

“ALWAYS IN BETWEEN”: HOW RESETTLEMENT
AGENCIES SUPPORT CAN SHAPE THE
REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

by

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the communication barriers faced by refugees going through the resettlement process in Amarillo, Texas, which is guided by VOLAGs, or voluntary resettlement agencies that work in alignment with the goal established by the U.S. refugee resettlement program of helping refugees achieve rapid self-sufficiency after entering the country. The Refugee Services of Texas (RST) is an example of a VOLAG that provides support services for refugees during their initial time in their new home. This study analyzed how services provided by RST can shape the refugee experience. This organizational ethnographic research took place at RST during English as a Second Language (ESL) classes over the period of 15 months. In addition to participant observations and fieldnotes collected at RST, five in-depth interviews were conducted with refugees and RST service providers. Results show that part of the refugee community is struggling with communication barriers in Amarillo. Additionally, a high number of refugees work in the meat-packing industry, a job that does not always allow refugees to perform educational and professional skills from prior experiences, often leading to dissatisfaction with life in the United States. The refugee community can benefit from the support provided by organizations like RST and be able to achieve varied professional opportunities to explore their career through the resettlement process. In order for this to happen, such support must be offered in the proper way, which should respect particular limitations and strengths of each client.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines a refugee as "someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence" ("Refugee Facts," 2018, para. 1), leading the individual to live under the risk of suffering attacks based on "race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group" ("Refugee Facts," 2018, para. 1). In other words, refugees are persecuted for being who they are. For some reason, they are deemed to be outside the law or accepted norms, usually related to politics or religion. The UNHCR states that currently, there are about 68.5 million people forcibly displaced worldwide, out of which 25.4 million are classified as refugees ("Refugee Statistics," 2018). A great number of these individuals are starting their lives over in the United States. In 2017 alone, 24,559 refugees resettled in the United States ("Refugees in America," 2018).

In their journey for safety, refugees face a long road that consists of many steps they have to take in order to be qualified as a refugee and receive protection, as well as certain benefits from the hosting country. Support is often received through voluntary agencies (VOLAGs). These VOLAGs are voluntary resettlement agencies that work in

alignment with the goal established by the U.S. refugee resettlement program of helping refugees “achieve economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible” (Fix, Hooper, & Zong, 2017, p. 7). In this sense, VOLAGs have the role of offering services such as apartment set-up, English as Second a Language (ESL) classes, childcare, job search resources, and assistance with medical appointments (Fix et al., 2017). In Amarillo, Texas, these are the services provided by The Refugee Service of Texas (RST), and such services are the focus of the organizational ethnography and analysis of this study. Based on my ethnographic experience at RST, there is one particular insight that I hope organizations serving refugees like RST take from the following analysis: that each individual has very personal necessities when entering the process of learning a new culture, a new language, and new survival skills. In this process, such particular necessities must be considered and treated with patience, empathy, and respect in order for a refugee to reach self-sufficiency and well-being.

RST is an institution that provides support for refugees resettling in Texas. The organization was created in 1978, in Dallas, with the purpose of “providing assistance to refugees and other displaced persons fleeing persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group - as well as to the communities that welcome them” (“We work,” 2018, para. 1). The organization eventually expanded to other Texas cities, including Amarillo where the office began to operate in 2008 affiliated with the Church World Service and the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services. RST describes the refugee’s journey in seven fundamental steps: (a) fleeing their home country to a safe area at a neighbor country or a refugee camp; (b) applying to be registered as a refugee with the UNHCR; (c) waiting for applications to be

processed and for referrals to be submitted; (d) undergoing detailed interviews and extensive background checks; (e) having their applications approved (or denied) and going through medical examinations; (f) being approved for resettlement; (g) and finally, traveling to the hosting country to start a new life (“The Refugee Journey,” 2018). According to RST, this process can take up to 19 years to be completed. During the process, the UNHCR states that most refugees find asylum in refugee camps or in urban areas and informal dwellings. According to UNHCR (2018), “Once a person becomes a refugee, they are likely to remain a refugee for many years. Many will be displaced for nearly two decades. It is a life in limbo” (“What is,” para. 1). In this context, the harsh realities faced by refugees make VOLAGs like RST an important part of their resettlement process.

The Refugee Experience

In the film *The Resettled*, Larry Yungk, senior resettlement officer for the UNHCR, states that “most refugees aren’t resettled. Well, less than 1% of refugees get resettled” (Thompson, 2016). To express how arduous the journey of a refugee is, Yungk uses the following metaphor:

For many refugees getting to the U.S. is like finishing a marathon. They went through a very long process and finally they get here. . . . And just like the marathoner, you hit that finish line, and they are ready to sort of collapse in exhaustion that they finally made it. And then they arrive, and somebody says “by the way, maybe there’s another two miles to the marathon. You’ve been through so much more but there’s just a little bit more.” And so those first few months in

the U.S or any country is a time when, frankly, the refugees haven't thought about that much. (Thompson, 2016)

Yungk notes that the challenges experienced by refugees during the resettlement process in their new home country are, many times, a problematic surprise. Refugees are not really aware of or prepared for the challenges of resettlement.

The Refugees in Texas

As stated by the UNHCR, "The U.S. resettles the most vulnerable refugees and has been the world's resettlement leader for decades" ("Refugees in America," 2018). The agency also clarifies that the U.S. has a tradition of offering resettlement support "to the most vulnerable refugee cases including women and children at risk, women heads of households, the elderly, survivors of violence and torture and those with acute medical needs" (UNHCR, 2018, "Welcoming," para. 2). UNHCR data also show that "2/3 of refugees come from just five countries: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar and Somalia" (UNHCR, 2018, "Noteworthy," para.1). Aligning with this information, data from RST show that 254 refugees were resettled in Amarillo through 2017, and the majority of them came from South Sudan, Myanmar, and Somalia (RST, 2018). Throughout this research process, I had the opportunity to meet several refugees and indeed, most came from one of these countries.

This study seeks to provide a better understanding of the services of RST through an organizational ethnographic study, while also addressing the pressing needs of the refugee community in Amarillo, Texas. My interactions happened from June of 2017 to September 2018, taking place at RST's office in Amarillo during their ESL classes (Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9 a.m. to noon). My activities were divided between

taking care of the children while their parents were attending ESL classes and assisting the ESL teachers in class. In doing so, I had the chance to interact with several refugees who recently arrived in Texas, in situations very limited by the language barrier between us. Such experiences allowed me to be directly involved in the English learning process of a few refugees within two different contexts: indirectly, when I listened to the children repeat words after me while interacting with them in childcare; and directly, when I would assist the ESL instructors in class.

As a result of this organizational ethnographic study, my goal is to provide detailed and accurate information to enlighten the discussion regarding the struggles refugees face throughout their journey in search for basic human rights and needs. The focus is on understanding the reasons for such struggles to identify ways RST can further support resettlement efforts to stimulate the improvement of refugees' everyday life and welfare.

Organizational Ethnography

The choice of using an ethnographic approach was because the method covers exactly what this study was intended to do: connect field experience to an experience I could relate to personally, while supported by theoretical work. Moreover, there is one specific fact that relates myself to the refugee community: I also speak English as a second language. However, given the fact refugees are expected to start working as soon as possible from the moment they enter the country to soon become self-sufficient, learning English becomes a fundamental step of their resettling process when they lack the necessary time to develop and improve such English-speaking skills. Organizations like RST provide ESL classes for refugees in order to allow them to have an opportunity

to keep improving their skills. It is in this same scenario that the majority of the field work for this research took place.

RATIONALE

A particular characteristic of ethnography is that it allows the researcher to be personally involved with the study's topic. As Fine (1994) states, "we bring our belongings into the field with us" (p. 9). In this case, the belonging I have brought with me as basis for the ethnographic approach is my experience learning English as a second language (ESL). Creswell (2007) states that an ethnographer must analyze "shared patterns" of a given experience that is common to "an entire culture-sharing group" (p. 90). For the purpose of this research process, the group analyzed was the refugee community resettling in Amarillo and receiving support from the Refugee Services of Texas with ESL classes. In this sense, the shared pattern in focus was the English learning process of the refugee community living in Amarillo.

I can relate to refugees by being an immigrant living in the United States and hence, understanding what is like to be in the search for better opportunities at a foreign country. My experience, however, is very different from the refugee experience, consisting of a much easier journey that I have faced until the moment of conducting this study. Learning English as a second language is a skill that I have developed since childhood, in Brazil (my home country), where we learn English in a similar way that Americans usually learn Spanish, at school. When I started fifth grade, however, I also started to attend extra English classes weekly and continued to do so until I was a sophomore in high school. Those classes I used to take twice a week at a second languages school were very similar to the classes RST clients receive for ESL training.

Being involved in such scenario reminded me of those years when I was having my first contacts with the English language.

Later, when I came to Texas as a foreigner exchange student for my senior year in high school, the experience I had with the language was completely different from the prior one in the classroom environment, and that was the moment when I found myself unable speak in English to people. Having conversations was very challenging for me back then, and it took me about five months to break such language barriers. When I learned that refugees go through a process similar to this in terms of learning English, along with the pressure of achieving self-sufficiency within 120 days after entering the U.S., I realized how challenging the resettlement process must be for them, especially compared to my journey as an immigrant in the same country. This sense of privilege for having so many years to build my English skills and seek my goals as an immigrant was a strong motivation for conducting the present study.

Having experienced ESL training as well allowed me to approach the refugee community with a great sense of empathy for understanding a small level of their experience. Going through the research process at RST as a volunteer allowed me to build relationships with the refugees and learn their stories. These stories and observations I made guided by my empathy towards refugees represent the data collected through the organizational ethnographic experience at RST, which is presented and discussed in the following chapters.

My intention from the beginning of the research process has been to explore the context in which refugees are being resettled in the U.S., more specifically in Amarillo, analyze what challenges they are facing in such a process, and propose possible ways for

them to overcome those challenges based on the ethnographic data. Thus, this study was motivated by my personal beliefs regarding vulnerable populations, inspired by my own experiences related to learning English as a second language, and engaged with my goal as a communication researcher of being a voice for vulnerable populations. The questions that guided this research process are the following:

Research Questions

RQ 1 - What roles do language barriers play in the journey of a refugee towards achieving self-sufficiency?

RQ 2 - What's the role of VOLAGs, RST in particular, in the resettlement process for refugees?

RQ 3 - How can VOLAGs, RST in particular, help to facilitate the refugee journey?

