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# **WAS IT A DREAM OR NIGHTMARE? A NARRATIVE EXPLORATION OF ADULT REFUGEE LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

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## **Abstract**

Refugees enter the United States seeking a safe place to rebuild their lives after surviving life-threatening situations. In this journey, education is seen as a bridge from instability to self-sufficiency. The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to better understand the experiences of adult refugee learners as they navigate higher education in the United States. The research questions were: How do adult refugee learners' prior life experiences influence the transition to higher education? How does the intersection of ethnicity and immigration status influence the higher education experience? and What strategies do adult refugee learners employ to navigate higher education?

Keywords: community college, refugee students, adult learning, narrative inquiry

Each year, refugees enter the United States (U.S.) in search of a safe place to rebuild their lives after surviving life-threatening violence, persecution, or environmental dangers. As refugees seek to establish a stable life for their families, education is seen as a bridge from instability to self-sufficiency (Perry & Mallozzi, 2011). Adult refugee learners in the United States can struggle to maintain a balance between cultural frames of reference because they need to learn new standards of behavior and expectations in a new place (Lehtomäki & Posti-Ahokas, 2016). The way they see the world and behave in social situations may vary from U.S. cultural and societal norms. This acclimation process can create stress and confusion while refugees strive to resettle and re-establish their lives in a new country (Lehtomäki & Posti-Ahokas, 2016).

According to the U.S. Department of State (2018), the number of refugee students studying in U.S. higher education has consistently increased over the past ten years. However, due to socioeconomic barriers during the resettlement process, it is increasingly difficult for refugees to access education (UN Refugee Agency, 2019). When refugees arrive to the U.S., it is usually common for them to ask for government assistance while they seek employment or educational opportunities, especially as they also deal with the aftereffects of trauma (UN Refugee Agency, 2019). Additionally, since English may not be the first language for refugees, language and communication barriers must be mediated in order to advance in the resettlement process.

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to seek a better understanding of the experiences of adult refugee learners as they navigate higher education in the Southeastern United States. The research questions that guided this study were: How do adult refugee learners' prior life experiences influence the transition to higher education? How does the intersection of ethnicity and immigration status influence the higher education experience? and What strategies do adult refugee learners employ to navigate higher education?

## **Literature Review**

This literature review addresses the intersectional nature of the adult refugee learner experience accessing and navigating U.S. higher education. Key themes in the literature include sociocultural acclimation, marginalization and discrimination, language proficiency, and inclusion practices. Some understanding of this topic with regard to refugees, adults, and learners in higher education existed in prior literature. However, the intersectionality of refugees, adults, and learners in higher education has not been extensively explored in academia. This literature review section will set the foundation for this study through prior literature, exposing what is known about the population of the refugee adult learners and evidencing gaps in the existing knowledgebase.

Refugee students have persisted through much hardship and trauma to reach the point of participating in educational opportunities in the U.S. The United Nations Refugee Agency (2019) reports on the high level of physical, emotional, and psychological trauma refugees experience. Refugees may have experienced the violence of war, sexual assault, or hostage situations and starvation firsthand (UN Refugee Agency, 2019). These aspects of the identity of refugees can impact future interactions, expectations, and level of perseverance (Perry & Mallozzi, 2011; UN Refugee Agency, 2019). The process of resettlement can also be influenced by the prevailing social attitudes of acceptance or discrimination toward a refugee's cultural heritage (Urdu, 2012).

The level of an adult refugee personal and professional success in a new culture is impacted by the level of acceptance and mutual respect offered by the local community (Urdu, 2012). Using race as a lens to discuss the intersecting positionalities of students and teachers, Baumgartner and Johnson-Bailey (2008) explore how the coming-together of varied positionalities influences a classroom learning environment. For instance, a teacher's positionality according to race, ethnicity, gender identity, and socioeconomic status may impact teaching philosophies, methodology, and praxis (Misawa, 2015). So, scholars consider how these intersections of varied life experiences and positionalities may further influence the delivery and perception of material in a classroom (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2008; Misawa, 2010, 2015). As McBrien (2005) explored the educational needs and barriers for immigrants and refugees, the study found that in many cases educational systems make assumptions of what students need to facilitate a healthy learning environment. Instead, it is vital to consider how to facilitate resettlement for refugees through educational opportunities that are accessible and sufficient to meet students' needs.

