Resettled Refugee Experiences of Aspiring to and Navigating Through the Postsecondary Access Process

Sarah M. Harendt

Dissertation submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Higher Education

Claire K. Robbins, Chair

Tonisha B. Lane

Jennifer M. Bondy

Jennifer M. Case

December 6, 2023

Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: *refugee, postsecondary access, cultural wealth, college students, higher education*

Resettled Refugee Experiences of Aspiring to and Navigating Through the Postsecondary Access Process

Sarah M. Harendt

ABSTRACT

More than 3 million refugees have resettled in the U.S. alone since 1948 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2018). Less than 10% of refugees resettled in the U.S. make educational advancements of any kind post-resettlement, and only six percent of refugees worldwide have entered postsecondary education (Capps & Fix, 2015; Ferede, 2018; Kerwin, 2012; Mendenhall, Russell & Buckner, 2017; U.S. Department of State, 2017; UNHCR, 2017, 2019, 2021). Despite these data, there is no lack of desire to attend college or university among refugees who have completed secondary school (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2010).

This post-intentional phenomenological study sought to understand more deeply the lived experiences of resettled refugees accessing postsecondary education and how they utilize navigational and aspirational capital to negotiate exploration, application, and enrollment processes.

Findings of this study surfaced barriers resettled refugees in the United States navigate at the meso-, macro-, and micro-levels of postsecondary educational access, the community cultural wealth that resettled refugees create, and how they utilize this capital to navigate the complexities of an educational system created without them in mind.

This study has implications for secondary and postsecondary professionals, policymakers at the state and federal levels, and for researchers who are interested in postsecondary educational access for resettled refugees.

Resettled Refugee Experiences of Aspiring to and Navigating Through the Postsecondary Access Process

Sarah M. Harendt

GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Refugees have been resettled in the United States since 1948(United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2018). Most of these resettled refugees have not made educational advancements after resettlement despite their desires for additional education.

This study was designed to understand what it is like for resettled refugees when they attempt to purse education after graduating from high school and what are the barriers that can get in their way when they are learning about, applying to, and going to college. This study also sought to understand what helps resettled refugees successfully continue to make progress at each of these points in the college-going process.

This research shows that resettled refugees have high aspirations for gaining education after high school and that their families and other members of their broader community also share these aspirations. It also shows that resettled refugees learn how to work through complex challenges by relying on both the information they collect about college-going and the information that others share with them.

This study is useful for those who work in all areas of education and government in the United States and who are responsible for making decisions about how policies and rules can help or hinder resettled refugees as they attempt to learn about, apply to, and go to college.

Dedication

To my children

Acknowledgments

First, to the amazing participants in this study. Thank you for your willingness to share your stories with me. Your experiences of turning dreams and aspirations into achievements will continued to inspire me.

To my amazing Chair, Dr. Claire Robbins, I just do not have the words to adequately describe how deeply appreciative I am that our paths crossed all those years ago. You demystified the hidden curriculum and came along beside me when I was unsure. You held the space so I could feel safe to ask the hard questions and to be vulnerable in my lack of understanding. For me, you will always be the ultimate Navigator.

To each of my committee members, Dr. Tonisha Lane, Dt. Jennifer Case, and Dr. Jennifer Bondy. I could not have asked for a better team of amazing scholars to guide my progress. Your sound counsel throughout this process has made me a more thoughtful researcher. Thank you for sticking with me through this process.

Thank you to my many colleagues and friends who over the years encouraged me to keep on going! Every little bit of encouragement mattered immensely.

To my parents, Randy and Phyllis Umbarger, who have always believed in me and encouraged me to learn. I know I promised I would NOT be a career student. Forgive me for breaking that one.

To my children, Emma, Paige, Nate, Austin, and Chase, you each paid a heavy price while I chased this dream. You understand what opportunity cost means at a very personal level. Know that I will always love you and this is as much your accomplishment as it is mine.

Finally, to my husband, Rob. You too have paid a heavy price throughout this process. I cannot give you back the time lost to countless nights of homework and weekends spent in front of a computer. Thank you for picking up the kids, the dinner, the slack, the pieces….I will always love you. You are my dream come true and the better part of "us".

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Key Terms

Application Process: The process by which individuals apply to gain entry into a trade or certification program, college or university.

Asset-based: Focuses on strengths an individual embodies and what individuals offer as opposed to what they are lacking. Asset-based is a purposeful perspective that stands in direct contrast to deficit-based by focusing on strengths rather than weaknesses, potential rather than lack, and recognizing experiences, skill sets, and knowledge that have not been given primary consideration within the dominant culture and social structure.

College access: "The ability to engage in college going as impacted by social structural factors (e.g. societal inequities, educational institutions, policies) (George Mwangi, 2015, p. 124)".

College choice: "The long-range and multi-phase process of deciding whether and where to go to college, inclusive of developing aspirations and readiness, planning, applying for, and enrolling" (George Mwangi, 2015, p. 124).

College Exploration: The process of researching, evaluating, and learning about the options available for education beyond secondary education. Can include trade and certification programs, community colleges, bachelor's degree-granting institutions, and beyond.

Deficit-based: A perspective that attributes failures such as lack of achievement, learning, or success in gaining employment to a personal lack of effort or deficiency in the individual, rather than to failures or limitations of the education and training system or to prevalent socio‑economic trends (Oxford, 2022). Deficit-based perspective also focuses on what individuals are "lacking" from a dominant cultural and social perspective without giving equal consideration to the strengths, skill sets, knowledge, and experiences that individuals embody.

Enrollment Process: The process of arranging to attend an institution and specific classes provided by that institution.

Global North: The Global North is made up of regions such as North America, Europe, and Australia. Developed by Emmanuel Wallerstein (1974) to explain the global capitalist system separating countries into the North and the South based primarily on economic participation in the global economy. The Global North includes countries, located primarily in the northern hemisphere, known as "first world" due to perceptions of their relative wealth, technology, and global dominance (Graml, Meyer-Lee, & Peifer, 2021).

High School Equivalency: "Attainment of the knowledge and skills or level of academic proficiency comparable to that which would be attained in a high school program of study and yields significantly the same outcome or capability" (Law Insider, 2022, para 1).

Office of Refugee Resettlement: The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) “provides new populations with the opportunity to maximize their potential in the United States. Our programs provide people in need with critical resources to assist them in becoming integrated members of American society” (2022, para. 1).

Postsecondary Education: Formal instruction at an institution of higher education or vocational school leading to the attainment of a certificate, an associate degree, or a baccalaureate degree.

Protracted Refugee: A state of being in which refugees find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo (UNHCR, 2019).

Refugee: “Individuals fleeing conflict who are recognized and protected under the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol. A person, outside of their country of nationality, who is unable to return to that country because of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Convention and Protocol, 1951, p.14).

TOEFL: An English language examination that is often taken by foreign students who want to study at universities in English-speaking countries. TOEFL is an abbreviation of 'Test of English as a Foreign Language' (COBUILD Advanced English Dictionary, 2022).

United States Citizen and Immigration Services: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is the government agency that oversees lawful immigration to the United States.

Chapter One: Introduction

For over seventy years, refugees from across the globe have come to the United States (U.S.). More than 3 million refugees have resettled in the U.S. alone since 1948 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2018), and to date, the U.S. has resettled more refugees than all other Global North resettlement countries combined (Barkdull, Weber, Swart & Phillips, 2012; Kerwin, 2012; Luu & Blanco, 2019). Refugees have often endured traumatic experiences in their countries of origin, negotiated the difficulties that arise from living in refugee camps and the relocation process, and navigated the process of acculturation while resettling and reclaiming an existence in a foreign land.

There are approximately 70.8 million displaced persons worldwide, of whom approximately 25.9 million are classified as registered refugees, and 51% are under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2023). In the current global climate of unrest, those numbers are certain to only continue rising. The education path for refugees is not a continuous one, and educational prospects are limited (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2010). Less than 10% of refugees resettled in the U.S. make educational advancements of any kind post-resettlement, and only six percent of refugees worldwide have entered postsecondary education (Capps & Fix, 2015; Ferede, 2018; Kerwin, 2012; Mendenhall, Russell & Buckner, 2017; U.S. Department of State, 2017; UNHCR, 2017, 2019, 2021). Despite these data, there is no lack of desire to attend college or university among refugees who have completed secondary school (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2010). For comparison, between 50% and 80% of underrepresented high school completers in the U.S. are enrolled in 2- or 4-year colleges and universities by October immediately following high school completion (Ramos & Taylor, 2017). However, no readily accessible quantitative data is available that demonstrates the percentage of refugees, whether U.S. high school completers or

not, who begin the postsecondary access exploration process, who apply to colleges and universities, or who enroll in postsecondary education. Likewise, qualitative literature situated within the context of the U.S. postsecondary education system and how it is accessed by refugees is lacking.

Statement of the Problem

While postsecondary access for underrepresented students continues to be of interest to educational researchers, research focused on postsecondary access among refugees is lacking (Felix, 2021). Additionally, literature focused on refugees, distinct from other underrepresented populations, is even more sparse. Often, the literature that does exist co-mingles refugees with other immigrant populations living in the U.S. Various researchers insist that enough differences exist in the lived experiences of refugees, despite great within-group variation, from other immigrant populations to support the need for research specifically focused on refugees (Bajwa, Couto, Kidd, Markoulakis, Abai, & McKenzie, 2017; Entigar, 2017; Harris, Chi, & Spark, 2015; McBrien, 2005; Perry & Mallozzi, 2011; Ramsay & Baker, 2019). Further, college-going represents a unique challenge for refugees (Vásquez, 2007). Therefore, it is imperative to conduct research about the postsecondary access process that is centered on the experiences of refugees.