Summary

Chapter 1 presented an overview of the current scenario experienced by refugees resettling in the United States and in Texas. The reasons for a person to become a refugee and aspects from their journey were discussed. The services of resettlement support provided by VOLAGs such as RST were also mentioned, as well as the Research Questions that guided the research process.

The following sections consist of Chapters 2-5. Chapter 2 presents a literature review exploring studies conducted in the past years regarding the situation of refugees resettling in the United States. Topics such as language barriers refugees encounter when seeking healthcare and employment are covered in the literature review section. Chapter 3 presents the methodology used to guide the study, known as organizational ethnography. The method section offers guidelines on how to conduct an ethnographic

research within organizational settings and how this method relates to this research process. Chapter 4 provides an analysis of the data collected for the purposes of this study, consisting of observation notes and five in-depth interviews. Such data are analyzed in comparison with the results provided by the literature review and in accordance with the guidelines presented by organizational ethnographic methods. Finally, Chapter 5 provides a discussion about the main take aways of this study regarding communication challenges faced by refugees throughout their resettling process.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

As described in the previous section, a refugee's life is formed by a number of harsh challenges, beginning with leaving a home, a life, and many times a family behind in the country where they were born to flee on a journey that is very dangerous and uncertain; however, it is still safer than staying. The most fortunate refugees are given the chance to come to a new country, such as the United States; however, after arrival they still have to face language and cultural barriers when seeking basic resources for starting a new life. This is where VOLAGs, like RST, step in with the role of providing vulnerable populations, such as refugees, with assistance services to help them face challenges and fulfill needs. As Nawyn (2006) clarifies:

VOLAGs are organizations that specialize in refugee resettlement. They have national offices that contract directly with the State Department to resettle a set number of refugees, and the national offices in turn assign those refugees to their local offices in various cities. (p. 1512)

In other words, VOLAGs are the bridges between federal agencies and the resettlement process of refugees at the community level. RST is one of these bridges located in Amarillo, Texas. Nawyn (2006) also explains that these organizations "can be

faith based, such as the Church World Service, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, or the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, or they can be secular, such as the International Rescue Committee or the Ethiopian Community Development Council” (p. 1512).

Nawyn (2006) also describes a series of services likely to be provided by a VOLAG:

Some support agencies provide cultural programming, including interceding between refugees and American institutions such as schools or the police. Some support agencies recruit volunteers who collect items to furnish a refugee family’s apartment or provide refugees transportation to job interviews and other necessary appointments. (p. 1512-1513)

Aligned with such services is the job conducted by RST, which is the main object of focus of the present study.

The resettlement process is mentally and physically challenging. For example, Shannon, O’Dougherty, and Mehta, (2012) discuss the impact that the refugee experience has on the mental health of refugees: “The aftermath of witnessing and surviving horrific and violent war atrocities leave many refugees with significant symptoms of psychological distress including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and major depression” (p. 48). This is only one of the reasons why refugees may need extra support during their resettlement process, since battling mental and physical health challenges in addition to the language and cultural barriers can make the refugee experience extra difficult for some of them.

The Resettled is a 2016 documentary written and directed by Alan Thompson that portrays the stories of refugees resettling in the USA. Among the many narratives presented in the film, one is a great example of the situation many refugees face while

resettling. In the documentary, Fidel Nshombo, a refugee activist from Congo who has been resettled for 10 years in Boise, Idaho, describes the consequences that witnessing a war brought to his personal life. Nshombo suffers from chronic body pains that were generated from the harms he went through during conflicts before leaving his country 10 years ago. Still today, he reports not being able to sleep at night due to nightmares about all the suffering he experienced, and these nightmares lead to anxiety attacks. Nshombo is a writer and motivational speaker. The following speech was written by him describing his own experience:

We were a loving family, doing our daily activities during the day and praying together, as a family, and then . . . boom! Everything that I had disappeared in a single day. The war broke out. I found myself alone with my whole family disappeared, killed, kidnapped, ran without me, or in prison. I did not know. All I knew was I had to save myself. I had to find a safe place for myself. My city, Bukavu, was not one of the safe places because from that day on my country was classified as a war zone. My country, the Democratic Republic of Congo, was classified as the worst place for women. Eight million people have been killed and buried in my land, 10% of our population to be exact. You see? I was not born a refugee, I was made one to survive. I had to walk through hell to find a safe place.

(Thompson, 2016)

The experience described by Nshombo is not one singular case, but the same of thousands of refugees around the world.

The present study intends to explore the context in which individuals like Nshombo access basic community services to fulfill everyday needs while resettling in

the United States. Fix et al. (2017) describe the preparation process refugees go through in order to resettle in the U.S.:

Prior to departure for the United States, refugees receive three to five days of cultural orientation, which describes the resettlement process, refugees' rights and obligations, and life in the United States. When resettled refugees arrive in the United States, they are met by a representative from one of the nine voluntary agencies who provides them with initial reception and orientation services during their first 30 days in the country. These services include help with purchasing food and clothing, finding affordable housing, enrolling children in school, receiving English as Second Language (ESL) instruction and employment assistance, applying for social security cards, and navigating social services. (p. 7)

In this context, the research focuses on the role that organizations like RST play in guiding the resettling process of refugees while providing them services such as ESL classes that are crucial for them to develop the necessary skills to become self-sufficient in the new country. In this study, ethnographic approaches were used to guide the analysis of support services offered by RST through fieldwork, observations, and in-depth interviews with refugees and RST service providers. The data obtained from such experiences is presented and analyzed in Chapter 4.

Identifying Refugees' Needs

One of the community services mentioned in this study that is needed for a refugee is medical care. Shannon et al. (2012) posit that, in an ideal world, being aware of the refugee's journey should be crucial for healthcare providers when treating refugee patients, however, this is not what happens in most of the cases. When analyzing

interactions between refugee patients and health care providers during medical appointments, the authors identify many problems that emerge from those situations when the communication between both parties is compromised due to barriers caused by linguistic conflicts. In these cases, Shannon et al. (2012) establish two important factors: on one side, “Physicians tend to focus on the physical complaints of refugees without reference to emotional well-being and the socio-political context of those symptoms” (p. 49); on the other hand, “Refugees are hesitant to initiate conversations with physicians due to cultural norms requiring deference to the doctor’s authority” (p. 47). This lack of communication and translation services, combined with other challenging experiences faced during the resettlement process, potentiate the prevalence of mental health symptoms among the refugee community and threatens their well-being.

Regarding translation services, there are two different and important components: *linguistic* and *cultural interpretations*. Wiking, Sundquist, and Saleh-Stattin (2013), in a qualitative study conducted in Switzerland, also explored the interpretation process between immigrant patients, interpreters, and health care providers during medical consultations. As the authors clarify, linguistic interpretation is the literal translation between two languages using explicit explanation of terms. In this case, the interpreter must be fluent in both languages in order to provide a full and clear translation. The cultural interpretation is the one where the cultural background of the patient is considered, as well as morals and values that are part of such culture (Wiking et al., 2013). Wiking et al.’s (2013) study results showed that the majority of participants were concerned about the doctor fully understanding *how* they were feeling. “I want the interpreter to translate or convey exactly how I feel, in other words, my feelings,

emotions, and experiences, that is, not only the verbal thing” said one of the participants of the study (p. 3). The authors also analyzed the participants’ perceptions of the consultation itself, pointing out how, sometimes, it is hard for the patient to trust in what the interpreter is saying, because the interpreter’s explanation might not match the medical authority with the same level of accuracy.

Crosby (2013) published a clinical review of a Somalian refugee. At the time of the study, Ms. P was a 48-year-old woman from Somalia who was a victim of many traumas during the Somalian civil war before becoming a refugee in 2001. Following the steps of the refugee’s journey, she first moved to Egypt (neighboring country), where she lived for three years before being accepted to resettle in the United States in 2003. Ms. P had just been diagnosed with a kidney problem when she first arrived in the U.S., and the organ needed to be removed. In the review, she describes how there was no interpreter present when she was asked to sign the papers allowing the doctors to remove her kidney, neither was there someone capable of even explaining to her what was going on at that moment. Without a choice, Ms. P signed the papers and had her kidney removed without being fully aware of what was actually happening. She argues:

When there is no interpreter, it becomes very difficult to communicate, and staff may not be familiar with my culture. One main frustration I had was when male doctors tried to shake my hand. In my religion, women are not allowed to touch men. (Crosby, 2013, p. 520)

This situation described by Ms. P is also a perfect example of when cultural interpretation would be necessary, in order to avoid the uncomfortable moment where she refuses to shake the doctor’s hand.

In this sense, acknowledging the different expectations refugees have of social situations becomes fundamental when providing them with any type of service, including the ESL classes I was involved with at RST during this organizational ethnographic research process. Organizations like RST are key conduits between refugees and physician services as accompanying refugees to medical consultations is one of the services the organization provides. In fact, this was the initial direction of the study however, when I learned that the medical consultations were accompanied by individuals with prior experience with the task because it might involve delicate and emergency situations, I knew I must redirect my plans. I also learned that before studying refugees' interactions in English, I would have to explore their English learning process, which led me to change the focus of this study to the ESL classes offered by RST and how they can shape the refugee experience of those enrolled.

Language Barriers in Support Services

Migration and resettlement can strain the health and welfare of refugees, which is why VOLAGs such as RST were created. RST's purpose is to provide assistance to displaced individuals and asylum seekers, including refugees, around Texas during their initial process of resettling in the United States. Kirmayer, Narasiah, Munoz, Rashid, Ryder, Guzder, and Pottie (2011) classified the three phases that a refugee goes through regarding the resettlement process: (a) premigration, which "often involves disruption to usual social roles and networks"; (b) migration, when "immigrants can experience prolonged uncertainty about their citizenship status as well as situations that expose them to violence"; and, (c) postmigration resettlement, that "usually brings hope and optimism, which can have an initially positive effect on well-being" (p. 961). Each phase is linked

to certain risks. For example, due to the positive feelings of hope and optimism that are generated during the postmigration resettlement phase, symptoms of mental health problems may not be evident during the primary care consultations refugees go through when first arriving to the new country. However, these initial hopes and expectations can soon be replaced with enduring obstacles when immigrants and their families face the actual adaptation process at a new home. In this sense, feelings of disillusionment, demoralization, and depression might appear after no longer under a VOLAG's care.