Importantly, literature reflects a connection between the level of English proficiency and the level of perceived discrimination for students (Diaz, et al., 2016; McBrien, 2005). English language acquisition for refugees can be viewed as a bridge from a state of uncertainty and instability to a future of opportunities, autonomy, and social efficacy. While exploring the importance of ESL education for adult refugee learners, research demonstrates that language learning can be a complex and layered process (Diaz, et al., 2016). Not only do adult refugees face the challenge of integrating into a new society and culture, but they are also challenged to learn English while immersed in a new academic environment (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2016). Refugee learners come from diverse backgrounds with a variety of life experiences, varied cultural belief systems, and levels of socioeconomic status. In order to serve the needs of adult refugee learners, educators must consider the students' lived experiences.

## **Methods**

Using narrative inquiry, this study focused on the ways that adult refugee learners in the

Southeastern U.S. communicate their experiences through storytelling. Through narrative inquiry, we focused on what participants believed were important aspects of their experience in relation with others with regard to their positionality (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). To recruit nine adult refugee learners currently enrolled in a community college in the Southeastern U.S. for this study, we used the network sampling strategy (Roulston, 2013).

Utilizing a narrative framework, this study included semi-structured narrative interviews using an IRB-approved interview guide to facilitate the interview process. Each participant was asked to take part in an audio-recorded one-on-one, 60-90-minute interview. After completing the individual narrative interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim for a narrative analysis (Saldaña, 2016). We utilized a four-stage coding process and identified four main themes from the participant narratives. To strive for trustworthiness, we utilized triangulation, member checks, research field notes, and peer debriefing. We maintained a focus on trustworthiness and credibility throughout this study and utilized triangulation, member checks, research field notes, and peer debriefing. Careful attention to trustworthiness in qualitative research is essential to maintain credibility in the field (Roulston, 2013).

## Findings

This study included nine participants. Four participants identified as female and five participants identified as male. The age range of the participants at the time of the interview for this study was 22 to 48 years old. Each participant had a unique journey coming to the U.S. As a refugee, however, there were also varied and notable intersections in their stories.

All nine participants left their country of birth in search of safety – safety from war, violence, personal threats, or terrorism. Many of the participants lost close family members due to armed conflict in their home country. The importance and centrality of family served as a thread that binds their narratives. As this study seeks to expose the meaning-making process for adult refugee learners, the importance of family relationships and the preservation of cultural traditions remains a constant source of motivation for the participants.

The narrative analysis of the interview transcripts revealed four main themes. The first theme that emerged from the participant narratives was *Seek to Understand and be Understood*, which refers to the participants' experiences with coming to the U.S. and realizing the role and impact of English language acquisition during the adaptation process. This theme also addresses the participants' complex individual identities. The participant narratives expose the importance to recognize the individuality of refugees, as each person's story may impact needs, abilities, goals, and behaviors as they seek higher education.

The second theme, *Bird in a Cage*, came from a participant when he expressed his feelings about living in his home country where he knew what to expect and how things work – but still feeling trapped. When he came to the U.S., he felt relief at being in a place that offered safety and hope; however, he soon realized he still felt like a bird in a cage. He always felt trapped by barriers and always wanting more from life. This theme embodies the ideas of feeling caught between cultural realities and striving to balance prior knowledge with new social and cultural expectations.

The third theme, *Power of Education*, emerged from the interview transcripts as the nine participants shared beliefs about education as a pathway to success, a way to a more secure future, and as a way to build socioeconomic stability. This theme also refers to the strategies that participants utilized to seek help on campus and the ability to find support and guidance which helped participants on campus and in the community. The participants shared how gaining access to community college influenced their feelings of self-efficacy, level of welcome, and facilitated empowerment as they looked forward to a safe and stable future.

The fourth theme that emerged from the interview data was *There is Only Hope*. Participants in this study talked about how they perceived the resettlement experience as a shift in their perception of themselves and realizing how others perceive them as refugees. The participants shared numerous experiences with discrimination which impacted their academic experience in the U.S.