A review of relevant literature from around the world exposes the barriers to postsecondary education refugees encounter as they resettle in any number of locations (Ariel, 2014; Bankston & Zhou, 2002; Kanno & Varghese, 2010; McBrien, 2005; Mukilbi, 2015; Tandon, 2016). Existing literature primarily focuses on refugees outside of the U.S. and is qualitative by design. Barriers that surface in this literature include but are not limited to: current policies and laws that discourage postsecondary education; withholding of critical knowledge related to postsecondary access; lingering effects of events that led to being a refugee and living

as a displaced person; educational disruptions and non-recognition of education attainment; discrimination; and language barriers (Bajwa et al., 2017; Dougherty, & Callender, 2017; Fincham, 2020; Fox, Burns, Popovich, Belknap, & Frank-Stromborg, 2004; Kanno et al., 2010; Lee, 2002; Luu & Blanco, 2019; McBrien, 2005; Mendenhall, Russell, & Buckner, 2017; Morrice, 2013; Mukiibi,2015; Mwangi, 2015; Tandon, 2016; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012; Trueba, Jacobs & Kirton, 1990). While this consistent, and persistent, set of barriers appears to create challenges for refugees pursuing educational goals worldwide, the exploration of how refugees in the U.S. use their embodied capital to navigate the postsecondary access journey successfully is missing from existing inquiry (Yosso, 2005). These emergent barriers intersect in complex ways, but across all, the assumption that these barriers exist as a result of the individual "lacking" is a prominent theme. This approach foregrounds the barriers' importance while pushing the lived experience of the individual to the background and out of view (Roy & Roxas, 2011). Through exploration of this body of literature, the need for research shedding light on how refugees enact their own capital becomes more evident.

Purpose of the Study

For my dissertation, I conducted a study using a post-intentional phenomenological approach to explore the ways in which individuals resettled in the U.S., with current or former refugee status, experience the exploration, application, and enrollment processes and utilize community cultural wealth, specifically aspirational and navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) while in the process of accessing postsecondary education. By employing this approach, and using a theoretical model that focuses on capital already embodied by the individual, resettled refugee participants in this study provided a deeper understanding of their lived experiences from an asset-based perspective and provided the nuance and clarity essential to begin dismantling the multi-level barriers that complicate access to postsecondary educational opportunity.

This study employed a criterion sample of seven former refugees, resettled within the U.S., who (a) previously completed secondary education within the U.S., (b) have begun the postsecondary education exploration process, (c) have been or are currently enrolled in postsecondary education, and/or (d) have completed a certificate or degree from a postsecondary institution within the U.S. Results of this post-intentional phenomenological inquiry were developed via data collected from virtual (Zoom), semi-structured, in-depth interviews.

Research Questions

This study, and the research questions that guided it, were concerned with the refugee experience of accessing postsecondary education and what it is for refugees to find themselves negotiating processes not designed with them in mind. How might accessing postsecondary education take shape for refugees in the U.S.? More specifically, this post-intentional phenomenological study sought to understand more deeply the lived experiences of resettled refugees through the following research questions:

- What are the experiences of resettled refugees in the postsecondary exploration, application, and enrollment processes?
- Do resettled refugees encounter barriers in the postsecondary exploration, application, and enrollment processes?
- How, if at all, do resettled refugees utilize navigational and aspirational capital to negotiate exploration, application, and enrollment processes?

Significance of the Study

This study sheds light on the barriers to postsecondary education access as experienced by refugees within the U.S. and the ways in which refugees are utilizing their community cultural wealth, more specifically their navigational and aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005). As McBrien (2005) wrote, “If not for the sake of the individual refugee…, then for the stability of

society as a whole" (p. 358). With this in mind, this study holds significance for practice, research, and policy.

Significance for Practice

This study has significant implications for professionals in the practice of providing support for refugees in secondary education who may or may not show interest in postsecondary education, for college admissions and financial aid officers in postsecondary education, for refugee resettlement program staff, and those policymakers and policy implementers in both federal and state governments.

Findings from this study inform secondary education administrators, teachers, guidance counselors, and other staff regarding how the messages they communicate and propagate to refugees, in relation to postsecondary access, impact college-going. Further, bringing attention to the accessibility of information provided to refugees regarding postsecondary access could assist secondary educators in tailoring workshops and information to address the needs of refugee populations as they begin to explore and navigate the college-going process.

For postsecondary administrators and staff, understanding the barriers refugees face may mirror those faced by other underrepresented populations they serve, but are likely more nuanced and complex. Findings from this study can assist these providers in offering services tailored to resettled refugee populations.

Significance for Research

Wambu, Hutchison, and Pietrantoni (2017) concluded that additional studies are needed to "help explain the role of perceived and actual barriers" as they apply to refugees and postsecondary education. More specifically, Voutira et al. (2007) "observe a trend that fewer doctoral theses are written on refugees specifically or on specific groups of refugees" (p. 163). This dissertation adds to the existing body of literature focusing on refugees and educational

attainment in the U.S. Currently, research explores refugee student experiences while traversing the secondary education system and the implications of literacy development (Kanno et al., 2010; McBrien, 2005; Perry et al., 2011; Tandon, 2016) and the effects of English as a second language while enrolled in postsecondary education (Hannah, 2019; Hirano, 2014; Kanno et al., 2010). While research does exist about refugees resettled in other countries in the Global North, the secondary and postsecondary education systems are very different from that of the U.S. and parallels are, therefore, limited (Detourbe & Goastelle, 2012; Dougherty et al., 2017; Harris et al., 2015; Ramsay et al., 2019; Sontag, 2019). A more robust exploration of the specific barriers to postsecondary exploration and access by refugees is warranted.

Additionally, understanding how refugees utilize community cultural wealth, specifically navigational and aspirational capital, in the postsecondary education access process provides an avenue for illustrating the additional applicability of the community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005). Utilizing this conceptual framework creates an asset-based lens through which to reframe the origins of barriers to postsecondary access for refugee populations.

Significance for Policy

Findings from this study offer implications for federal and state policymakers and relevant organizations, such as the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) which operates under the Department of State, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) which operates under the Department of Health and Human Services, state refugee coordinating bodies who work closely with the Department of Homeland Security, and the U.S. Department of Education Office of Financial Aid. As part of the grant process for resettlement organizations, requiring a clear plan for education beyond secondary education and having education incorporated into the "work" plan required for those who will not be enrolled in secondary education are both viable options.

Exposing barriers experienced by refugees in the continued postsecondary exploration experience, application phase, and enrollment process can better inform college and university admissions and financial aid offices to reexamine policies and procedures related to these steps and transitions. Improving clarity around the legal parameters surrounding refugee status and current requirements for admissions and eligibility for federal and state aid in an outward-facing manner is critical to both refugees and practitioners. Creating financial aid policies such as allowing the FAFSA to be produced in multiple languages representative of the refugee populations coming into the country would send both a spoken and unspoken message to students, families, institutions, and access providers about the availability of federal student aid. Also simplifying the FAFSA process to clarify the application and ease the confusion created by such a complex process would be reassuring for refugees and their families.

Additionally, encouraging partnerships between resettlement organizations, secondary school systems, and college access providers within the resettlement community through federal grant application processes would further provide an incentive for resettlement agencies to build postsecondary education planning into their resettlement plans.

Barriers to Research with Refugees

Research regarding refugees is challenging for several reasons. First, "fewer individuals are being officially recognized under the 1951 Refugee Convention as refugees and permanent protection is being replaced by temporary protection" (Voutira et al., 2007, p. 163) despite the growing numbers of displaced persons across the globe. Research focused on migrant and undocumented individuals has increased, yet there is a lack of research centered on refugees specifically. In fact, refugees are often included in research on "migrant" or "immigrant" populations without regard being given to the nuances that make their arrival in the U.S. unique. Further, refugee populations are extremely diverse in cultural systems, religious affiliations, and

beliefs regarding gender roles, which complicates research efforts further. “As refugee communities emerge out of crisis, they are frequently made up of individuals who do not share common origins, with fractured family relations, and together by accident making participation a complex endeavor” (Dona, 2007, p. 217). Finally, difficulty translating and conducting interviews with a representative sample of the refugee population presents prohibitive obstacles to conducting research with and about refugees. In the sections that follow, I will discuss how I have given consideration to these issues.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is organized into five chapters that cover the nature and scope of the problem, the literature that is directly relevant or closely aligns with the study, the methodology used in the collection and analysis of the study, and finally the findings and their implications.

Chapter One introduced the topic of postsecondary access for refugee populations living in the U.S. This chapter introduced barriers faced by refugee populations in their pursuit of postsecondary educational opportunities, identified a need to explore how refugees negotiate those barriers through navigational and aspirational capital, and the significance of these questions for practice, research, and policy.

Chapter Two presents a review of current, relevant literature focusing on barriers encountered by refugee populations as they explore and pursue postsecondary access. This comprehensive review provides a broad look at the barriers faced in the Global North and within the U.S. more specifically. This chapter also provides an introduction to the asset-based theoretical framework, community cultural wealth, developed by Tara Yosso (2005).

Chapter Three describes the research methodology employed in conducting this study. The rationale for choosing a post-intentional phenomenological inquiry, followed by a

description of data collection and analysis methods and a post-intentional reflection on the researcher's positionality, rounds out the chapter.

Participant introductions and profiles are the focus of Chapter Four. An in-depth analysis of participant responses and the emergent themes of the study are presented.

Finally, Chapter Five discusses how the major findings of this inquiry connect to the research questions, illustrate the utilization of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) by refugee populations, identify implications of the findings, acknowledge the limitations of this study, and pose directions for future research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter discusses the importance of postsecondary education for refugees. Next, an overview of previously identified barriers to postsecondary access for refugees within the U.S., and more broadly in Global North countries when supporting global literature exists, will be provided. Finally, the chapter presents a synopsis of the conceptual framework supporting this post-intentional phenomenological inquiry and evidence to support exploring this topic further.