Refugees often do not receive proper care because of language barriers. Similar to the findings presented by Kirmayer et al. (2011), mental health problems such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety were the most common issues mentioned by refugee patients in a study conducted by Morris, Popper, Rodwell, Brodine, and Brouwer (2009). Morris et al. (2009) also noted that "Every participant perceived language to be a major, if not the most major barrier to refugee health care access" (p. 533). The authors argue that this situation forces refugee patients to prioritize a doctor's ability to speak their language over their professional qualification in order to avoid the stress of not being understood (Morris et al., 2009). Thus, not being able to speak and understand the language of the new country affects a refugee's whole life, from interacting and practicing ordinary daily activities to completing important tasks that are necessary for their own health and welfare. For this reason, services provided by VOLAGs that include improving English language skills are critical for improving the life quality of refugees regarding healthcare, or any type of care. Not only do these language barriers affect efforts of communicating in any social situation, they also affect the search for opportunities of becoming self-sufficient.

Employment & Self-Sufficiency

The 1980 *Refugee Act* declared the objective of refugees achieving self-sufficiency in a short period of time after entering the United States, which according to Fix et al. (2017) directly affects the work of resettlement agencies (VOLAGs). The objective of VOLAGs is to help refugees integrate into American society by studying and working to sustain their families, just like any other citizen. However, Fix et al. (2017) mention challenges for entering the workforce given many “have experienced trauma, have physical or mental health needs, and/or have been out of the labor market for years while displaced” (p. 7). That is, refugees’ resettling process is impacted by consequences of their experiences, making it more challenging for them to seek work opportunities. Facilitating such process is one of the main reasons VOLAGs such as RST operate around the country.

Fix et al. (2017) clarify that, in accordance with the goals established by the U.S. refugee resettlement program, the goals of VOLAGs include assisting refugees to become financially independent within the shortest period of time possible by helping them to find jobs. As presented by Ives (2007), “Resettlement is conceptualized at the federal level as economic self-sufficiency consisting of short-term assistance implemented locally” (p. 54). This means that when the United States approves the resettlement of a refugee in the country, the main goal expected for that refugee in the U.S. is to achieve financial independence as soon as possible, meaning that that individual will be an active participant within the American economy. Ives (2007) argues that “With a singular focus on refugees’ economic participation, there is little understanding of the complexities of long-term economic stability” (p. 54). Refugees who arrive in the U.S. holding great

academic records, mastering great skills from prior working experiences, but without English-speaking skills, end up working at jobs that only provide them financial stability without allowing them to make progress on the professional career they once had the chance to choose.

It is not surprising, then, that “many of the orientation and integration services made available to newly arrived refugees focus on finding early employment - and, thus, avoiding reliance on cash assistance” (Fix et al., 2017, p. 7). Fix et al. (2017) argue that, in this context, “there is a tension between this push for rapid self-sufficiency and the goal of finding employment commensurate with the professional qualifications and experience of mid- to high-skilled refugees” (p. 7). Although refugees might be highly skilled in a particularly professional or intellectual area, the need for quickly becoming self-sufficient forces them to rely on high paying jobs that usually involve manual work (such as the meatpacking industry). While such job opportunities do allow refugees to obtain quick financial stability, they do not allow them to utilize their best skills or advance those skills. This leads to higher *underemployment* levels, especially “for those who hold a college degree or higher and are unemployed or employed in a low-skilled job,” which may “affect professional mobility and attainment, and crucially, long-term earning potential” (Fix et al., 2017 p. 2). Although the self-sufficiency objective of the 1980 *Refugee Act* is meant to stimulate a system where a significant number of job opportunities are offered to refugees, many of these jobs may not meet a refugee employee’s professional qualification from prior working experiences, nor allow them to seek higher goals in terms of professional career and income.

Ives (2007) also states that the tendency to evaluate social welfare and support considering one's "ability to enhance personal independence in the form of individual economic self-sufficiency and to reduce dependence on public assistance" are proper characteristics of the American system (p. 55). In this context, the refugees who come to the U.S. are expected to adjust as quickly as they can to the national culture and economic scenario, and it is part of the job of VOLAGs around the country to guide them through such process.

Employment expectations. Given the challenges to employment, VOLAGs help manage refugee expectations. Baran, Valcea, Porter, and Gallagher (2018) studied what refugees expect from employment in the U.S. related to availability of jobs, placement, work hours, and wages. Refugees tend to build positive expectations of living the *American Dream* based on the image of great economic power the U.S. has for foreign countries. However, these expectations start to disappear once, in reality, they face cultural and language barriers that make their experience much more challenging. Baran et al. (2018) argue that giving attention to the situation will only result in "further insight into the employer-employee relationship, and such insights would benefit those who assist refugees in resettlement" (p. 103), such as RST.

Another argument presented by Baran et al. (2018) is that "Clarity about one's job search is also likely complicated by the fact that refugees may be unable to base their goals upon prior experiences, making them reliant on native guidance" (p. 103). It seems clear that the refugee community is a vulnerable population in much need of empathy and debate regarding ways to make their experience less difficult. Based on my own

experience, mastering the English language is fundamental when seeking professional opportunities in the U.S., which supports the relevance of ESL classes.

Education and Expectation

Ives (2007) describes the refugee resettling experience with the image of merging two selves:

Becoming a part of a host country is a transformative process that requires space for the fusion of selves. The self from the country of origin does not disappear but is a durable strand together with the refugee self and the self in the host country in the helix of a new existence. (p. 56)

Although I can relate to the ‘transformative process’ of moving to a foreign country mentioned by the author, I have learned the refugee journey to be one of the most devastating experiences a human being can go through, meaning that the adaptation process they face at the new country is much more intense and harder than anything I have experienced before. Refugees are representations of much resilience, strength, and perseverance for facing the circumstances they do.

Again, referring to the “transformative process that requires space for the fusion of selves” mentioned by Ives (2007), I do relate strongly with the experience of integrating the roots of my Brazilian culture with the American characteristics I have acquired since living in Texas, which I would describe as an interesting, challenging, and constant process. For refugees, however, there exists a pressure to go through such process within 120 days while seeking the goal of becoming self-sufficient. “In order for a refugee to achieve integration, he or she must fully participate in the life of the host country, meaning participation in each ecological domain, while maintaining a

relationship with the country of origin” (Ives, 2007, p. 56). I believe this to be another important reason to stimulate organizations like RST to provide the best resettling assistance possible for refugees, allowing them to integrate into an environment that pushes them to explore their best skills and seek their own goals.

Ives (2007) clarifies the refugee experience takes place around three different factors:

Micro factors are the purview of the refugee in that he or she must work through or address each factor, such as language proficiency issues, employment challenges, and so forth. As meso and macro factors are outside of individual control, in order to achieve integration, the refugee must deal with the ramifications of these factors, such as discrimination and host country context. (p. 56)

In this context, the research process for the present study took place around micro factors of the refugee experience, addressing language proficiency issues and employment challenges within the RST’s context as a VOLAG. Such aspects were observed during weekly ESL class meetings and five in-depth interviews with refugees and RST service providers. The research process was guided by organizational ethnographic approaches discussed in Chapter 3.

Most part of the data collected through the research process consists of results of my lived experience with RST. Getting involved with the organization as a volunteer allowed me to spend about 360 hours at their office soaking their environment, which resulted in the content of the field observations for this study. My ethnographic experience at the organization allowed me to observe the clients receiving ESL

instruction as well as to work alongside refugees and other RST employees. Through a very close approach with RST, the basis for analysis are services provided for refugees to help with the acquisition of basic English skills, educational opportunities, and employment services. The questions that guided this research process are the following:

Research Questions

RQ 1: What roles do language barriers play in the journey of a refugee towards achieving self-sufficiency?

RQ 2: What's the role of VOLAGs, RST in particular, in the resettlement process for refugees?

RQ 3: How can VOLAGs, RST in particular, help to facilitate the refugee journey?

Summary

This section presented an overview of studies that have been conducted regarding refugees resettling in the United States, the language and cultural barriers they deal with while doing so, and the challenges regarding mental and physical health they are more vulnerable to face throughout the resettlement process. Based on this literature, three research questions were proposed. These questions guided the data collection process that consisted of field observations made at RST over 15 months and five in-depth interviews with refugees and RST service providers, which are presented on Chapter 4.

Next, Chapter 3 will describe organizational ethnography, which is the method chosen to guide this study. The method provides guidelines on how to conduct an ethnographic study within organizational settings. Such guidelines were the basis of the research process conducted at RST.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

The choice of conducting organizational ethnographic research was instigated by a few similarities I found between the method and the news production process. Coming from a journalistic background, I have always enjoyed the whole experience of going somewhere, talking to someone about something, then writing about it later on. In terms of the research experience I was seeking, I knew that my desire was to not only write about something, but to also be involved with that something in a more practical way afforded by using an ethnographic approach. Wolcott (2008) explains that “we expect the ethnographer to go somewhere to conduct the study” (p. 45). Wolcott (2008) also points out that the activism and independency required in the research process should result in a considerable amount of unpublished data created by the researcher. “There is a further expectation that the ethnographer will gather his [sic] own data rather than become over reliant on data gathered previously by others” (Wolcott, 2008, p. 45). This does not mean that previous studies with similar purposes were ignored; however, they served as guides regarding how the topic has been previously addressed and as comparison parameters to the data presented in this paper, which in fact was generated by interactions I had with refugees and service providers over the past 18 months within the RST environment. This

organizational ethnographic research process was conducted from June 2017 to September 2018. The steps taken along the way will be discussed in terms of the characteristics defined by Ybema, Yanow, Wels, and Kamsteeg (2009) regarding organizational ethnographic studies.

Organizational ethnography consists of an ethnographic study conducted inside of a specific organization, or as Ybema et al. (2009) describe, the study of “organizations and their organizing processes” (p. 4). In this study, the organization being studied is RST and its organizing process. In particular, my role was primarily within the ESL class offerings to recently arrived refugees, which also provided the best opportunities for interviewing refugees and RST employees.

Closeness to the Topic

Ybema et al. (2009) state that organizational ethnographers must “work at becoming as knowledgeable about the organization they are studying as its members are, while at the same time holding on to a stranger’s perspective” (p. 11). I confess that such “stranger’s perspective” was not maintained for too long between me and the people from RST. However, such closeness that I developed with them was essential for me to obtain the knowledge required for this research process. The stories refugees have to share are stories that should never be told, yet some of them were told to me for the sake of conducting this study. While learning such stories, I realized that the individuals who contributed via in-depth interviews were opening up to me about narratives they do not enjoy remembering, so it makes sense they would only be willing to share them with someone they trust. Developing close relationships with the participants allowed me to see myself in each one of them more clearly, which I believe to be a necessary process

when studying a population: to put yourself in those shoes before analyzing the ones wearing them.