## Discussion

The first research question focused on the prior life experiences of the participants. The participant narratives exposed numerous instances when prior life experiences influenced the adult refugee learner transition to and experience in higher education in the U.S. and it is closely related to the supporting literature. The participants emphasized how prior knowledge of cultural norms no longer facilitated understanding of social expectations. While the nine adult refugee learners were excited and looked forward to a new start in the U.S., they began to experience frustration when realizing they faced new struggles in a quest to understand and be understood in a new cultural and academic environment.

The participants highlighted their feelings of being *set-apart* and as an *outsider* from society. As is widely encouraged within adult education scholarship, adult learner prior life experiences are integral parts of the adult learning process (Brockett, 2015). As adult refugee learners strive to establish stability during the resettlement process, they simultaneously deal with past experiences with trauma, the stress of relocation and resettlement, and the complexity of adapting to a culture - while also learning English. This complex adjustment process involves a process looking forward while reflecting on the past. This process directly influences the adult refugee learners' experience and persistence in higher education.

The second research question addressed the intersectional nature of the adult refugee learner experience. Considering the intersection of ethnicity and immigration status for adult refugee learners, the participants shared how their complex identities influenced their higher education experience in the U.S. The study findings revealed how participants felt they were labeled and understood as refugees in the U.S. and how this perception influences the level of welcome and inclusion they feel in society. The participant experiences highlight the importance of recognizing the intersectional nature of human beings. Each person may share some common ground with others, but every person is individual and carries various part of their identity with them into each new experience. The participants also emphasized the importance of reaching past stereotypes to get to know individual refugees as a way to develop trust and mutual understanding.

In relation to research question three, the participants shared strategies they employ to help navigate U.S. higher education that are also supported by existing literature. The participants found support on campus and built cross-cultural friendships, valued self-directed learning methods, reflected on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and focused on the importance of English language proficiency as success strategies. All the nine participants also shared experiences of finding support from faculty, staff, and fellow students on campus. As Brockett (2015) and Misawa (2015) affirm, learners are more likely to persist when they are supported and encouraged by faculty and staff who strive to create a safe learning environment.

When reflecting on the experiences of discrimination, isolation, and fear the participants shared, the support provided on campus becomes an even more powerful example of how simple acts of kindness and the acts of individuals striving to gain cross-cultural understanding can create a positive shift in the trajectory of adult students' lives. As adult refugee learners claim their intersectional identities, they also persist to learn from the past to succeed in current and future goals. These findings illuminate the integral role of prior life experience, motivation,

and critical reflection in the adult learning process.

### **Implications**

This research provided a window into the lives of the participants and illuminated ways that their experiences can be applied to practice in adult and higher education. Through this study, educators and program planners will be able to make more informed decisions about how to plan curriculum, support services, and programs to enhance the social environment and learning experience for refugees. By understanding the refugee experience, adult education practitioners and community members can also mediate the impact of marginalization for adult refugee learners.

This study contributes to adult education practice by showing how to improve campus student support services. In particular, we noticed three opportunities for improvement in relation to adult refugee learners: 1) emphasize the importance of recognizing the intersectional identity of adult refugee learners across campus services; 2) recognize the impact of faculty and staff on the lives of adult refugee learners; and 3) realize the need for cross-cultural understanding and knowledge-sharing in order to build a positive learning community. These opportunities for improvement are currently being developed into a comprehensive training program for community college campuses.

In regard to future research, adult refugee learners could be a difficult population to reach, but the potential impact of further research is worthwhile and entirely possible to achieve. Refugee support agencies and non-profit organizations who support refugee populations can be vital resources to connect scholars with the refugee population.

### **Conclusion**

Following traumatic experiences with war, violence, religious or ethnic persecution, and starvation, refugees seek safety, freedom, and stability through the U.S. refugee resettlement program. Adult refugees bring a wealth of knowledge and expertise that can contribute to cross-cultural problem-solving and increased understanding of a globalized society. The participants in this study exuded hopefulness as they sought to rebuild their lives in the U.S. The study shows how adult refugee learners dream about seeing U.S. culture evolve to be more accepting and inclusive of varied cultures and ways of being in the world. This narrative inquiry added to the existing limited body of research on adult refugee learners and sought to humanize the refugee experience to enhance public understanding of the challenges, hardships, motivations, and lived experiences of refugees in the U.S.

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