to anonymously write their own accounts of discrimination with a view to publishing them as part of an awareness-raising campaign being developed by a local organization at the time.

3.2.2 | Sociopolitical control

This category includes narratives related to a perceived increase in the participants' ability and motivation to take action as mentors and to bring about social change to improve the well-being of their community. Upon completion of the first phase of the program, all of the participants' assessments highlighted this contribution, as shown in this extract:

I found the sessions useful because I've been able to explore the unknown and observe more closely the needs of others and that we have acquired tools for improving our lives and helping others. I feel more confident, clearer, more secure. I hope that everything I have learnt is of use to me so that others who are confused and worried can also see the reality and can gain this same awareness and confidence that I have now.

[64-year-old Venezuelan woman]

The penultimate session of the first phase was one of the most important sessions for increasing sociopolitical control among participants. During this session, the participants had to put themselves in mentors' shoes and write a letter to a refugee who had recently arrived to the country and suggest some useful recommendations at this initial stage. Most of the letters included a practical advice section, as well as a more heartfelt section in which they expressed support and empathized with them and the difficulties and emotional distress they would experience during these early days. Once they had shared their individual letters with the rest of the group, the participants started to reflect on their own abilities to help newcomers. They particularly stressed the importance of having lived through similar circumstances to offer a safe space for listening and accompaniment, for sharing practical tools, and for providing information about organizations of interest. As one participant expressed:

Well, from my point of view, I think that I have all the strengths as well as the talent to be able to help these people, also from the position of what has happened to us, from the inside, it is very important, the view that we have is different, so first, when you have contact with these people, it's about listening, I think it's

very important to listen [...]. After listening, it's giving them all the accompaniment and support they need in every sense, from the institutions that we know, from the friends that, well, as of this first meeting. Helping this person to relate to others, you see, what I want to give to these people... these are all tools that we have and that we have seen here [...]. I don't want what happened to me at the beginning here, in some situations on the bus... [...] That's why the project seems so important.

[37-year-old Colombian man]

3.2.3 | Community participation

The development of critical awareness and sociopolitical control over the course of the sessions, coupled with the establishment of a cohesive group, enabled participants to take action upon completing the first phase of the program. Furthermore, with every session, participants started to become involved more in social initiatives in the local area, collaborating with social organizations as volunteers. They also helped out in religious communities and even acted as mediators to recently arrived refugees on a one-to-one basis. All participants who acted as mentors gave very positive feedback of their experience, not only because of the benefits it brought to newly arrived refugees, but also because of these participants' new lease of well-being which equipped them to help other people in a vulnerable situation. For example, the mentor of the Ukrainian group reported feeling very useful leading the sessions because the newcomers were lacking a lot of information and because the sessions helped her feel more confident about working with people who need support:

I think the sessions have helped me to feel that I have a great potential for working with people who need help and support. Now I feel more support and I am more confident about being able to help other people in the same situation as me to change their lives... It has helped me so much and I am really looking forward to being able to continue and work in this sense... I feel really good and very happy to be able to lead these sessions. I clearly see why these sessions are useful for people who are lost and lacking a lot of information, and this project should be a priority for all those people who have just arrived. They always thank me for the information that I give them. My participants have told me that the classes are very useful and every day they thank CEAR, the university, and me for this opportunity to gain useful knowledge for the future... They are learning a lot.

[31-year-old Ukrainian woman]

When the program ended, the participants who had been mentors did not want it to stop there; they saw it as a very positive experience and felt that it was necessary to give it continuity:

This must continue, it can't stop here. For me especially, it has been an unforgettable experience and it has helped me a lot to be better, stronger, it's the first step for social change, you convey to one person and this one to another... I feel empowered.