In the research process many unexpected discoveries came to light, which also broadened the possibilities of paths the study could have taken. In fact, this “lack of control over the field setting” is pointed out by LeCompte and Schensul (1999) as a specific condition that generates certain criticism towards the ethnographic approach, being a “concern to those who consider ethnography to be more of an art than a science” (p. 3). However, looking at the situation from another perspective, I believe the many discovery possibilities that flourished here are what allowed me to look at the refugee situation with a much more realistic perception, especially because the ethnographic approach allowed me to be involved with the analysis of my topic face-to-face. For example, while I was watching documentaries and reading articles at home about the journey of refugees resettling in the U.S. and trying to become self-sufficient, I was also attending RST twice a week and helping to teach refugees ESL skills in order to assist them in the path of achieving self-sufficiency.

The Organizational Ethnographic Process

Ybema et al. (2009) define a few key characteristics for conducting organizational ethnography studies. In the next paragraphs, a few of them will be mentioned and discussed in comparison with my own organizational ethnographic experience with RST. I have dedicated a considerable amount of time following the refugee crises through the UNHCR website. Ybema et al. (2009) state, “Through the use of these different methods of generating data over an extended period of time, ethnographers are able to describe

various aspects of organizational life” (p. 6). These documentaries helped orient me to the process I would be involved with at RST.

The first characteristic is *combined fieldwork methods*, which Ybema et al. (2009) define as the process of “observing (with whatever degree of participation), conversing (including formal interviewing), and the close reading of documentary sources” (p. 6). All three steps just mentioned were taken in the course of this research process, in different levels. Observations were the most collected type of data, since they were constantly being made while I was present at RST. Conversations were also very frequent and played a significant role in providing me the necessary knowledge to analyze the data. Five in-depth interviews were conducted, which fits Kvale’s (1996) minimum criteria suggestion. The author explains that the “number of subjects necessary depends on a study’s purpose” (Kvale, 1996, p. 102). In the case of this study, the purpose was to explore the refugee experience from a close and deep approach, hence, the depth of the interviews was more relevant than the quantity. Kvale (1996) states that “If the number of subjects is too large, then it is not possible to make penetrating interpretations of the interviews” (p. 102). Because this is an organizational ethnographic study, making penetrating interpretations of the interviews was a fundamental characteristic of the data analysis process. As Kvale (1996) argues, “If the purpose is to understand the world as experienced by one specific person, this one subject is sufficient” (p. 102). This study looked for understanding how refugees are experiencing the world while going through the resettlement process in Amarillo, so the five in-depth interviews conducted provided enough information for answering the proposed research questions.

The second characteristic mentioned by Ybema et al. (2009) for conducting organizational ethnographic studies is being *at the scene*. “Organizational ethnographers do not describe the complexities of everyday organizational life in the abstract, but instead through reporting on their first-hand, field-based observations and experiences” (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 6). Aligned with this characteristic, I have consistently attended RST’s ESL classes every week over the past year and, in doing so, I became deeply involved with their activities. I also developed strong relationships with refugees and service providers in their environment, to the point where I questioned my own roles as volunteer, researcher, and co-worker many times. “Ethnographers go out into the field of study to participate in organizational members’ lifeworlds, establishing working relationships with them, immersing themselves in the circumstances of members’ situations, and giving voice to participants’ own interpretations of these” (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 6). Experiencing such processes has transformed me personally and opened to me a whole path of volunteer work around ESL programs that I had never imagined. I am so grateful for having found it.

A third characteristic is *hidden and harsh dimensions: power and emotions*. Ybema et al. (2009) explain that “Such ethnographers can, at times, have a somewhat critical, even ‘raw’ - direct, unpolished, and sometimes shocking - quality, laying bare harsh and/or hidden social realities and exposing the entanglement of culture with power” (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 7). In fact, many times throughout the course of the research, I questioned if I was actually helping the refugee community or if I was just using their stories as a way to prove a point. An experience I had, for instance, that contributed to this shift of perception happened while volunteering in childcare during the first months

of the research process. During a conversation with an African and an Asian girl, I realized that having the liberty to choose a person to date was a privilege I held. The moment of that conversation was when I had my first real insight about child marriage and how being able to choose who to be in a relationship with is a privilege that many do not have. Having these raw contacts with the cultural reality of those individuals has made me feel hopeless a few times. However, the closer I would become to them and learn their life stories, the more inspired I would feel by their persistence and strength in life, and more motivated I would feel to give them space to express their voice through my study.

Finally, a fourth characteristic is *context-sensitive and actor-centered analysis*, which Ybema et al. (2009) define as the process of first analyzing the big picture of the situation through elements such as the “institutional context, the historical background, power relations, and societal discourses” (p. 7) of the organization being studied, to then explore the role these context, background, relations, and discourses are playing in peoples’ lives at the individual level, “exploring and exemplifying the general through the local and the particular” (p. 7). In this sense, before starting to get personally involved with RST and the refugees, I spent a considerable amount of time conducting research on the organization’s background and the clients’ history. Acquiring such knowledge was fundamental for me to be able to develop the appropriate attitude when interacting with RST and the refugee community.

Based on the characteristics just described, conducting an organizational ethnographic research means to create new data from scratch while respecting very

specific criteria in terms of how to manage such data, which is where the method becomes fundamental:

While fieldwork generates the basis for the descriptive aspects of a study of organizational life and deskwork works through the analytic relationships between descriptive material and theoretical concerns, ethnographic textwork aims to convey the researcher's field experiences and theoretically-informed analysis to a reader (or listener or views, in the case of an oral report of perhaps even an ethnographic film). (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 10)

In this sense, my attempt here is to bring attention to the situation refugees are facing in Amarillo when trying to integrate the city's environment. What stimulates my empathy for the topic is my own experience of integrating the same environment as a foreigner. The analysis was guided by the criteria defined by Ybema et al., (2009) for organizational ethnographic studies.

Participants

The focus of this study is the refugee community resettling in the United States, specifically in Amarillo, Texas, using the services of RST. The group of potential participants was formed by refugees resettling around Amarillo and the employees of RST. Five in-depth interviews were conducted and participants are identified as A, B, C, D, and E. Participant A is a female from Myanmar who was also an RST service provider at the time of the study; Participant B is a male from Myanmar; Participant C is a male from Congo; Participant D is a male from Myanmar who was also an RST service provider at the time of the study, and Participant E is an American female who was an RST service provider at the time the study was conducted.

Procedures

Fieldwork. Being a volunteer at ESL classes allowed me to witness the process of learning English that quite a few refugees, adults and children, go through at RST (mostly Burmese, Congolese, and Sudanese individuals, although these nationalities tend to change over time). This experience gave me the opportunity to truly understand some of the challenges of communicating with refugees. Our interactions were very limited because I do not speak their natural language. This gave me a clear idea of what it is like to provide community services to refugee populations who do not know the English language. Because the main focus of this study was to analyze the services provided to refugees, understanding the language barriers they are facing when seeking community services in Amarillo was an important part of the fieldwork. Exploring the English classes these individuals are taking provided valuable thoughts related to their English proficiency levels, as well as reflections on the challenges they might face through their learning process. Similar to the data regarding refugees' nationalities that change according to time period and geographic region where refugee communities are fleeing from around the world, the number of refugees attending ESL classes at RST is an inconsistent data. The number of students in class would vary from around 10-15 clients in each class (level 1 and 2) during the beginning of the research process, to around 2-4 students towards the end of the study's timeframe. As mentioned by Fix et al. (2017), this decrease is an evident consequence of the 2016 presidential elections and the changes that came along with it, such as "the reduction of the refugee admissions ceiling for FY 2017 from 110,000 to 50,000" (p. 6). In fact, the reduction of admissions ceiling for refugees was noticed inside RST's ESL classrooms.

The fieldwork observations entailed in annotations I would take in a journaling style. Because I was actively participating in RST's activities, notes were taken after each visit, manually, including a description of key points I observed along with personal reflections of such observations. These reflections would usually flourish from noticing RST's interactions similarities with topics addressed by previous studies I read, such as the ones mentioned in the literature review in Chapter 2.

Once the fieldwork data were collected, it was necessary to work through all the notes for analysis from over 500 observation hours. Thirty-eight pages of observations notes were taken (6 typed in the computer and 34 hard written in a notebook). As Ybema et al., (2009) precisely describe,

fieldworkers at some point need to climb out from under copious amounts of often disorganized data - observational field notes, interview notes, notes on documents, notes on methods - and turn those data into thickly described texts which link to their epistemic community's theoretical concerns. (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 12)

Aligned with this thought, the next section will use the guidelines explored in this method section to present the data collected through the course of 15 months regarding RST, their clients, their service providers, and my experience as a volunteer and a researcher within such context.

Interviews. The major challenge I faced in the interview process was to find potential participants who were willing to share their stories with me. The ones who eventually agreed to do so were the ones with whom I developed a close relationship through my volunteer experience. In this context, five in-depth interviews were

conducted with refugees and RST service providers. The transcription of each interview as well as the audio files were returned to each participant to review.

The first interview happened on January 22 with Participants A and B, at the same time. Participant B (20 years old) is a female Burmese refugee who was a childcare service provider for RST when I started to volunteer (we became friends then).

Participant A (19 years old), a male Burmese refugee, came along with her to the interview. They both arrived in Amarillo during childhood and because they attend the same church ever since, they have received similar support and shared a similar context through their resettlement process. The interview happened at my apartment in the form of an informal conversation guided by the questions listed in Appendix A.

The second interview happened on May 3 with Participant C (20 years old), a male Congolese refugee whom I met during an ESL class where I was volunteering as an instructor and he was one of the students. He had recently arrived in Amarillo, on April 2018. The conversation took place outside of his apartment at a complex in Amarillo where, according to him, many other refugee families also reside.

The third interview happened on August 21 with Participant E, an ESL service provider from RST. The conversation happened at RST's office during the ESL class period. Since Participant E is American and does not share the refugee experience with the other participants, she answered a different set of questions, listed in Appendix B.

The fourth interview happened on August 21 with Participant D (22 years old), a male Burmese refugee who is also an RST service provider. He arrived in Amarillo in 2005, brought to the area because it is where his grandparents were already resettled.

Similar to the previous interview, this conversation happened at RST's office during the ESL class period.

All the interviews described above were recorded on a password protected device and later transcribed to a laptop protected in the same way. The interviews transcriptions resulted in a 53 pages file, which did not include any type of personal information about the participants.