Identifying the Refugee Population

A refugee, as defined in the 1951 UN Convention and 1967 Protocol, "is a person who is outside his or her country of nationality (or place of habitual residence if stateless) who, owing to a fear of persecution on account of a protected ground, is unable or unwilling to avail himself of the protection of the state" (U.S. Department of Homeland Security: Refugees, 2016). Protected grounds include race, nationality, religion, political opinion, and membership of a particular social group. According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and current U.S. immigration law, a refugee is someone who:

- Is located outside of the U.S.
- Is of special humanitarian concern to the U.S.
- Demonstrates that they were persecuted or fear persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group
- Is not firmly resettled in another country
- Is admissible to the U.S.
  (U.S. Department of Homeland Security: Refugees, 2016)

Refugees have been granted asylum and given opportunity for resettlement in the U.S. since 1975. Individuals and family groups come from regions in Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America/Caribbean (US Department of State, 2016). While circumstances vary, all refugees have been forced to flee from their homes for their safety (Hannah, 1999).

More than two-thirds of refugees live in resettlement camps before arriving in their final resettlement country. Resettlement has always been and remains an option of last resort for host countries and a very limited number of the world's displaced peoples are granted refugee status by admitting countries like the U.S. While individual world regions have a total admission cap, "[i]n the U.S., refugee resettlement is a Federal Government programme and the quota of refugees accepted in a given fiscal year is determined by the President," (Mamgain, 2003, p. 115). Resettlement programs come about via a grant application process. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have been federally approved apply for funds to assist refugees in the resettlement process for up to 180 days post-placement. NGOs must have prior experience with resettlement to include a plan for employment, housing, transportation, mental health, interpreting, legal services, ESL courses, and educational training designed to quickly lead to employability through local employers. However, nowhere in the Federal grant application is there a requirement for services to educate, advise, or provide refugees of any age regarding educational opportunities including high school equivalencies or beyond.

In 2021, just over 11,000 individuals were resettled in cities and towns within the U.S. Persons admitted to the U.S. as refugees have a status that allows them to work, pay taxes, begin the process of citizenship, enroll their children in public school, and receive federal financial aid for higher education, among other benefits. Barriers to social integration begin almost immediately and encompass every facet of life for newly arrived individuals. For example, refugees begin their lives in the U.S. owing the federal government for their relocation and are expected to begin repaying the debt within 18 months of resettlement.

Once refugees are relocated to the U.S., formal education at the elementary or secondary school level begins or continues via public and/or private elementary and secondary education if applicable. The same cannot be said for postsecondary education, however. Currently, the U.S.

Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics has no searchable database regarding refugees and postsecondary education. Further, while individuals with a high school diploma from the U.S. or who have obtained a GED post-resettlement may apply for admission to any college or university in the U.S. and are eligible for federal student aid, the process is ripe with pitfalls. Hannah (1999) stated, "college and university applicants from humanitarian or refugee backgrounds are often unable to present official documents confirming their previous educational experiences or qualifications" (p. 62.).

Postsecondary Education for Refugees is Imperative

In 2019, the UNHCR set a worldwide 15% target rate for access to postsecondary education among the approximately 26 million persons holding refugee status. Approximately only **six percent of the world's refugees have enrolled in some form of postsecondary education** while in protracted or resettlement locations (Lambrechts, 2020; UNHCR, 2016, 2020). Projections for postsecondary education and workforce labor growth within the U.S. illustrate immigrant populations, of which refugees are a part, to be a main source of human capital for both the education and labor sectors (Batalova & Feldblum, 2020). Individuals with higher levels of education "are much more likely to participate in the labor force, earn more, and are less likely to be unemployed" (Batalova & Feldblum, 2020, p. 3). Given these projections, the importance of postsecondary access is crucial for the economic health of the resettlement country and those living within it. Hirano (2014) pointed out that a stable, healthy economy can also improve a country's ability to support additional refugee resettlement.

For refugees, postsecondary education provides access to upward social and long-term economic mobility, quicker integration into a resettlement country, and connections to a variety of networks that build additional forms of social and cultural capital (Baker et al., 2019; Ferede, 2018; Fincham, 2020; Hirano, 2014; Lenette, 2016; Mamgain et al., 2003; McHugh & Doxsee,

2018; Sheehy, 2014). Postsecondary education provides opportunities for improved knowledge of the sociocultural norms of a resettlement community, which in turn create pathways to employment and social connections. Similarly, Taylor and Sidhu (2012) found postsecondary education creates a starting point for preparing to become a citizen.

Postsecondary education access does not only contribute to socioeconomic shifts. Baker et al. (2019) also found that "access to and meaningful participation in higher education is absolutely fundamental to supporting the settlement process and promoting the well-being of people from refugee backgrounds" (p. 5) so they can "feel autonomous and in control of their lives" (p. 7). Further, "education can be a crucial pathway to re-establish the sense of security and stability that was lost" during forced migration, displacement, and the resettlement process (Baker et al., 2019, p. 9). Mosselson (2007) also found that for refugees, educational opportunities can serve as a catalyst for the restoration of hope.

Postsecondary education can influence refugees' sense of belonging as well (Lenette, 2016; Morrice, 2013). It is important for the human psyche to feel a sense of belonging, a sense of purpose, usefulness, and to have goals to accomplish (Ryan, Dooley, & Benson, 2008). Refugee adaptation best occurs when individuals can pursue goals that satisfy their needs and manage the demands they encounter in their new host country (Ryan et al., 2008). "Regaining things lost during migration and post-migration is imperative to successful integration into a new society since adaptation...to a new environment depends largely on the ability to regain lost resources" (Ryan et al., 2008, p. 13). Many refugees look to advance their educational attainment and skills related to workforce development, knowing these assets increase earning potential and capacity to support their families (McHugh et al., 2018).

Education beyond the secondary level provides refugees with much-needed resources that support social mobility, provide stability, and further acculturation. "The human cost of

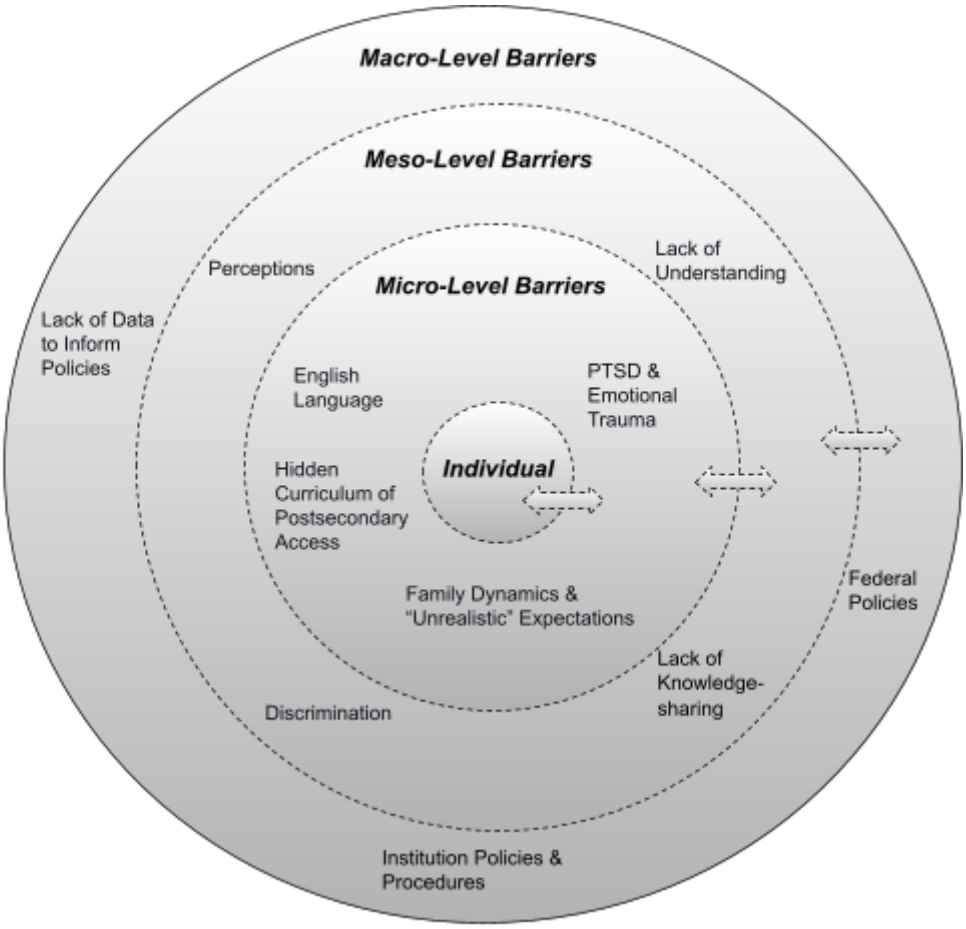
neglecting education for such a large population of displaced people is, therefore, potentially disastrous" (Baker, Ramsay & Lenette, 2019, p. 5). However, the path to postsecondary education is difficult on many levels. The following sections will reveal the barriers to postsecondary education identified through research with refugees or with refugees in mind.

Barriers to Postsecondary Educational Access among Refugees

Refugees "encounter a range of barriers" as they "attempt to gain new resources," such as postsecondary education, "in the host environment" (Ryan et al., 2008, p. 13). These barriers are well-documented across Global North countries and among diverse cultural, ethnic, and racial groups that share refugee status. A review of literature that encompasses the resettlement experiences of refugees in the Global North draws focus to how systemic policies might impede educational access and lack of knowledge and support shaping access to educational goals. At multiple levels, refugees must "navigate in a space that is highly restricted and affects every area of life" once resettled (Schroeder, 2003, p. 380).