[29-year-old Salvadoran man]

Three months later, the mentors were contacted again to find out how they were and if they were undertaking any community engagement activities. Two of the mentors who led a Spanish-speaking group continued to meet with their participants on a weekly basis with a view to supporting each other in their daily struggles. They were also at the early stages of setting up a support network involving other refugees with whom they shared information, provided accompaniment and mediation, and exchanged material goods considered basic necessities. Meanwhile, the other Spanish-speaking mentor pair, along with a Palestinian participant from the first phase, were leading an initiative to establish a refugee association, and were waiting for an answer from the local town hall. Lastly, thanks to the initiative of the mentors and with the support of the research team, a community resource

guide for refugees was drawn up in five languages, which contains all of the organizations and local resources shared during the program and which is useful for recently arrived refugees.

4 | DISCUSSION

The results highlight the usefulness of a peer-support and peer-mentoring approach to enhancing resilience and empowerment by refugee mentors in the receiving society. Specifically, the mentors' resilience increased over time, and they were empowered to utilize their inner strength toward developing new support systems, taking specific actions to improve their community's situation, and training to help newly arrived refugees in southern Spain. To our knowledge, this is the first study that sequentially combines peer-support and peer-mentoring formats into the same intervention design to explore the benefits that these types of community-based programs have on the positive and active development of refugees in host settings.

The results suggest the need to gear interventions toward building refugees' inner strength—that is, promoting the resilience process—as a preliminary step to “looking outwards” and taking action. In fact, for our participants to successfully take on the role of mentors, an initial phase was required, whereby, they were given the opportunity to improve their resilient strategies to alleviate the suffering presented initially, before moving onto promoting a process of empowerment over the course of the sessions. In any event, our experience suggests that, to some extent, both processes—resilience and empowerment—interacted throughout the program in a mutually supportive dynamic. In the words of Brodsky and Cattaneo (2013): “empowerment builds on resilience to provide the bridge that connects individual power to social power, changing the world around the individual and local community. Those external changes have profound psychological impact, building resources that may in turn shore up resilience, in the case of future adversity” (p. 344).

We found this intervention to be successful at activating four protective processes that respond to the main challenges faced by refugees upon arriving in the host society and which enhance their resilience and empowerment: the elaboration of “migratory mourning,” enjoying close peer-support relationships, acquiring knowledge of the receiving context, and playing a meaningful role as mentors.

The structure of the first-phase, peer support sessions—centered around future mentors sharing their migration experiences—paved the way for a safe environment built on trust, which welcomed the expression of personal suffering and a *more positive redefinition of migratory mourning*. As Eastmond (2007) states, “stories are important sites not only for negotiating what has happened and what it means, but also for seeking ways of going forward” (p. 251). Our study also highlights the importance of facilitating *supportive relationships among refugees* that overcome social isolation—in our case driven by the peer-support format during the first phase—as a key element when it comes to promoting resilience and empowerment. In fact, we can state that the storytelling process within a peer-support group itself becomes a resilient and empowering tool that allows redefining negative experiences, identifying personal strengths, finding inspiration in others to tackle similar situations to one's own, and challenging the dominant cultural narratives (Williams, Labonte, & O'Brien, 2003).

Furthermore, every first-phase session ended with a presentation of the main *community resources available in the city*, many of them informal, to help address the challenges identified during each workshop. This knowledge acquired during the program was considered essential, as it could help future mentors better understand their environment and feel more confident about their ability to make an impact on their new community. The program also offered participants the opportunity to partake in *meaningful engagement as mentors* working with peers facing a more vulnerable situation, recognizing their key role in the success of the second phase. From this perspective, importance was given to viewing this program as a flexible collective-building process which would allow the program to feed off its own experiences. The fact that the mentoring experience developed during the second phase has been shown to be related to increased empowerment among our participants supports the notion that “working for the collective good is empowering” (Gilster, 2012, p. 779), and ties in with studies that suggest that community engagement is associated with resilience and empowerment among displaced people (Paloma et al., 2010; Taurini et al., 2017).