Data Analysis

Creswell (2007) states that an ethnographer must analyze “shared patterns” of a given experience that is common to “an entire culture-sharing group” (p. 90). Although complex, ethnography made sense for this project because of the need to work closely with refugees. In this sense and for the purposes of this study, the focus of my analysis throughout the past year has been placed on the experience of becoming a refugee as a whole, and all the life changes that accompany such experience.

It is true that throughout the research process many *shared patterns* were identified and observed, however, the analysis of such patterns was only possible when considering the *particularities* and *individualities* of each person who contributed somehow to the research process. In fact, many of these identified patterns are aligned with questions previously approached in other studies, and a few of them are mentioned in the literature review section of this paper. Much patience, empathy, and respect were also necessary in the data analysis process of this study, when looking for similarities and differences among each one of the in-depth interviews. Although the majority of the topics addressed by the participants were in accordance with the information provided by

the literature review, each one of them approached such topics in very particular ways, describing different perceptions of similar situations.

Regarding validation, topics that were not aligned with the research proposal were not considered for analysis, nor were the descriptions of experiences that were particular of one single individual and did not resonate with the study's purpose. In this sense, the topics considered for analysis were related to refugees' English learning process, the process of adapting to a new culture, employment-related concerns, and the role RST plays in the resettlement process.

Validation

In accordance with methods suggested by Creswell (2007) for ethnographic studies, the data validation process was approached through: (a) thick description, where “the writer describes in detail the participants or setting under study” (p. 252); (b) member checking, where “the researcher solicits participants' views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations” (p. 252); and, (c) peer review, which “provides an external check of the research process” (p. 251) through the perception of third parties who agree to read the study and provide feedback on their perception of the information presented to them.

Thick description. My reflections of participant experiences are noted throughout this paper, presented in the form of thick descriptions. Since ethnography allows the researcher to blend personal experiences with the research topic, these descriptions of my experience are provided as a support for my motivation when choosing the topic and allow the ethnographic study to flourish from the connection between the topic and my previous knowledge it. The ethnographic experiences described

are part of the fieldwork conducted by me at RST and interactions I had with the refugee community, which are the core of the data collected for this study. In other words, the fieldwork consisted of being personally involved with RST on a weekly basis and developing relationships with refugees and service providers throughout the research process. In describing my experience, I hope to provide information that allows someone to visualize some of the situations I have seen at the organization.

Member checking. The data analysis was sent to participant E (RST service provider), who checked whether the idea presented in the study resonates with the participant's experience. Participant E confirmed the analysis to be consistent with the point of view intended to be expressed in the interview. Additionally, another ESL teacher who I met at RST during the research process have read and checked the information. The final version was also sent to RST to review.

Peer review. The analysis was also reviewed by two peers, who described clear understanding of the arguments. Both peers are also immigrants in the U.S. in the same situation as me, so they can relate to the ESL experience on a personal level as well. One of them said "I agree with the discussion of English as a second language makes it difficult to open up. I feel it also bring challenges in cultural context, as it can be challenging to understand culture and traditions at first if you don't understand English completely." The peer also affirmed the data to resonate with his personal experience as an ESL speaker:

My evaluation of the analysis of the data collected from the five interviews is that they are very accurate and closely represent a life of someone whose first language is not English. Being an international student, I can very closely relate to

the stories mentioned during the interviews. Especially, as indicated by participant D, practicing English becomes more difficult when we don't have people to practice it around the house.

This agreement between certain experiences among researcher, participants, and peers gives validity to the data for being consistent with others' experiences.

Summary

This chapter discussed the method used for analysis. The next chapter discusses the analysis of the data from the organizational ethnography. The data analysis leads to support for the discussion of the research questions on the roles of language barriers and VOLAGs.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS

RST is the starting point of this research process so understanding its history is fundamental to understanding the role played by the organization in the life of its clients. Specifically, RST takes on a significant role in helping refugees learn English. Ybema et al. (2009) proposed a question that made me reflect more clearly about studying this organization: “what caused these particular forms of organization, in this specific setting, in this exact context?” (p. 25). In other words, why was RST created in Texas, and what was the context? The description found in the organization’s webpage states that RST was created with the purpose “to provide initial resettlement services and on-going support to refugees, asylees, and other displaced persons” (“Amarillo,” 2018, para. 1). The organization states that most of the refugees who reside around Amarillo were brought through family members previously resettled in the area.

Orienting the Research

The research process began on June 2017, when I started to volunteer for RST as a childcare assistant, a task that I would share with a girl who would eventually become Participant B of this study, bringing with her a second friend, Participant A. She was one of the first people I met throughout my research journey and, eventually, she and I

became good friends: the kind who plan dinners together and text every once in a while. As I noticed the friendship flourish, I confess that I felt worried about whether this close relationship could symbolize some type of bias. However, I could never ignore the fact that her friendship has taught me lessons about the Burmese culture, the Chin ethnicity (as well as the other many ones that form the country), the Asian continent, and the many differences and similarities among its people; lessons I believe I would never have learned otherwise. Another lesson, only comprehended later on, was that every interview I conducted was made with someone who somehow became a friend of mine, or at least a close acquaintance, revealing what would be a fundamental aspect necessary between me and the individuals who would contribute with the interviews: trust. The learning and comprehension of all these factors have not only guided, but also motivated the present research as currently constructed.

Conducting the in-depth interviews was a process that took me 7 months to achieve, with much patience, persistence, and learning the right words to use when explaining what I was doing and why. A very significant takeaway of this experience was the reasons why I faced so much resistance from interview invitations, and such understanding did not come to me with ease and grace. At the beginning, I had a hard time comprehending why so many people were refusing to be interviewed by me, while I was still convinced that I was offering them nothing but help. It took me months of following the refugee crisis through the UNHCR website; babysitting refugee children and really struggling to communicate with their parents; building relationships with refugees and people who have dedicated their lives to work with them; getting involved with the English learning process of several refugees during ESL classes, to then realize

that I was stepping on much more delicate grounds than I could imagine. The things I have learned in this research process about war, intolerance, violence, hope, and persistence has touched me in many indescribable ways, which has encouraged several personal reflections. Meanwhile, the reflections I can describe from my fieldnotes will be closely analyzed in this chapter, along with parts of five in-depth interviews using guidance from Ybema et al. (2009) regarding the organizational ethnography research process.

My goal is that the following analysis can provide an enlightening discussion for resettlement organizations about the refugee experience and a few aspects about their journey that, if explored and understood, can only result in a higher welfare and self-sufficiency opportunities for the refugee community. This aligns with the goals established by the U.S resettlement program, which are “to protect vulnerable populations and to offer the prospect of long-term integration” (Fix et al., 2017, p. 3), which means to achieve the self-sufficiency objective stated by *The Refugee Act*. This objective shape the services of resettlement assistance provided by agencies such as RST.

After analyzing RST’s services in comparison with topics approached in the in-depth interviews, it was possible to identify which aspects of the refugee experience this study intends to bring attention to: (a) Language Services, including the subthemes “The difference the language makes” and “Being interpreter for the parents”; (b) Educational Services, including the subthemes “Funding limitations” and “When English is not the problem”; and (c) Employment Services. Such themes are more deeply explored in the following section.

Services of RST

Language Services

My own living abroad experience has taught me that mastering the language is a fundamental step in the journey of seeking professional opportunities at a foreign country. The same experience has also taught me that climbing such a step depends fundamentally on having interactions where your only option is to communicate using the required language, in this case, English. This means that in order to actually learn English while living in the U.S. one must have conversations with Americans who speak nothing but English. However, this research process has led me to find that such experience is not very common among the refugee community resettling in the Amarillo area. For example, all four refugees who participated of the in-depth interviews of this study (as well as all the several ones with whom I interact on a regular basis) told me they continue to communicate in their native language at home with their families, meaning that English is spoken only when they have to communicate with Americans or with those who cannot speak their language, like me.

Additionally, the refugee community usually interacts mostly with the refugee community itself, which creates a barrier in their learning English process. Participant A, a young man who arrived in Amarillo in May 2005 when he was 9 years old, described to me what it was like to deal with language and cultural barriers growing up as a refugee in Texas. I also heard from him a phrase I believe to be very accurate in describing the refugee experience: “You’re never really home, you know? You’re always in between” (Participant A). In his reflections regarding the English learning process and the process of developing relationships with Americans, this participant noted:

It's hard for us to get it right grammatically, you know? You can't get it right. I don't think we'll ever get it right because the way we speak in our native language is different from the way English grammatical structure is like, you know? (Participant A)

The Burmese participant is referring to how difficult it is to grasp grammar, which inhibits individuals from speaking with native speakers, an experience that I can completely relate to.

It is true that for us who speak English as a second language there is a constant worry regarding the proper use of words every time we have to communicate in English. Feeling comfortable to do so is a process that takes much practice, patience, and understanding from all parts involved in the interaction. Unfortunately, not all daily human interactions happen to take place in such circumstances, and it is in these moments that refugees tend to struggle the most with language and cultural barriers. Additionally, the process of interacting with others brings the pressure of mimicking social expectations refugees struggle to meet due to different cultural backgrounds that shape different ways of being and behave, as Participant A notes in the following quotation:

It's hard to interact, have a good relationship with a foreigner, because like, we wanna get close to them, but then we don't know how to get close to them. The way they carry themselves, the style, their walk . . . like living, you know? It's different from the style that we live, so it's hard to make a really good friend. We do make friend but like, I don't think we're close, you know? Like *that* close. (Participant A, 2018)

As the participant agrees, developing good relationships with Americans is beyond refugees' will when there are several cultural barriers that make interactions extra challenging for them. In this context, Participant A expressed the importance of ESL classes to help the refugee community build English skills and competency with social interactions.

English as a Second Language. Another lesson found in this research process is that having a standardized ESL class format based on grammar and definitions is not the most effective way to get the students engaged in communicating, because there is one significant barrier that must be broken before anything: fear. This fear arises from the little interaction some refugees have with English speakers, meaning that speaking the language is challenging for them when it is not something they are used to do, just like it would be for an American who is fluent in English only to be in a situation where the only option to communicate is to speak Spanish, for example. We all tend to hesitate before doing something we are not used to, it is part of the human nature. Based on this context, Participant E, an ESL specialist who speaks Spanish fluently, talks about the importance of creating an environment for the students that allows them to get familiar with English:

And so, when you're teaching you know, you have to use a lot of hand gestures, you have to use a lot of visual imaging to get a message across . . . and, back at the school what I was taught: English, English, English. Even if they are lost and confused, they need to be immersed in just pure English. (Participant E)

Additionally, the participant mentions how growing up in an environment surrounded by Spanish auditory elements was fundamental for her learning process of the language,

which encourages her to approach ESL classes in a similar way. In fact, my personal learning English process also developed much faster once I started to surround myself with English elements (auditory and visual) until such elements were no longer strange to me. In the same way, the goal of ESL classes is to make the English language something familiar to the students.