According to Escandell, Mari-Klose, and Mari-Klose (2015), refugees are asked to navigate factors identified in existing literature at three distinct yet intersecting levels: the macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors. These factors, which I will refer to as barriers, directly and indirectly appear to shape access to postsecondary education and refugees' outcomes. To provide further context for and delineation among the barrier levels, "macro-levels factors include national and state-level institutional aspects," while "meso-level factors include community and household level aspects" (Escandell et al., 2015, p. 1038). In turn, "micro-level factors encompass refugees' cognitive and non-cognitive abilities", mental health, and perceptions of the postsecondary education system (Escandell et al., 2015, p. 1038). In the next section, I describe each barrier level in detail.

Figure 1 - Postsecondary Access Barriers for Refugees



Macro-Level Barriers

Existing literature documenting refugees' experiences has identified a set of barriers to postsecondary access found at the macro-level. Examples at the macro-level include directly blocking access to resources as a result of current laws and policies, not recognizing educational qualifications gained in another country, not creating space to account for disruptions at all levels of formal education, and a lack of appropriate guidance and assistance at the federal, state and community levels to navigate the postsecondary access, application and/or financial aid process for refugee students and families (Ramsay et al., 2019; Baker, et al., 2019; Mamgain et al., 2003; Ryan et al., 2008; Schroeder, 2003).

Although the Refugee Convention, 1951 (Article 22) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (Article 13) clearly make education both a priority and a requirement for host countries to adhere to, this only extends through elementary education. Individuals who are designated with refugee status are afforded the same rights as any citizen of the U.S. to obtain an education (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2012) beyond elementary school under "the most favourable treatment accorded to nationals of a foreign country, in particular as regards the remission of fees and the award of scholarships" (UNHCR Refugee Convention, 1951, p. 117). However, international agreements, federal policies, and grants for resettlement programs do not incorporate requirements, provisions, or plans for postsecondary education access or enrollment.

Federal Policies as Barriers. Before resettlement even occurs in the U.S., macro-level barriers surface for refugees via existing law and the resettlement policies and procedures that are tailored to fit within federal requirements. Humanitarian models, upon which resettlement policies are designed, leave out education as a provision within resettlement contexts even though education has the potential to provide socioeconomic mobility and stability, increase a sense of well-being, and support assimilation into the resettlement country (Baker et al., 2019; Ferede, 2018; Fincham, 2020; Hirano, 2014; Lenette, 2016; Mamgain et al., 2003; McHugh et al., 2018; Ramsay et al., 2019; Sheehy, 2014). Detourbe and Goastelle's (2018) review of postsecondary and social stratification of refugees in Germany and England points out that refugee populations rely heavily on existing social policies within resettlement countries, and the probability of accessing postsecondary is directly related to how resettlement policies intersect with postsecondary policies. In the U.S. specifically, there is a clear lack of policy framework built into the existing federal legislation and regulations to support refugee education holistically (Unangst & Crea, 2020). Further, Kanno et al. (2010) qualitative study indicates that "structural

constraints" can negatively impact access to postsecondary education for refugees specifically (p. 318). Existing scholarship focused on access and participation in postsecondary education indicates it is " highly problematic" for refugees to navigate the postsecondary infrastructure that exists regardless of Global North country (Baker et al., 2019, p. 9).

As has always been the case in the U.S., federal law dictates resettlement policies and procedures and prioritizes quick integration into the workforce. What is clear is that employment within the first 30 days of resettlement is a crucial objective of both resettlement agencies and the U.S. federal government for anyone ages 18-64, with limited exceptions. Language from the U.S. Refugee Act of 1980, Public Law 96-212 exemplifies this theme. The Act states that resettlement agencies "are mandated to make available sufficient resources for employment training and placement in order to achieve economic self-sufficiency among refugees as quickly as possible" (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2012, (1)(A)(i)).

Further, the Act declares in the first 90 days the Department of State will work through designated agencies to provide refugees with food, housing, employment, medical care, counseling, and other services to help the refugee make a rapid transition to economic self-sufficiency (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2012). Per this legislation, while refugees are given 90 days of food and housing assistance, they are expected to cover living costs after that period has expired. According to Koyama (2014), the pressure for refugees to establish economic self-sufficiency results in individuals quickly taking lower-wage positions that require minimal, if any, education or skills training. This mandate constitutes a structural barrier that directly constrains refugees' choices related to postsecondary education.

Due to the policy mandate to become self-supporting, refugees must often choose work, which creates conflict with course taking, finding childcare, and securing adequate transportation (Perry et al., 2016). Policy researchers have affirmed this barrier. According to document

analysis performed by Luu et al. (2019), federal policies concerning refugee resettlement in the U.S., "focus primarily on workforce development and career training rather than on the academic track of postsecondary education" (p. 9). Additionally, "resettlement agencies' efficacy is rated according to refugee job placement as the measure of successful integration," which in turn determines their ability to maintain federal funding (Grace, Nawyn, & Okwako, 2017, p. 52).

With the push for quick self-sufficiency by sacrificing future educational pursuits, "U.S. resettlement policies bear much responsibility for subverting adult refugees' educational aspirations" (Perry et al., 2016, p. 21). However, the importance of education for the lives and futures of refugees cannot be overstated. Studies by Potocky-Tripodi (2001, 2004) found that for refugees, regardless of ethnicity or nationality, the predictor that had the greatest impact on economic adaptation and economic well-being was education. Mamgain et al. (2003) and Koyama (2014) had similar findings indicating education was the most significant predictor of higher wages for refugees.

Under the U.S. Refugee Act of 1980, resettlement agencies are mandated to provide sufficient employment training resources so that economic self-sufficiency can be achieved as quickly as possible. This law also recognizes that acquiring English language skills and having adequate access to cash assistance is an important part of self-sufficiency (Refugee Act of 1980). However, missing within current laws are provisions explicitly making postsecondary access an expected resource provided to refugees upon resettlement. As a matter of course, interpretations of federal law go so far as to remove access to cash assistance for refugees if they are enrolled in any postsecondary program (Refugee Act of 1980).

Institutional Policies as Barriers. Institutions of postsecondary education are active participants in creating and maintaining systemic barriers that unduly disenfranchise refugees. Postsecondary institutions in the U.S. further impede postsecondary access for refugees by failing to recognize prior learning (Hannah 1999; Ryan et al., 2008; Yi & Kiyama, 2018). Institutional actors erect barriers "through the non-recognition of qualifications" (Ryan et al., 2008, p. 13). Adding to the complexities of postsecondary access for refugees, those resettling in the U.S. may have experienced varying degrees of formal education within their native country and/or while living in a center or camp in preparation for relocation. Additionally, the level of access to education may differ significantly based on various factors such as location, gender, and cultural norms, among others. While refugees with a recognized high school diploma or GED may apply for admission to any college or university in the U.S. and are eligible for federal student aid, the process is ripe with pitfalls. To complicate matters further, if an individual has obtained the equivalent of a high school diploma or beyond outside of the U.S., they are "...often unable to present official documents confirming their previous educational experiences or qualifications" (Hannah, 1999, p. 62). Unangst et al. (2020) noted that refugees may not have access to documentation that demonstrates past postsecondary (or tertiary) enrollment or degree attainment from their country of origin or other location inhabited before permanent resettlement in the U.S. Adding insult to injury, those fleeing from persecution can face backlash from those operating the power structure they fled from by having credentials withheld or destroyed (Ferede, 2018).

Even when postsecondary documentation is available, a lack of understanding by refugees of the complex degree certification procedures, and costs associated with obtaining or translating credentials, may create or compound barriers. Even if credentials can be obtained and certified, all learning gaps have to be accounted for, which adds additional time and cost-burdens

refugees (Ferede, 2018). According to Mamgain et al. (2003), some individuals who had been resettled to the U.S. said "they knew their educational attainment (acquired in their home country) would not be worth very much in the U.S., but they had hoped to secure a job in their field of expertise" (p. 131). That, however, did not often happen.

While there has been increased interest in other Global North countries to support refugees' postsecondary aspirations through the creation of education scholarship programs and access programs, the same cannot be said about postsecondary education in the U.S. (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2010; Detourbe et al., 2018; Ferede, 2018). A study by Hannah (1999) found no examples of formal, good institutional practices to follow or guide policies related to refugee access to postsecondary resources. While some states within the U.S. have recognized the lack of resources aimed at transitioning refugee youth from high school to postsecondary education and have developed programs to fill this gap, these initiatives are often built without evidence-based practice or findings from scholarly inquiry and may not be evaluated to determine what aspects of the initiative should be replicated and scaled (Greenberg, Gelatt, Bolter, Workie, & Charo, 2018). Being able to create a narrative of success through qualitative and quantitative data would be useful in courting funders to support initiatives given that "the refugee resettlement network is experiencing unprecedented financial stress" (Greenberg et al., 2018, p. 41).

Lack of Data to Inform Policies. The lack of data related to refugees and postsecondary access behaviors is quite concerning. Currently, the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics has no searchable data regarding refugees and postsecondary education. Yi et al. (2018) report "data specific to refugee postsecondary application, choice enrollment, persistence, and graduation is inconsistent at best and completely missing at worst" (p. 19). Little data related to educational pursuits or attainment is collected beyond ESL

instruction or job training, and data that exists may not be publicly available (Greenberg et al., 2018) or does not adequately represent refugee population experiences. Mwangi, Manour, and Hedayat (2021) make the recommendation to "disaggregate immigrant research samples" and "center on under-researched immigrant populations with a growing presence in the U.S. higher education system" specifically indicating refugees (p. 61). The lack of data indicating the extent to which resettled refugees enroll in, and complete, a postsecondary credential is a strong indicator of the lack of interest in postsecondary access for refugees. Baker et al. (2019) view the active overlooking of education as a whole where refugees are concerned as an outright "form of solidifying global hierarchies and inequalities about knowledge and power by implicitly reaffirming who gets access to education and who does not" (p. 10). Further, "the prevailing invisibility of refugees in existing U.S. policies may add to the sense of displacement and disenfranchisement that many of them experience" (Luu et al., 2019, p.19).