Our study offers guidelines for professional intervention in the field of positive refugee development from a community-based approach. First, it provides empirical support for the use of interventions that—going beyond the top-down approach—combine peer-support and peer-mentoring formats to promote refugee resilience and empowerment. Its inclusion in organization-led stable programs offered to refugees during the settlement process would help these organizations perform transformative rather than ameliorative or even disempowering functions (Evans, Hanlin, & Prilleltensky, 2007). Moreover, it would respond to the need to establish informal settings and programs that promote a sense of community among peers, mentors, and professionals as an effective strategy for positive development promotion among refugees (Edge, Newbold, & Mckeary, 2014). Second, this study highlights the suitability of participatory methodology, given that it adheres to the guidelines proposed by the UNHCR (2017): (a) it recognizes refugees' strengths; (b) it strengthens refugees' capacity to support each other through community-based activities; and (c) it promotes the meaningful engagement of refugees—who are not experts—as agents of change within their communities. Furthermore, involving the refugees themselves as agents of change ensures that the intervention programs show cultural sensitivity. Language barriers are also overcome and more equal relationships between providers and users of community services are established. Third, this study emphasizes the appropriateness of introducing a collaborative and intersectional partnership, which actively involves academics, NGO professionals, and refugees themselves as key stakeholders. Evidence suggests that working closely with the community and finding synergies with existing social organizations during intervention increases the likelihood of building lasting change in host localities (Wolff et al., 2017).

This study presents a number of limitations. First, the participants involved as mentors may be less representative of the refugee population, especially because selection was based on a series of leadership skills and sensitivity toward social engagement. Although we witnessed genuine processes of resilience and empowerment among them, it is clear that, from the outset, they exhibited a series of protective factors that more than likely made them more resilient compared with other peers. Second, the assessment design did not include a comparison group, meaning that we could not safely conclude that the positive changes observed were due to the intervention program. In any event, the triangulation of findings (mentor narratives, written evaluations, researchers' external observations, and assessment by CEAR) allow us to exclude alternative reasons such as social desirability or mere personal strength over time in the host society. Third, the participants' perceived vulnerability or psychological distress over the course of the program was not appropriately measured in this study. As such, future assessments would do well to include a broader picture of the development and effects of the program on participants. For example, it would be interesting to assess more systematically the impact of intervention in the participants' lives and in their wider social context beyond their narratives (Im, 2018). In this paper, we offer data about how the refugees took action as mentors and led several social initiatives beyond the mere expression of resilient and empowered narratives. Nevertheless, we understand that some concerns may be raised about actual day-to-day change as opposed to simply learning and appropriating the discourse of empowerment. Fourth, we have only analyzed the dynamics of resilience and empowerment that are clearly linked to the benefits of the intervention program. However, the refugees undoubtedly present other more natural sources of resilience and empowerment that do not derive from program participation; for example, the role of spirituality as a source of hope as well as a coping mechanism (see, e.g., Hasan, Mitschke, & Ravi, 2018).

This study contributes to the literature by providing specific content on the resilience and empowerment processes tailored to the refugee population. It also demonstrates the usefulness of implementing community-based interventions that promote the meaningful engagement of refugees to enhance the well-being of displaced persons—as the ultimate aim of resilient and empowering processes—and to involve them as active citizens in places of settlement. The mobilization of mentors from refugee backgrounds contributes toward community capacity-building within localities by allowing them to alleviate feelings of powerlessness and be ready to catalyze possible collective efforts to overcome the challenges of their community from within the receiving societies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research project was funded by grants from the Lafourcade-Ponce Spanish Foundation for Psychological Well-being (2017/INT) and from the Universidad de Sevilla's Office for Development Cooperation (2017/04/02). We would like to thank all mentors participating in this study, who showed enthusiasm and commitment to the project and who taught us some valuable life lessons.

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How to cite this article: Paloma V, de la Morena I, Sladkova J, López-Torres C. A peer support and peer mentoring approach to enhancing resilience and empowerment among refugees settled in southern Spain.

J Community Psychol. 2020;48:1438–1451. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22338>