But because the English skill levels among RST clients vary tremendously, a lot of accommodation is necessary in order for understanding to be achieved. For example, while volunteering in the ESL classes, I worked with students who knew English on the same level as I do, but I have also worked through the alphabet with illiterate students. In this context, Participant E described a similar scenario when I asked what to be careful with when teaching ESL:

I mean, first of all they don't know English, but then also you have some who know some English, and some who don't know English . . . and then you have some who don't know English but are illiterate . . . and then some who are very high educated.

The organizational ethnographic process of this study allowed the comprehension of how understanding these particularities become fundamental when providing each student with the proper ESL class approach.

Participant E also describes the changes RST has suffered in the past two years in terms of clientele and services provided to them:

The two years I've been here it's changed dramatically from clients that we gotten. Back then it was just low, little, little education of any . . . to now we have had clients who are college graduates back in their home country, you know, who

had high paying jobs back home. So, that's when we created the pre-GED class. And now, you all have done the computer class, because they want to learn more about technology. Cause they come here, and they know technology is something important, and not just for them, but their kids too. And now you can communicate a lot with your teachers, your kid's teachers through email, or you get things through email, and so I think that's why this kind of evolved more, we kind of help . . . I mean, there's so much more we could do, but with nonprofit agencies it's really limited and stuff.

Participant E explains that services provided by organizations like RST are shaped by the context in which individuals arrive to the U.S. This becomes a challenge for keeping services consistent because RST must meet particular needs of each individual, which are unknown until the resettling process actually begins.

When mentioning the computer class, Participant E is referring to an RST project that I had the opportunity to be fully involved in along with another volunteer since July 2018. RST proposed to us the task of teaching the ESL students how to use laptops and how to type. Along with the second volunteer, a class plan was designed where the students started learning how to type, then how to use Microsoft programs such as Word and Excel, and finally creating their own résumé. The intention behind this project was to present to refugees the idea of having more autonomy over their professional career process and taking a step away from relying completely on resettlement support agencies like RST to find jobs.

The difference the language makes. Out of the five in-depth interview participants, four were refugees, and they all said they speak their own language at home,

which means practicing their English even less. Participant D described this scenario very clearly. Different from Participant E, this individual is both a service provider for RST and a Burmese refugee who came from Thailand and has lived in Texas for 13 years. The participant has a bachelor's degree and speaks fluent English, Thai, and Burmese. According to the interview, his family was allowed to resettle in Amarillo because his grandparents were already living in the city.

Starting to attend an American school at 5th grade, Participant D learned English through his educational process (assisted by ESL classes), and also through entertainment. "I watched, after school, PBS kids, sometimes I watched movies. To improve my grammar, I put the subtitles on" (Participant D). In this way, he talked about his learning English process as something that came very naturally to him, similar to Participant A and B, since they all arrived in the U.S. while still in their childhood, which allowed them to grow up in an English-speaking environment, even if only during their school hours.

However, Participant D did not describe the same natural learning process when talking about his mother's experience. He told me that still today he needs to translate English interactions for her, which led him to make one more comment about her experience: "my mom, mostly, she wants to go back, she misses home" (Participant D). In trying to understand the challenges she could be facing, I asked him what she used to do back home, and he described a regular tradesperson: "Oh my mom, she used to sell stuff. So, let's say, we had this store, we would sell clothes, food, electronics" (Participant D). My following question was her current job, and he said the name of a meatpacking company, and added: "Yeah . . . she says it's hard, it's rough . . . I feel bad

for her, but you know, I got her now” (Participant D). His mom went from a sales position in her home country, to a job with much harsher conditions.

After this interview, I wanted to understand the exact types of jobs the majority of refugees perform at meatpacking companies, which led me to start asking every refugee I met who work for such companies what their jobs are like. I discovered that it consists mostly of manual work related to cattle slaughtering and meat processing. Of course, this is a considerable shift in terms of routine for someone who comes from a background of working at a local small business every day, like Participants D’s mother. This is why I believe it is extremely important to encourage refugees to seek different types of professional experiences if they desire to do so by developing the skills they need through organizations like RST.

Being interpreter for the parents. As I said at the beginning of this chapter, Participant B became a good friend of mine, meaning that long conversations about how different our cultures are were something that happened several times during the period of the research process. These conversations were fundamental for me to understand aspects of the refugee experience. Since Participant A was her friend, I interviewed both of them together in a chat-like environment. During this in-depth interview, Participant A and B opened up about dealing with the expectations their parents have of their communication skills:

Participant B – They expect too much . . . the parents expect from us a lot.

Participant A – “You go to school, learn how to read!”

Participant B – “What have you been doing at school? Are you learning?”

[laughs] . . . even until now, there’re some other people that I don’t completely

understand, and my dad be like “You graduated high school!” Even until now you know parents complain: “You go to school since you’re young, and you still don’t know this?” That’s the most painful thing they can do to us.

Participant A – “Why did you go to school for? What did you learn?”

Learning this side of the story shows that adult refugees need proper assistance developing their English communication skills in order to be able to achieve more autonomy over their life in the U.S.

Refugees need to be able to work through problems caused by language barriers, such as avoiding medical consultations, another issue pointed out by Participants B:

You do avoid. Even when we’re sick, even when we have like 103 fever or whatever, what we do is like, we put towel wet on our forehead. We dress really warm to make the sweat come out. Yeah, we do really avoid going to the hospital, unless is kind of like something dangerous, getting cut or, I mean, those you have to go to the doctor. But other than that, like fevers, cough and those we do avoid.

Based on the situation just described, it seems that although refugees do receive English training, they still hesitate to seek the medical care they need. The present study aimed to shed light on the English learning process that refugees resettling in the Amarillo area are facing through ESL programs offered to them at RST.

The ethnographic research process allowed me to experience first-hand the accommodations of RST’s services to match the clients’ needs, for instance allowing the computer classes and résumé workshops to happen. However, it was noticeable that still exists an enormous gap between refugee populations interacting with American

populations. Encouraging such interactions to happen more often can only result in the improvement of refugees' communicating skills.

Educational Services

My knowledge, opinions, and expectations regarding the present research has changed drastically from the beginning of the data collection process until now. When I first learned about the refugee community through news stories, and then about their journey in a volunteer orientation on May 3, 2017 (requirement to become a volunteer at RST), I did not have a clear idea of how my interactions with RST's clients would happen, however, I expected to develop meaningful relationships with the many individuals who would agree to be interviewed by me. In reality, what I faced initially were interactions that would happen mostly through facial expressions and gestures, and in most cases, while attempting to comfort a child crying incessantly. Situations like this would make me feel powerless and incapable of helping those individuals, especially while volunteering in childcare, where the whole purpose of being there was to babysit the children so then the parents could attend the ESL class.

In this context, a situation I have witnessed several times was the parent(s) having to leave the classroom to stay in the childcare space with us in order to comfort the child, depriving them of educational opportunities. Soon, such families would not be attending ESL anymore because the parents got a job (at the meatpacking industry) and the children were going to start school. Consistently, every recently arrived client I initially met at RST during the ESL classes soon started to work for the meatpacking industry, and the majority of them still had very little English-speaking skills. However, I met two Congolese brothers recently arrived from Kenya with very advanced English skills. Still,

the older brother soon reported to me he was going to start working for the meatpacking industry, and he was going to do that while taking classes required for his college application.

Funding limitations. Fix et al. (2017) clarified that along with the result of the 2016 presidential elections a number of changes were incorporated, resulting in “the reduction of the refugee admissions ceiling for FY 2017 from 110,000 to 50,000, and the development by the State Department of a proposal to increase state and local involvement in decisions about where refugees should be settled” (p. 6-7). As a consequence of such decisions, there has been a decrease in the number of new refugees allowed resettlement in the United States, and a decrease in the amount of public funding provided to agencies such as RST, leading to a higher need of volunteer assistance.

Another change Participant E mentioned was her perception of how different the scenario is now for refugees in the Amarillo area as compared to what it was when she started to work for RST: “We were getting a lot of clientele back then.” I have witnessed the decrease in clientele as well. Although RST continues receiving clients, the influx of new arrivals has reduced drastically. An evidence of that for instance is that several times during the last months of my volunteer experience in childcare we did not have any children to watch at all. The decrease in the number of students attending ESL classes was also evident over the past year. On the bright side, a positive consequence of this decrease in the number of students is that it allowed us to work more closely with the clients and have a more interactive approach while guiding them through the computer activities.

When English is not the problem. On April 5, 2018, I was asked to substitute for the level 2 ESL teacher, and I was told that the students I was going to work with were the two Congolese brothers who had recently arrived in Amarillo two weeks prior. Based on my earlier experiences with other students, I confess I was not expecting their English to be very developed (a small reflection of some personal biases of mine that this research process has helped me to deconstruct). The teacher I was substituting for left the lessons I was supposed to ask the students to complete.

To begin, we spent a few minutes talking and once I told them “I am from Brazil” we engaged in a nice conversation about soccer. It did not take me too long to notice that they had no problem speaking English at all, as I could understand them with clarity and it was noticeable that they could understand me on the same level. After this initial interaction, I looked through the lessons and explained it to them. They completed the exercises in about 5 minutes. Noticing the advanced level of English these students spoke, I decided to spend more time talking to them about what they were struggling with the most, and that was when I actually learned their real story and the needs they were seeking to meet. They shared with me their anxiety about wanting to start working and going to college soon because they know they are capable of doing so; however, they were still lacking all the required documents to apply for school because of the inconsistency of educational resources they received throughout their refugee journey. In exchange, I shared with them my experience of applying and getting accepted at schools in the United States and told them to keep studying and improving their English, and, in the meantime, to find a job in order to have money for school.

I have been amazed by the gratitude and the respect that refugees (at least every single one I have met) express for the United States and the opportunities with which they are provided, whichever they might be. On May 5, 2018, I had the chance to interview the youngest of the Congolese brothers. I asked him what life was like back in Congo, and he said “Life was tough, life was hard. Everything was difficult because of the war. Security was not that good. There wasn’t security, so it was tough” (Participant C). Then, I asked how life was in Kenya, where they spent 8 years until being allowed to resettle in the United States: “In Kenya? Life was a little bit better than in Congo. It was better because there was security, and there were opportunities to get jobs, to earn a living, so it was more comfortable than living in Congo” (Participant C). His answer clarifies the one thing a refugee is seeking for: job opportunities that allow them to earn a living. Just like me. Just like you. In this context, RST’s role is to provide refugees with services that facilitate this process of starting life over again, with the main goal to achieve self-sufficiency.