Ryan et al. (2008) called on host societies to look at what is or is not being intentionally done to create macro-level barriers systematically. Understanding how refugees experience the process of navigating these systemic barriers and how they draw on aspirational capital and enact navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) is imperative to expose the multiple levels at which existing systemic barriers perpetuate or create inequities and to understand further the policies and procedures hindering access. Additionally, linking macro-level barriers to those found within the meso-level can provide insight into how larger systemic structures trickle down and have direct implications for refugee postsecondary access.

Meso-Level Barriers

At the meso-level, barriers identified in existing literature include perceptions by those with power and agency that create barriers to access for refugees and their family systems; withholding postsecondary access knowledge, whether intentional or not, by those in power; a lack of knowledge by those with power and agency about refugee status and eligibility as it relates to postsecondary education and financial aid; and discrimination (Baker et al., 2019; Ferede, 2018; Hannah, 1999; Koyama, 2014; Ramsay et al., 2019; Schroeder, 2003; Yi et al., 2018). Uptin, Wright, and Harwood's (2016) interviews with twelve former refugee youth surfaced discrimination, limited knowledge and resource sharing regarding postsecondary education, and a lack of access to "power or privilege" on the part of the refugee (p. 612).

Perceptions as Barriers. Much of the existing literature about refugees' access to postsecondary education focuses on the deficit-based views that are pervasive within social and educational systems, perpetuate systemic oppression, and center blame for lack of educational attainment on refugees. Such deficit-based views suggest refugees do not have aspirations of pursuing postsecondary education. In Hannah's study (1999), refugee caseworkers perceived refugees to be demotivated and having little interest in educational pursuits. On the contrary, Dougherty and Calendar (2017) indicate refugees accessing postsecondary education is "the product not so much of lesser desire or ability but of societal and institutional obstacles and exclusions that negatively shape disadvantaged students' aspirations, knowledge, and academic preparation" (p. 43). Perry et al. (2011) found that refugees do have educational aspirations, but those aspirations are "invisible," "questioned," "ignored" and/or "doubted" leading to systemic gatekeeping that in turn limits postsecondary access (p. 249). Such gatekeeping also highlights the "tension between [refugees'] aspirations and the realities of their available and accessible opportunities" (Yi et al., 2018).

Lack of Knowledge-sharing as a Barrier. With these unfounded perceptions comes a lack of adequate resources and knowledge-sharing about how educational systems function and how to navigate them. Baker et al. (2019) viewed the existing literature related to refugees accessing postsecondary education as revealing "an imbalance in the production of knowledge" needed to advance and realize aspirations (p. 10). Similarly, Unangst et al. (2020) explained that a central finding in their research with refugees in the United Kingdom was a lack of "timely, accessible, information" about their legal rights regarding postsecondary education participation, that financial support was available, and how the postsecondary education system functions, particularly around admissions and enrollment (p. 4). According to Hannah (1999), the lack of impartial information and guidance disadvantages refugees' pursuit of postsecondary education. Indeed, "restricting refugees from accessing higher education imposes limits on their own aspirations, and future dreams for themselves and their family" (Baker et al., 2019, p. 8).

At no point in the U.S. resettlement process is "tailored pre-arrival information and guidance" concerning postsecondary education disseminated to refugees (Unangst et al., 2020, p. 4). When marginalized, as is the case in the U.S., support via information shared, both en masse or individualized, is more difficult to obtain (Sheehy, 2014). Sontag (2019) argued that individualized, knowledgeable consultation specifically about postsecondary education is critical, and where that knowledge comes from matters. George Mwangi's (2015) meta-synthesis of research examining the role non-parent family and community members play in postsecondary access for underrepresented student populations concluded these individuals play a multifaceted role in supporting, encouraging, and in some cases, directly applying knowledge of the college-going process for those who are considering or actively pursuing postsecondary education. Those who work directly with refugees can serve as a "bridge to educational information" (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2017, p. 7). After parents, "schools have the greatest

impact on college access" among potential college students from underrepresented backgrounds (p. 138). If these individuals can make such positive impacts, then perhaps withholding knowledge, support, and encouragement has opposite, detrimental effects.

Lack of Understanding Regarding Refugee Status and Eligibility as Barriers. Access to financial aid is the meso-level barrier that is most evident in existing literature. Understanding the complex financial aid process at federal, state, and institutional levels is difficult and problematic for those unfamiliar with systemic structures of postsecondary education within the U.S. The added layer of not understanding the vast system that encompasses funding of postsecondary education further complicates a piece of the access puzzle for refugees. Refugees "are likely to misperceive the costs and benefits of postsecondary education and be deterred by high tuition costs" (Ferede, 2018, p. 79). Baker et al. (2019) noted that access to postsecondary education remains "prohibitive because of financial or more implicit forms of exclusion" despite the aspirations of refugees (p. 9). Withholding knowledge or being unaware of eligibility has immediate and long-term implications for college-going where financial aid and postsecondary application processes are concerned. Barriers such as lack of funding for postsecondary education, particularly for refugees who are adult learners or those with disabilities, limit the pursuit of postsecondary educational goals and could result in individuals being unable to convert postsecondary information into access (Fincham, 2020). Student behaviors, such as not applying for financial aid, are impacted by "inadequate knowledge and understanding" of financial aid (Perna, 2006, p. 1622). This lack of information can result in potential postsecondary students missing necessary financial aid-related deadlines and lead to "limited financial resources," which negatively impacts access to postsecondary education (Kanno et al., 2010, p. 311).

Particularly for refugees, their reliance on college and university staff, guidance counselors, and school resources creates a need for intentionally crafted federal policies that are clear and widely disseminated to those in a position to share knowledge about aid eligibility and application processes with refugees and their family systems. Individuals operating in these spaces may not always be fully aware of refugee eligibility status for federal, state, and institutional aid and may share incomplete or incorrect information (Ferede, 2018; Sheehy, 2014; Tobenkin, 2006; Yi et al., 2018). When educators are unaware that refugees are eligible to receive financial aid just as U.S. citizens are, refugees' access to postsecondary education becomes restricted by financial constraints even further (Tobenkin, 2006).

Another meso-level barrier that surfaces in current literature concerns a lack of knowledge about refugees' rights regarding their classification on college applications. Lack of knowledge of refugee rights (on the part of the refugee, family system, high school paraprofessionals, or postsecondary education administrators) or withholding knowledge of the college application process, can result in potential applicants being classified as out-of-state or international students, both of which dictate financial aid and tuition costs (Tobenkin, 2006; Unangst et al., 2020; Yi et al., 2018). For example, incorrect classification as an international student can result in being required to take the TOEFL to demonstrate English language proficiency and required remedial, non-credit-bearing language courses (Unangst et al., 2020). The additional time needed to complete these courses and the associated costs can prolong degree completion and courses of this type may not be covered by available aid. Incorrect classification as an international or out-of-state student will also result in varying degrees of aid ineligibility.

Discrimination as Barrier. Another meso-level barrier, discrimination occurs across the spectrum of services offered to refugees by resettlement specialists, case managers, and

academic advisors (Khanlou, Shakya, Islam, & Oudeh, 2014). For refugees, “access to higher education is...prohibitive because of…. implicit forms of exclusion” (Baker et al., 2019, p. 9). Cultural identifiers, such as clothing and religious practice, can alienate students, particularly female students (Bacchus, Birman & Trickett, 2001). Socioeconomic background is also a driver of postsecondary education inequality (Détourbe et al., 2018). Further, whether refugees are welcomed into the communities they are resettled in directly affects educational outcomes for refugee youth in particular (McBrien, 2005; Tandon, 2016).

For refugee students in secondary school, discrimination within an education setting can be the greatest barrier to adaptation, and subsequent postsecondary pursuit (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). According to McBrien (2005), rejection within a high school setting increases the likelihood of dropout. Discrimination within a secondary setting can also impact students' interest in participating in school activities and seeking out and assuming leadership roles. Building a portfolio of educational opportunities is important for secondary school students who are considering applying to bachelor’s degree-granting institutions. Furthermore, limitations on secondary school opportunities directly relate to access to more selective postsecondary opportunities.

Isolation by teachers and school policies can result in a lack of information regarding postsecondary education. Roy and Roxas’ (2011) research with secondary school teachers and counselors suggests that viewing refugee students and family systems from a deficit lens results in microaggressions that limit assistance offered to refugee students and family systems as early as initial exploration of postsecondary education as an option. These exclusionary practices can be subtle, like the physical location of ESL courses on a secondary school campus, lack of translators for parents when they meet with school staff, adequate testing materials that are ESL friendly, or labeling refugees with learning disabilities due to lack of academic English skills

(Gitlin, Buedia, Crosland, & Doumbia, 2003; McBrien, 2005; Trueba, Jacobs, & Kirton, 1990). Exclusionary practices can also be very visible, as identified by Lee (2002), whose interviews with educators found that they held perceptions that students embodied negative traits like laziness, not valuing education, and culturally lacking capital. Further complicating this view of refugees as unmotivated or uninterested in education, when teachers and counselors view refugee students and family systems from this deficit perspective, both learning and extracurricular engagement are limited through opportunity withholding (Roy et al., 2011).

Discrimination of this kind "often stems from a lack of accurate information and from cultural misunderstandings" (McBrien, 2005, p. 352). These exclusionary practices and cultural insensitivities have been found to exacerbate depression and low self-esteem among refugees and may very well lead to the withholding of information that would provide a greater likelihood of postsecondary access for refugee students (Bankston et al., 2002; Mosselson, 2002; Trueba et al., 1990).