Finally, I asked Participant C about life in the U.S., which he described as a place where there is “a lot of opportunities, a lot of jobs available to everyone who is willing to work, education is good, there is food, good food! Yeah, America I found it’s a good country” (Participant C). Refugees are truly focused on rebuilding their lives in the hosting country and willing to do whatever it takes to do so.

Employment Services

In getting more involved with RST, I could better understand the context around refugees resettling in Amarillo. After numerous conversations with RST service providers and refugees in and out the organizational setting, I noticed that there is one

specific area of the city's business that appears very receptive to the refugee community: the meatpacking industry. It is important to point out this information first reached me through refugees themselves working in other areas, such as Uber drivers, as well as RST workers in the most varied positions, from interpreters to case managers to van drivers. Although the meatpacking industry employs a large number of refugees, it is clear there are varied options in terms of jobs a person in refugee status in the U.S. is allowed to perform. Such reflection allowed me to understand that the meatpacking industry is not at all the only option of work for refugees to do in Texas, although it is still the sector that seems to employ the higher number of refugee workers in the Amarillo area. The present study aimed to understand why, and Michels (2016) in a Texas Observer article provided a detailed answer to this question:

Job prospects for refugees got really good in 2006, when Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids rounded up hundreds of undocumented migrants, mostly from Mexico and Guatemala, who'd been working at Tyson and Swift meatpacking plants around Amarillo. Faced with a labor shortage, the companies offered their remaining workers, many of whom were refugees, bonuses of up to \$1,500 for each new worker they recruited. That drew a second wave of refugees to town, in numbers well beyond the direct placements by Catholic Charities. (para. 10)

Michels (2016) clarified that "In 2008, the new demand for services prompted Refugee Services of Texas, which has branches across the state, to open an office in Amarillo" (para. 11). The immigration reporter explains that this great wave of refugees being resettled in the area is what stimulated the need for the work of resettlement support

agencies. “Refugee Services also began accepting hundreds more direct placements in Amarillo each year, duplicating the work Catholic Charities had handled on its own for decades.” (Michels, 2016, para. 11). As a consequence, Michels (2016) argues the high number of refugees moving to the Amarillo area was unexpected to the city’s population: “In a city of fewer than 200,000 people, refugees were arriving in numbers great enough to be noticed, and that’s when the backlash began” (para. 12). Such phenomenon might be one of the causes for barriers to emerge between the Amarillo population and the refugee community resettling in the area, and I believe stimulating this discussion can allow such barriers to be broken through.

Considering the reflection described above, another realization was that job opportunities available for refugees in the U.S. depend on many different variables including their abilities and skills. Learning more from the refugees while building the “skills” section of their résumés, I have also met people with the most varied types of skills, from jewelry making, to nursing, to accounting, to modeling. So, why is the meatpacking industry so attractive to refugees in the Amarillo area? Data present a few different answers for this question. First, the meatpacking industry does not require advanced English skills for the positions offered to refugees. Second, Participant E affirmed that some refugees are indeed attracted by family members:

Yeah, many of them, if not, they want to work with Tyson or they have family members who tell them “you’re going to work at Tyson, because you can do this and this.” And so, it’s just a natural thing that they think they want to go there.

Third, Participant E also mentions another important factor seen as attractive for refugees in the meatpacking industry: money. According to her, the field offers “the highest pay

that they can get, and I think that's just a natural attraction for them, because of course we want to go where there's more money, you know?" The quest for better financial opportunities even motivated me to leave my home country and come to the U.S., however, in extremely different (and much easier) circumstances.

Still, the comparison just made has followed me from the beginning of this research process to now, causing me to seek answers to what barriers refugees face in their resettlement process. I sought to identify how different or similar the barriers I faced when first moving to Texas are from theirs, and I wondered how I could use my own experience to help refugees diminish those barriers somehow. Luckily, RST allowed me to attempt to answer these questions in a very close approach: inviting me to volunteer as an ESL instructor and get completely involved with the learning process of a few clients, such as the ones I worked with in the résumé activity. My personal interpretation of this is that I was given the chance to get fully involved with the core of my research topic, because if I were seeking to learn more about barriers refugees are facing to improve their communication in English, what better place to do so if not where a few of them are developing such English skills? I believe that assisting as an ESL instructor allowed me to face the answers to my questions in a more explicit way.

Summary

This section provided a description of the data analysis process based on themes related to language, educational, and employment services provided to refugees by organizations like RST. In order to allow refugees to seek the goal of self-sufficiency, such services are fundamental for their resettlement process and must be shaped by the circumstances they are surrounded by when arriving the new country. Next, Chapter 5

will provide a description of how the research questions were addressed, the main implications of the study, as well as limitations found along the way and suggestions for future research involving related topics.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Providing services to refugees involves dealing with many barriers. Failing to deal with those barriers might result in the poor quality of life of refugees going through resettlement process. For example, a refugee who is unable to develop good English-speaking skills will depend more on job opportunities that do not require advanced language skills, like slaughtering at meatpacking companies. Encouraging a refugee to develop English communicating skills means giving that refugee more control over the job search process and more freedom to seek different opportunities. In this process, there are three aspects that become fundamental services for VOLAGs like RST to provide refugees: language, employment, and educational services.

Data show that refugees tend to avoid interactions where they might not be understood due to language and cultural barriers, meaning that mastering the language is fundamental for any individual when resettling in a new country to be able to interact with the local life. At the same time, getting used to the language is a process that generally takes practice and time to achieve. In this context, adult refugees tend to struggle accommodating to the new life when they have a hard time learning English. One of the consequences is that parents tend to rely too much on children to communicate in English, since children will learn the new language with more facility through the resettling process.

Another finding is that the meatpacking industry is the sector that most employs refugees in the Amarillo area, resulting in an overwhelming number of refugees working for those type of companies. This is why refugees might benefit from having more control over their professional career and being able to choose what types of jobs they would like to perform, knowing that meatpacking companies are only one of the many options available to them.

Additionally, the current American political scenario brings to refugees and resettlement agencies in the U.S. higher need of funding and volunteer assistance; as well as resulting in a significant decrease in the number of refugees allowed resettlement in the U.S. This does not change the fact that the country already hosts thousands of refugees who are already facing the resettlement process and in need of assistance. Such individuals form the population of which this study intends to raise awareness.

Language Barriers

The first research question asked what roles language barriers play in the journey of a refugee towards achieving self-sufficiency. In my experience as an immigrant, language has in fact played an enormous role, just like I believe it would happen for anyone with any other language at any other country. For refugees, however, the experience is extra challenging because they face the process of learning a new language within a very disturbing context, given the circumstances that led them to flee home. In this sense, refugees are a population expected to achieve self-sufficiency fast and learn a new language even faster. These circumstances justify the existence of support agencies around the country, such as RST, working towards facilitating the resettlement process. Although language is not the only barrier refugees face in such process, my personal

experience, peer review reflections, the literature review of this study, as well as the ethnographic experience has shown language to be the major barrier, since it is the starting point of the communication process between people from different nationalities. Throughout the research process, the focus of observations was placed on verbal interactions I had the chance to witness at RST. However, understanding such interactions was only possible when I expended my perception to elements that were beyond refugees' verbal ways of expression. Acknowledging their cultural, social, and political background was fundamental to understanding their ways of behaving and being, and only then was I capable of interacting with them, and hence, learning from them. Such lessons led me to the answer of the next research question.

Refugee Services of Texas

The second research question asked about the role of VOLAGs, RST in particular, in the resettlement process for refugees. VOLAGs are a place where refugees go to receive services that support attempts toward self-sufficiency, however, the time spent at the organization consists of only a few hours per week. Most of the communication barriers refugees face do *not* happen inside of RST's context, but during interactions with employers, co-workers, and acquaintances. In this context, the ethnographic experience took place in a setting where refugees go in search of solutions for problems they are struggling with at home and around the city of Amarillo, which are highly related to ESL classes and translations services. In this context, VOLAGs like RST have the role of providing refugees support to become self-sufficient as soon as possible in accordance with the 1980 *Refugee Act*, which declared the objective of refugees achieving self-sufficiency in a short period of time after entering the United States. VOLAGs have the

role of offering services such as apartment set up, English as Second Language (ESL) classes, childcare, job search resources, and assistance with medical appointments (Fix et al., 2017). Previous research is very aligned with the opportunities I saw RST offering and the services they provide.

Much of the work provided at RST was performed by volunteers. This work consists of guiding each client through their resettling process, which is something particular to each individual. For example, the needs Participant C and his brother faced initially were related with helping them find educational opportunities with the intention to acquire the necessary documentation to pursue an academic career. In contrast, one of the first students I had the chance to work with at ESL classes was an elderly woman seeking English literacy skills with the intention to be able to communicate in social interactions around Amarillo. This brings me to the response of the following research question.

RST and the Refugee's Journey

The third research question focused on how RST facilitates the refugee's journey. The best way for resettlement agencies to help refugees in the process of integrating to a new life starts with providing them a comfortable environment to learn. Because refugees come from harsh backgrounds forcing them to flee, it is natural that they feel insecure and uncertain about who and what to trust. It is extremely important to make them aware that they are safe in the U.S. and that RST's office is a place for them to deal with struggles and there is no need to feel intimidated. Helping them with such struggles consists of showing respect and empathy when listening to their narratives and personal needs and thus, provide them the necessary information and resources to meet those

needs, such as moving into an apartment, finding a job, learning English, enrolling children in school, and so on. In this context, important ways to facilitate the refugee journey includes providing them services with the presence of interpreters, having acknowledgement of cultural differences between them, accommodating the communication with the use of more evident gestures and facial expressions, and developing patience and understanding about the fact that communication will not be 100% clear so extra attention is required in order for better comprehension to be achieved.

Implications

Interacting around refugees for an extended period of time allowed me to notice the different ways they have to express themselves. For example, there were a few times when I offered a hand-shake to Muslim men before finding out that their religion does not allow men to touch women. Similarly, many times I would interact with the children touching their heads for example, until I found out that the Burmese find it disrespectful for people to touch children on their head. Lessons like these would constantly transform and shape my attitude when approaching refugees and RST staff along the way of the research process. I could slowly comprehend that their problems are carried out with them beyond RST's doors, and it is for those interactions that VOLAGs intend to prepare their clients for.