Refugee students aspiring to attend college reported feeling unwelcomed within the educational setting by academic staff who were unaware, ignorant, and insensitive to both interests and circumstances being navigated (Hannah, 1999). Disturbingly, certain educational tracks (medicine and law) were not encouraged by academic advisors and were "coolly received", while courses of study that were less popular, less prestigious, and less competitive were "greeted more warmly" (Hannah, 1999, p. 159).

Barriers such as discrimination do not only play out in public school settings. Discriminatory assumptions based on race, ethnicity, and gender inequality are a part of the employment process as well. Koyama's (2014) qualitative inquiry of refugee resettlement specialists and local employers found both constructions of gender and stereotypical assumptions based on country of origin permeating employment efforts for refugees. Both resettlement

specialists and employers placed refugee women in employment perceived to fit with "particular assumptions about gender roles in the refugees' countries of origin" (p. 267). Examples included statements from participants that equated to particular work being chosen and deemed to "fit" with stereotypes garnered from images gathered through media such as television and magazines and from "anecdotes from friends" (Koyama, 2014, p. 271). The majority of employment placements were in food, sewing, and manufacturing. In contrast to the statements of resettlement specialists and employers, refugees indicated they did not want to do the work they had been placed in and were eager to instead become educated and learn skills that would lead to a career as opposed to being a wage earner (Koyama, 2014).

The withholding of knowledge by those with an understanding of how to access postsecondary education, a lack of clarity regarding the rights of refugees, and discrimination all create a complex web of barriers that are a direct result of policies and procedures at the macro-level. These interwoven barriers continue on a trajectory that drives barriers found at the more personal micro-level. It is these micro-level barriers that refugees experience most acutely while pursuing access to postsecondary education.

Micro-Level Barriers

Compared to macro- and meso-level barriers, micro-level barriers are more tightly bound to the individual refugee and their lived experiences. These barriers include, but are not limited to: the effects of PTSD and emotional trauma manifesting in ways not conducive to the systemic requirements for educational attainment; existing English language barriers; family dynamics and "unrealistic expectations of parents and students...about the actual opportunities offered by the educational systems" (Escandell et al., 2015, p. 1039); and, the lack of access to adequate knowledge about systemic functions of postsecondary access directly affecting individuals (Hannah, 1999; Schroeder, 2003).

PTSD and Trauma as Barriers. The lingering effects of emotional trauma and PTSD are often silent barriers but can emerge in quite disruptive ways. Potocky (1996) noted that physical or mental traumas that refugees suffered during the events leading to dislocation and to time spent in refugee camps later led to depression. Difficulties with concentration and motivation were more likely to occur in students with refugee backgrounds due to "after-effects of torture or trauma, with physical or psychological symptoms disrupting their ability to concentrate and study" within a postsecondary setting (Hannah, 1999, p. 158). Additionally, trauma and a lack of choice are often the norm for refugees and can further complicate the adaptation process (Yi et al., 2018).

Ryan et al. (2008) found that refugees experience distress when they experience the "loss of major life goals" (p. 9). Humans "need to feel a sense of belonging to a community…they need to engage in meaningful activities in their daily life, to feel they play a useful role in their community and to have goals they feel to be worth striving for" (Ryan et al., 2008, p. 9). Resettled refugees who have postsecondary aspirations and access education through persistence indicate that this sense of belonging mitigates mental health trauma (Fox, Burns, Popovich, Belknap, & Frank-Stromborg, 2004).

English Language as Barrier. As Luu et al. (2019) argued, "linguistic integration among refugees is a priority because English proficiency is a requisite for employment and/or access to postsecondary education" (Luu et al., 2019, p. 8). Unfortunately, one of the primary barriers to refugees' postsecondary educational access, according to Kanno et al. (2010), is the absence of access to the opportunity to become proficient in English and the multitude of barriers enshrined in ESL requirements. Often, refugees enter the U.S. without proficiency in English. ESL courses are encouraged and often provided by resettlement programs however, postsecondary institutional policies and procedures compound linguistic barriers by adding costly steps to the

application and admission process, such as requiring refugee applicants to take the TOEFL, apply as international students, and/or enroll in non-credit bearing ESL coursework that drain financial resources.

Several studies have documented refugee students' experiences with linguistic barriers. Refugees in Kanno et al.'s (2010) study believed that they could overcome linguistic barriers with hard work, and this barrier was within their control. However, they also reported feeling both a "sense of unfairness" and "stigma" when required to enroll in ESL coursework. In another study, "low English language fluency" created an "immediate and acute impact on self-esteem" (Khanlou et al., 2014, p. 123). Further, Kanno et al. (2010) indicated students with "limited English proficiency" had a "tendency to self-eliminate" from considering postsecondary education as an option, which negatively impacted their access to postsecondary education (p. 310).

Mamgain et al.'s (2003) research indicated proficiency in the English language to be the most significant predictor of wages for resettled refugees. However, the second predictor of wage level was having a college degree. High school and technical training did not provide the same increase in wages, regardless of the country of origin (Mamgain et al., 2003).

Family Dynamics and "Unrealistic" Expectations as Barriers. Mamgain et al. (2003) found that refugees may hold assumptions that their experiences and/or education in their home country, or education acquired while in a protracted refugee situation, would be useful to some extent in securing employment in their field of expertise. However, the anticipation of continuing one's education is often unrealized once relocation occurs, given that employment placements often are not conducive to the time required for participation in postsecondary education. Perry et al, (2016) pointed out that "cultural contexts, beliefs, and expectations also shape refugees' access to education" and their decision-making where education is concerned (p. 2).

Resettlement timeframe within an individual's educational journey is important in that youth who are not resettled with enough time to take courses required by college and university admissions requirements, or who do not have access to educational documentation that would demonstrate coursework completed, creates barriers that have implications for access to institutional type, selectivity, and how long financial aid will last (Kanno et al., 2010).

Furthermore, refugees who work to support their families may decide to forgo additional education for a time (Shakya, Guruge, Hynie, Htoo, Akbari, Jandu, Murtaza, Spasevski, Berhane, & Forster, 2014). Refugees can feel pressured to financially support family members (Rumbaut et al., 2001). The opportunity costs of postsecondary education, accruing debt, and losing needed income may be a "price that refugees consider too high to pay for the remote benefits of future earnings" (Ferede, 2018, p. 22). Some refugees recognize the prohibitive cost of postsecondary education, how complicated the financial aid process can be, and that postsecondary education requires family system support, which is confounded by "circumstances outside of their control" (Perry et al., 2016, p. 14). Evans & Fitzgerald (2017) found that while obtaining a high school diploma may take refugees longer, over the course of ten years, they are on par with their U.S.-born peers and once access to postsecondary education is obtained, over a ten-year period, refugees make great strides in college degree attainment and demonstrate both ability and drive to achieve this goal.

Struggling with their own difficulties adjusting to a new culture, parents of refugees may be unable to assist their child with adjustments often necessary for success academically (McBrien, 2005; Ascher, 1985). Parental support of refugee students does not always manifest itself in "typical" American fashion. Parents who are refugees themselves may not be involved in their child's school in the same ways or at the same level of involvement as non-refugee parents (Rumbaut et al., 2001). In a study by Roy et al. (2011), "[f]ew parents were knowledgeable

about....requirements for postsecondary education, even though they were highly motivated to succeed" (p. 532). This perceived lack of involvement may result from language barriers on the part of parents, cultural differences, or a lack of support from the school system that would encourage parental involvement (Vigil & Lopez, 2021; Yi et al., 2018). Roy et al. (2011) research with secondary school teachers and counselors suggests that viewing refugee students and family systems from a deficit lens results in misinterpretation of culture and whether education is valued. In fact, Timm (1994) found this perceived lack of parental involvement is viewed by school administrators, teachers, and guidance counselors to be a lack of interest in a child's education when the exact opposite may be true. Lower levels of participation and the resulting perception of lack of interest can lead to frustration on the part of school administrators and teachers and further exacerbate stereotypes and prejudice (Blakely, 1983). There is the potential for this perceived lack of interest to lead to inaction regarding targeting opportunities or sharing information about postsecondary access with refugee students and families.

Further, educators may be viewed as "experts" regarding education by parents (Timm, 1994). Coupling this perception by parents with a lack of understanding of secondary school personnel's traditional expectations of parental involvement, refugee parents may become dependent on teachers and guidance counselors to provide information necessary for students to pursue and access postsecondary education. Teachers and counselors, in turn, may be poorly equipped to provide such information (Bankston et al., 2002; Mosselson, 2002; Roy et al., 2011; Trueba et al., 1990). However, having the combination of family support and system understanding lessens students' access challenges (Crosnoe & Truly, 2011; Mukiibi, 2015; Vigil & Lopez, 2021). Within their meta-analysis, Mwangi et al., (2021) found families of immigrant students, including refugees, are supportive of education, and are a primary source of support to include aspirational capital.

The Hidden Curriculum of Postsecondary Access as Barrier. While previously discussed at the meso-level, lack of information about the college-going process results in a hidden curriculum of information needed to understand and successfully navigate the postsecondary access process. This hidden curriculum is detrimental to refugees' pursuit of postsecondary education. Hannah's (1999) work with refugees resettled in Australia found that they were unaware of programs to assist them with college applications and were unaware of the admissions qualifications even though specialized processes and information existed. Once aware of these resources, refugees perceived the lack of information sharing as a message that they were not welcome at colleges and universities. Refugees stated that their perceptions of academic staff at university as "ignorant and insensitive was a major problem for students" (Hannah, 1999, p. 164).

According to Perry et al. (2016), refugees who participated in their research "valued education" and had high aspirations for degree attainment (p. 10) but felt "educational opportunity was largely outside" of the individual's control (p. 18). Refugees resettled in Ireland who participated in Brunton et al.'s (2019) research recognized systemic barriers within the Irish tertiary system that hindered their access to educational opportunities at the postsecondary level, and they grew frustrated. These individuals did not lack the desire to pursue postsecondary education, but the "structural, financial, logistical, digital, and social barriers" were challenging to navigate without intentionally structured support (Brunton et al., 2019, p. 405). Khanlou et al.'s (2014) community-based participatory research with refugee youth in Canada also identified "broader systemic factors that impact self-esteem (negatively) to include discrimination, linguistic barriers, and economic difficulties" (p. 123).

Uptin et al.'s (2016) research with 12 former refugee youth resettled in Australia were determined to pursue opportunities despite perceived silencing through discrimination and being

viewed as “victims” (p. 613). In their study, refugees exhibited “a sense of agency in finding ways to negotiate their adverse circumstances to find an education for themselves” (p. 600). McBrien (2005) also found that “negative attitudes and experiences create short-term but not necessarily long-term consequences in refugee students’ academic goals and career aspirations (p. 351). With parental support, peer support, positive role models within secondary education settings and the community at large, refugees are more likely to “maintain their goals and academic standards” (McBrien, 2005, p. 351).

Barriers at the micro-level are manifestations of both macro- and meso-level barriers on an individual level. From policies that push quick employment to perceptions that result in misguided assumptions, access to postsecondary education becomes buried under layers of barriers ultimately negotiated and navigated by people who aspire to obtain knowledge. To begin understanding how refugees who access postsecondary education negotiate and navigate these barriers, researchers must foreground individuals’ lived experiences, which requires applying an asset-based lens. In this study, Yosso’s community cultural wealth model (2005) provides the asset-based, conceptual framework needed to reveal how refugees’ postsecondary aspirations become realities.

Conceptual Framework

Extant literature identifies barriers to postsecondary access for refugees. Many of the same barriers discussed in this literature impede access to postsecondary education among other individuals, families, and communities who remain marginalized and underrepresented in U.S. higher education. Unlike the majority of the literature about refugees, scholars in this broader area of inquiry have reframed deficit-based perceptions about postsecondary access among underrepresented students, asking: “How do potential underrepresented student populations successfully navigate postsecondary access”? "Yosso’s community cultural wealth framework

centers the experiences of individuals from systemically marginalized groups" (Knaphus-Soran, Hiramori, & Litzler, 2021 p. 2). Accordingly, researchers have found that potential college students are drawing upon and utilizing community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) along the continuum of the postsecondary access process (Means et al., 2016). Increasingly, a number of studies focused on underrepresented and/or marginalized groups employ community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) to better understand how individuals overcome barriers to and persist within postsecondary education (Dietz et al., 2021). However, much of the literature concerning refugees falls short of exploring the capital refugees possess. This inquiry employed an asset-based theoretical framework, Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model, to gain a clearer understanding of the lived experiences of refugees accessing postsecondary education within the U.S.

Through critiquing how Pierre Bourdieu's (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) theory of cultural capital applied a deficit lens to Communities of Color and viewed them as "culturally poor" (Yosso, 2005, p. 76), Tara Yosso saw the need for a model that would bring to light the under-valued capital marginalized communities possess. Drawing upon Critical Race Theory, Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model is built upon the premise that Communities of Color bring cultural capital, not always recognized or valued by traditional cultural capital theory, to bear on the structural inhibitors within the society they live. It is this capital, demonstrated via six identified forms, which marginalized individuals draw upon to "survive and resist" and can be used to empower (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Community cultural wealth can be applied to individuals for whom the network has been narrowed or compromised but who have built the capacity to act through navigational and aspirational capital (Yrigollen-Robbins et al., 2022). Intended for use with People of Color, the use of community cultural wealth has been expanded to include underrepresented populations within specific postsecondary majors and

those utilizing postsecondary support services (Dietz, Wishah, Douglas, & McCray, 2021; Knaphus-Soran, Hiramori, & Litzler, 2021; Samuelson & Litzler, 2016). It has also been used to explore the role social networks consisting of community members play in participants' college choice process (Martinez, 2012).

Dietz et al. (2021) point to additional considerations to add new forms of capital to the community cultural wealth model stemming from non-native English speakers and those within the LGBTQ community. However, there does remain a gap in the literature utilizing community cultural wealth as a theoretical framework with refugee populations who collectively and individually represent a number of marginalized groups simultaneously (Hiramori, Knaphus-Soran, & Litzler, 2021, p. 3). This study seeks to demonstrate the existence and utilization of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) within the refugee community in pursuit of postsecondary education.

Community cultural wealth consists of the following forms of capital: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant. Aspirational capital is “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers”(Yosso, 2005, p.77). Knaphus et al., (2021) expand on this definition by Yosso (2005) and add that Aspirational Capital is “the ability to overcome barriers and persist in education” (p. 2). With this in mind, refugees seeking to access postsecondary education in the U.S. have already demonstrated aspirational capital in that they see possibilities beyond the circumstances they left behind, as reflected in the existing literature that gives voice to refugees’ desire and aspiration to pursue postsecondary education (Brunton et al., 2019; Dietz, 2021; Hannah, 1999; Khanlou et al., 2014; McBrien, 2005; Perry et al., 2016; Uptin et al., 2016). Additionally, Yosso notes that aspirational capital is drawn upon “often without the objective means to attain” (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). It is for these reasons, “maintaining hope”, “without objective means” and “in the face of

real or perceived barriers" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77-78) and "the ability to overcome barriers and persist in education" that aspirational capital and the role it plays in the lives of refugees is of interest for this particular inquiry (Knaphus et al., 2012, p.2).

Navigational capital refers to "skills" called upon to "maneuver through social institutions" not created with marginalized groups in mind and often permeated by racism (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Knaphus et al., (2021) expand on this definition by Yosso (2005) as well and defines Navigational Capital as "the ability to locate and utilize the information and support necessary to navigate institutions designed within dominant paradigms" (p. 2). This particular type of capital is closely tied to resilience (how individuals survive and thrive after stressful or traumatic events) and is seen in research exploring refugees' post-resettlement outcomes. Because navigational capital uniquely combines both inner strength and the ability to mentally formulate a plan to overcome or work past a situation in the face of adversity, exploring how refugees engage this capital as they attempt to access postsecondary education may provide greater clarity to understanding how barriers are negotiated and overcome. In the literature that exists, barriers, real and perceived, have been identified, and yet, refugees have shown their ability to enact navigational capital in their day-to-day lived experiences as they support and provide for their family systems through information gathering and sense-making, caregiving, working, and other essential activities (Shakya et al., 2014).

Yosso's community cultural wealth model consists of four additional forms of capital. While "these forms of capital are not mutually exclusive or static" (2005, p. 77), it is outside of the scope of this inquiry to explore how each of these forms of capital is employed by refugees in the postsecondary access process. However, a brief introduction to these additional forms of capital is necessary to provide context for the proposed study's focus on aspirational and navigational capital.

Linguistic capital illustrates how marginalized individuals communicate in ways that are not validated by the educational structure and how having command of more than one language, or set of communication skills promotes the building and growth of multiple social tools (Yosso, 2005). Refugee populations often speak multiple languages and have communication skills beyond those recognized with legitimacy in their resettlement community (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2019). These additional linguistic skills serve as tools that provide support to both individuals and families. However, as seen in the preceding paragraphs, these linguistic skills are not viewed with much value, if any.

Familial capital expands beyond the immediate family bonds and encompasses a community and the resources it has within it (Yosso, 2005). Often, refugee families are resettled to an area as a collective and in communities where refugees from the same background have already been resettled (ORR, 2012). This deep engagement with those beyond the nuclear family structure provides refugees with support structures. However, refugees are not always resettled in this way, and relying on a system of kinship may not be possible.

Two areas of capital for which very little research exists concerning refugees are social capital and resistant capital. According to Yosso's model (2005), social capital refers to "networks of people and community resources" through which "instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions" originates (p. 79). In fact, many of the barriers refugees face and presented in existing literature speak to a lack of social capital as defined by Yosso (2005) where "peer and other social contact to provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions" exist (p.79). Resistant capital refers to "those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Given the circumstances that resulted in individuals finding themselves in a refugee

situation and the resettlement process, both social capital and resistant capital may not be as strong as other forms of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005).

Conclusion

Refugees' postsecondary educational needs, interest in, and challenges to access remain at best, under-researched (Hannah, 1999) and at worst, "largely ignored in higher education research, policy, and practice" (Yi et al., 2018, p. 9). This lack of empirical literature related to refugees and how they access postsecondary education serves to continue silencing and ignoring calls for equal access by refugees and their allies. What literature does exist relies on deficit models and focuses primarily on the power of barriers as opposed to the tenacity of refugees as they face systemic issues that impede their ability to exercise the aspirational and navigational capital they possess. This study contributed to an asset-based perspective on postsecondary access among refugees by taking a closer look at how refugees exercise their aspirational capital and their navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) to access postsecondary education despite identified barriers.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological approach for this study including participant criteria and sampling procedures,data collection and data analysis processes, and trustworthiness and quality assurance procedures. This chapter also articulates challenges to conducting qualitative research with refugee populations. Additionally, I share the perspectives, beliefs, and perceptions that frame my "seeing" as a researcher, describe my prior involvement with the refugee community, and discuss how I consistently considered my own knowing and understanding of the experience of accessing higher education. Finally, I discuss the initial limitations and delimitations of the study.