By providing services such as ESL and computer classes, RST can offer refugees a place to develop and improve their communication and professional skills. For instance, I believe the computer classes and résumé workshops were successful steps towards the direction of such improvement after I witnessed clients who have never used a laptop

prior to the activity to walk away from the program knowing how to type documents and with their résumé ready in hands. Moreover, the project continues to happen at RST during the ESL classes until the present moment and it was also incorporated by a second location offering resettlement support to refugees in Amarillo. The fundamental goal became to assist adult refugees in developing their language skills and, as a consequence, allow them to not rely so much on their children in order to communicate in English, a situation that is very common among the refugee community resettling at a new country, as expressed in the dialogue between Participants A and B.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Data have shown there still exists an enormous gap between the refugee community and the American population, which brings me to another great intention identified from this study: to stimulate Americans and refugees to integrate, allowing barriers such as language and culture to join them instead of separating. I believe discussing an issue is the first step to take action towards its solution, and I hope this thesis can open the way for such discussion to happen, based on the data collected during the ethnographic research experience.

Regarding suggestions for RST in terms of adjusting their services, I believe the refugee community and service providers could benefit from more detailed cultural training for volunteers, in order to avoid situations like touching kids on the head for instance; continuing computer training, allowing refugees to keep developing their technology skills; providing refugees more tools that allow them to explore different professional skills, encouraging them to seek job opportunities beyond the meatpacking companies; identifying specific educational levels and needs of each individual and

facilitating the communication with institutions for those interested in pursuing educational opportunities.

As a personal suggestion, I believe volunteer work to be extremely important and effective for refugees. In my search for learning about the refugee community, I have found the best individuals to teach me about their journey are the refugees themselves. Many times, what they need the most is the opportunity to be heard with attention and patience, so then they can express their stories and ask for help. I have looked for ways to keep in touch with them, which has been extremely rewarding and effective, and the reason why I highly encourage volunteer work.

CONCLUSION

Exploring the refugee journey allowed me to find a few connections among individuals in the context of refugees resettlement process: (a) refugees tend to avoid interactions in which they might not be understood (linguistically and culturally); (b) services providers attending refugees often lack the necessary abilities to deal with language barriers between them; (c) going through the refugee journey is an experience that makes one more vulnerable to develop mental health issues; and, (d) refugees tend to avoid healthcare in general (including mental) due to the fear of facing language and cultural barriers. These four mentioned points lead me to the conclusion that the issues addressed in the literature review of this study and later identified through ethnographic data reflect issues the refugee community has faced since long ago and continue facing. In fact, research has shown that changes made regarding refugee resettlement in the U.S. in the past two years under the Trump administration has made the situation more challenging, leaving refugees to feeling insecure and unstable about their status. For these

reasons, this research is engaged with the intention to stimulate a discussion about ways to assist refugees with barriers they might encounter in their journey. In this sense, there is one particular insight that I hope organizations serving refugees take from this study: that each individual has very personal necessities when entering the process of learning a new culture, a new language, and new surviving skills. In this process, such particular necessities must be considered and treated with patience, empathy, and respect in order for a refugee to reach self-sufficiency and well-being.

Limitations

Conducting research on such a delicate topic already starts with the limitation of demanding data that consists of information potential participants are not pleased to share. Because the refugee journey is formed by a number of challenges involved with federal law enforcements, there is a tension when approaching the topic, especially when those involved in the conversation do not master the same speaking language. Hence, the major barrier faced in this research process was approaching unpleasant subjects in a scenario affected by my inability to communicate with a few refugees in a clear and effective way. Several times I failed when trying to explain to them the intentions of my study and the reasons why I would like to do an interview. Such limitation resulted in a reduced number of in-depth interviews conducted, given the fact that the initial intention was to conduct at least 10 interviews with refugees and 10 with RST service providers. Although presenting a reduced number, these interviews were truly conducted with an *in-depth* approach, as well as they were much aligned with results found in the literature review. Such consistency is viewed as a strong validating factor for this study.

Areas of Future Research

The starting point of the research process was focused on exploring the mental health of refugee populations and their interactions with healthcare providers. In the course of conducting the study, such focus has shifted to analyzing the learning process of refugees during ESL classes provided by RST as well as the employment scenario they face in Amarillo, Texas. Since the research experience has led me to continue working as a volunteer with refugees in Amarillo, I expect to be able to also continue conducting research on the topic, as well as I hope to stimulate whoever else might be interested in doing the same to join me in such a journey. In this context, I believe the mental health of refugees to be a very important topic to be addressed in future research, given the circumstances that make them more vulnerable to develop mental health issues as presented by previous research, such as Kirmayer et al. (2011), Morris et al. (2009), and Shannon et al. (2012).

Additionally, I encourage special attention to be given to refugee women, since they face situations that are extra challenging for them due to the fact of simply being a woman. For example, sexual abuse such as rape and human trafficking are issues that are part of the problems faced by refugee women, leading them to develop mistrust towards male figures. These issues were in fact addressed by participants during in-depth interviews of this study, although they were not addressed due to not being fully related to the research topic. Still, I believe the topic to be very relevant for future research exploring the refugee community and possible ways to allow them to integrate into an environment where they are appreciated and encouraged to become their best selves in the journey towards self-sufficiency and a new decent life.

Learning about the refugee community was an incredible lesson about culture, politics, history, and vocabulary. Every refugee individual I have met in this research process has taught me something and inspired me to be braver and kinder. Knowing the refugee community in Amarillo also taught me that they are in much need of language, employment and educational assistance. I hope the information provided in this study can support the discussion about the refugee community needs and encourage volunteer work in the area as well.

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Appendix A: Refugees Interview Questions

- 1- Are you comfortable with talking about your journey as a refugee?
- 2- Would you like to tell me about your experience?
- 3- Please tell me about your life back home.
- 4- What were the reasons that motivated you to leave your home country?
- 5- How did you feel about leaving your home?
- 6- Where did you go first?
- 7- How did you get there?
- 8- Please describe your life experiences from the day you left your country until the day you arrived at the U.S.
- 9- What did you have to do to be eligible to come to the U.S.?
- 10- How long did it take until you were finally allowed to come?
- 11- Can you tell me the feelings you had when you first arrived to the U.S.?
- 12- How long have you been here?
- 13- How do you feel about living here?
- 14- What has changed in your life since you left your home country?
 - a. How has RST helped with your transition?
- 15- Do you still have the same feelings you did when you first arrived here?
- 16- Have you ever been to a doctor's appointment in the U.S.?
- 17- Can you tell me how it made you feel?
- 18- Do you think that the doctor understood everything you told him or her?
- 19- Did you understand everything the doctor say to you?

20- Have you ever been to a doctor's appointment in your home country?

21- Was the experience similar for you?

22- What's the biggest difference between going to the doctor here compared to your home country?

23- Now that you're resettled here, how safe do you feel?

24- Did you know English at all before coming here?

25- How is the learning process going for you?

Appendix B: Service Providers Interview Questions

- 1- How long have you been working with refugees?
- 2- Please explain how you got involved working with the refugee population.
- 3- Do your interactions with refugees usually happen in the presence of an interpreter?
- 4- Please describe the communication challenges you generally face because of language differences.
- 5- What kinds of things do you usually do to avoid misinterpretations?
- 6- Speaking in generalities, what are the most common health problems that you see the refugees facing?
- 7- What challenges do you face trying to help refugees get the treatment they need?
- 8- What made you feel prepared for working with refugees?
- 9- Have you ever been interested in learning their language?
- 10- What do you believe that could help on improving your communication with the refugees?
- 11- Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix C: IRB Approval Letter

West Texas A&M University

Academic Research Environmental Health and Safety

WTAMU Box 60217 Canyon, Tx 79016
806.651.2270

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS

Letter of Approval

August 1, 2017

Kristina Drumheller
Box 60754
Canyon, TX 79016

Dear Kristina Drumheller:

The West Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board is pleased to inform you that upon review, proposal #05-07-17 for your study titled, “**Language Barriers Refugees Face When Seeking Community Services**” meets the requirements of the WTAMU Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) No. 15.99.05.W1.01AR Institutional Review Board (Human Subject Research). Approval is granted for one calendar year. This approval expires on **August 1, 2018**.

Principal investigators assume the following responsibilities:

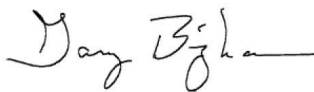
1. **Continuing Review:** The protocol must be renewed on or before the expiration date if the research project requires more than one year for completion. A [Continuing Review form](#) along with required documents must be submitted on or before the stated deadline. Failure to do so will result in study termination and/or loss of funding.
2. **Completion Report:** At the conclusion of the research project (including data analysis and final written papers), a [Close out form](#) must be submitted to AR-EHS.
3. **Unanticipated Problems and Adverse Events:** Pursuant to [SOP No. 15.99.05.W1.13AR](#), unanticipated problems and serious adverse events must be reported to AR-EHS.
4. **Reports of Potential Non-Compliance:** Pursuant to [SOP No. 15.99.05.W1.05AR](#), potential non-compliance, including deviations from the protocol and violations, must be reported to the IRB office immediately.
5. **Amendments:** Changes to the protocol must be requested by submitting an [Amendment form](#) to AR-EHS for review by the IRB. The Amendment must be approved by the IRB before being implemented. Amendments do not extend time granted on the initial approval.
6. **Consent Forms:** When using a consent form, only the IRB approved form is allowed.
7. **Audit:** Any proposal may be subject to audit by the IRB Administrator during the life of the study. Investigators are responsible for maintaining complete and accurate records for five years and making them available for inspection upon request.

8. **Recruitment:** All recruitment materials must be approved by the IRB. Recruitment materials distributed to potential participants must use the approved text and include the study's IRB number, approval date, and expiration dates in the following format: WTAMU IRB###-###-## Approved: ####/####/#### Expiration Date: ####/####/####.
9. **FERPA and PPRA:** Investigators conducting research with students must have appropriate approvals from the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) administrator at the institution where the research will be conducted in accordance with the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) if applicable to the research being proposed. The Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) protects the rights of parents in students ensuring that written parental consent is required for participation in surveys, analysis, or evaluation that ask questions falling into categories of protected information.

Sixty days prior to the expiration of this proposal, you will receive a notification of the approaching expiration date at which time you will need to submit an [Amendment/Continuation/Close out](#) form.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,



Dr. Gary Bigham
Chair, WTAMU IRB



Dr. Angela Spaulding,
Vice President of Research and Compliance