Overview of Methods

This phenomenological study focused on understanding more deeply the lived experiences of resettled refugees as they accessed postsecondary education and how they utilized aspirational and navigational capital in the accessing process. Past studies regarding access for marginalized or underrepresented students have overlooked the refugee population as a collective group who may wish to pursue postsecondary education and who face barriers that preclude that from happening (Baker et al., 2019). By employing a phenomenological approach, this study advanced a deeper understanding of resettled refugees' lived experiences around accessing postsecondary education and how they employed the capital they possess to confront a variety of barriers identified through previous research. In the course of this study, community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) was the theoretical framework identified as instrumental in the exploration of this phenomenon and provided the theoretical concepts and ideas that supported thought centered on the phenomenon (Vagle, 2018).

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following questions:

- What are the experiences of resettled refugees in the postsecondary exploration, application, and enrollment processes?
- Do resettled refugees encounter barriers in the postsecondary exploration, application, and enrollment processes?
- How, if at all, do resettled refugees utilize navigational and aspirational capital to negotiate exploration, application, and enrollment processes?

Barriers to Research with Refugees

Voutira et al., (2007) have "observed a trend that fewer doctoral theses are written on refugees specifically or on specific groups of refugees" (p. 163). Research regarding refugees can be challenging for several reasons. First, "refugees are becoming an 'endangered species' with fewer individuals being officially recognized under the 1951 Refugee Convention and permanent protection being replaced by temporary protection" such as asylum status (Voutira et al., 2007, p. 163). This creates an entirely new set of challenges for displaced individuals who are no longer afforded the rights they are entitled to under the Convention.

Refugees are often included in research on "migrant" or "immigrant" populations without regard being given to the nuances that make their arrival in the U.S. different. Interestingly, while research focused on migrant and undocumented individuals has increased, there is a lack of research centered on those with actual refugee status in comparison.

Refugee populations are extremely diverse in cultural systems, religious affiliations, and beliefs regarding gender roles and educational attainment, which complicates research efforts further. "As refugee communities emerge out of crisis, they are frequently made up of individuals who do not share common origins, with fractured family relations and forced together by accident thus making participation a complex endeavor" (Dona, 2007, p. 217).

Additionally, participant responses are dictated by their interest in the research topic, and their comfort with sharing personal information with a researcher who may be seen as a member of a dominant group within U.S. society. The interpersonal skills of the researcher can contribute greatly to the comfort level of participants and communicating interest in their lived experience via both verbal and non-verbal communication is imperative. Finally, unrecognized bias on the part of the researcher can also impact the analysis and interpretation of the findings. Bridling (which involves the essence of bracketing), post-reflexing, and considering what frames one's "seeing" are all necessary to continually combat assumptions and judgments veiled as analysis (Vagle, 2018). All of these things play a part in the challenges of conducting research with individuals with refugee status.

Ethical Considerations

Any research involving human participants requires careful thought and consideration of ethical issues. This is even more the case when conducting a study that involves refugee participants (Hynes, 2003; McBrien, 2005). Hynes (2003) cautions researchers who conduct studies that interview refugees solely for the sake of academic research and encourages introspection that determines "whether we research *for*, *on*, or *with* refugees" (p. 14). Along this same vein, careful thought should be given to eliciting information during the interview that may surface experiences or situations that can retraumatize participants needlessly.

Methodological Approach

"Qualitative research methodologies are now well-established important modes of inquiry" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 1) that have evolved significantly to include a broad variety of methods of data collection and analysis since their essential elements were first introduced by Paul Lazersfield in the early 1920s (Bailey, 2014). Regardless of the method utilized, qualitative research is "pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of

people" (Marshall et al., 2006, p.2). By using a qualitative approach to explore the barriers that refugees confront post-resettlement in the U.S. and how navigational and aspirational capital are utilized in the process of accessing postsecondary education, the lived experiences of refugee participants can be more openly explored. Because employing navigational and aspirational capital has rarely been studied with refugee populations previously, the findings of this study are emergent and therefore, more thoroughly explored through qualitative methodologies (Creswell, 2014; Moustakas, 1994).

While qualitative methodologies have thus far been the primary approaches relied upon in understanding the experiences of refugee populations, there is still much left to understand, regarding the postsecondary access experiences of those individuals who are resettled in the U.S. (Mwangi et al., 2021). Creswell (2009) notes that a qualitative approach is merited when exploring a topic where the "important variables to examine" (p. 18) are still not fully known and the theoretical framework has not been applied to a particular group.

Post-Intentional Phenomenology

Dona (2007) encourages those who pursue research concerning refugees to consider utilizing methods that are "concerned with the representation of refugee voices/perspectives in ways that promote refugees' views and challenge nation-centric ones" (p. 223). Phenomenology is a qualitative methodological approach that lends itself to describing how people experience a phenomenon and what meaning the individual makes of the experience, including perceptions, thoughts, memories, and emotions (Marshall, 2006).

Results of this phenomenological inquiry were developed via data collected from face-to-face (virtual), semi-structured, in-depth interviews, and a post-reflexing journal collected before, during, and post-interviews (Vagle, 2018). Semi-structured interviews, while relying on questions that align with the overarching basis for the inquiry, provide opportunities for nuance

among participants, flexibility, and engaged responsiveness by participants, and therefore, increase what "makes up the phenomenon" (Creswell, 2014; Vagle, 2018).

This study approached the phenomenon of interest from a post-intentional perspective to "capture productions and provocations of the phenomenon as it is lived" and focused on the connections to, and within, the phenomenon as opposed to only using existing theoretical frameworks and constructs, or even scholarly literature to date, to "explain or predict what might take place" (Vagle, 2018, p. 142). Because so much remains to be understood about how refugees resettled in the U.S. experience the phenomenon of postsecondary access in all of its complexity and nuance, a post-intentional phenomenological perspective created space for "situating the phenomenon in the multiple, partial, and varied contexts in which it tends to manifest" (Vagle, 2018, p. 142).

Post-intentional phenomenology also encourages considering contexts, such as dominant narratives, assumptions, policies, processes, and micro-contexts that come to bear on the phenomenon as experienced and how these contexts can provoke, produce, and shape the phenomenon (Vagle, 2018). Additionally, considering how an exploration of the phenomenon can encourage, affect, and create social change is an important component of post-intentional phenomenology. According to Vagle (2018), this is best accomplished by critically thinking through which theorists or theoretical ideas could be best suited to "both affect social change" within the context of this study and also "explicitly focus on critiquing, changing, or disrupting social norms, discourses, and traditions" (p. 147). Finally, post-intentional phenomenology expects the researcher to not "set aside prior knowledge, assumptions, and beliefs about the phenomenon, but to explore how they play a part in producing" it (Vagle, 2018, p. 153-154). Before, throughout, and after the data collection process, I created a post-reflexive journal to explore and question assumptions of the phenomenon, what was surprising, what is "normal",

and what beliefs, perceptions, and perspectives one will not shed (Vagle, 2018). Doing so allowed me, with close connections with the phenomenon and the population, to better understand what "frames one's seeing" (Vagle, 2018) and loosen those frames from having the power to unknowingly craft the analysis of the phenomenon.

Sample Selection

Population and Participant Criteria

This study employed a criterion sample of 7 resettled refugee-status persons who completed secondary education or equivalency within the U.S. and who had completed, are enrolled in, or have attempted to enroll in, postsecondary education in the U.S. Criterion sampling was utilized given this approach "works well when all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon" (Creswell, 2014, p. 128) or "experienced the phenomenon of interest" (Vagle, 2018, p. 150).

To participate in this study, individuals identified as persons who first arrived in the U.S. as children, adolescents, or adults under refugee status. These individuals relocated from a variety of countries because of persecution, civil unrest, government instability, or a combination of these things and therefore, met the federal definition of "refugee." All participants were 18 years of age or older at the time of recruitment for this study. Participant selection was based upon representation of the "range of multiple, partial, and varied contexts" within the phenomenon as identified by the research questions (Vagle, 2018, p. 147). In other words, it was important to select participants across the continuum of postsecondary access. In an effort to meet saturation, I planned to increase the sample size beyond 10 participants by recruiting three additional participants as needed.

Participant Recruitment

Over the last 10 years, the community surrounding Roanoke, Virginia has welcomed 1,644 refugees from more than 20 countries (Refugee Processing Center, 2011-2022). Refugees in the Roanoke region may have been resettled from any number of countries around the globe. However, refugees from the countries listed in Table 1 were directly resettled in Virginia.

Table 1. Country of Origin Prior to Resettlement in Virginia and Total Number of Individuals Resettled Between October 1, 2011, and March 21, 2022

October 1, 2011, Through March 31, 2022	Country Totals Resettled in Virginia
Afghanistan	1371
Armenia	6
Belarus	1
Bhutan	1865
Burma	550
Burundi	86
Cambodia	5
Cameroon	1
China	8
Colombia	172
Congo	9
Cuba	240
Dem. Rep. Congo	1634
El Salvador	375
Eritrea	371
Ethiopia	68
Guatemala	62
Honduras	68

India	1
Iran	588
Iraq	2907
Ivory Coast	22
Kazakhstan	5
Kenya	4
Korea, North	3
Kyrgyzstan	14
Libera	3
Moldova	4
Nepal	5
Pakistan	228
Palestine	26
Republic of South Sudan	33
Russia	25
Rwanda	32
Sierra Leone	2
Somalia	424
Sri Lanka (Ceylon)	2
Sudan	311
Syria	644
Tunisia	1
Turkmenistan	5
Uganda	10
Ukraine	122
Uzbekistan	6

Venezuela	15
Vietnam	14
Yemen	26

Many of these individuals came as family units. School-age children were enrolled in local city and county elementary, middle, and high schools. Therefore, this local community has many members within it who may be experiencing or may have experienced the phenomenon of interest. Additionally, within the geographic area, multiple options exist for postsecondary educational attainment and include technical and workforce certifications, community colleges, public and private universities, and professional schools. As a post-intentional phenomenological study, it is imperative to "select research participants who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation, whom you think will be able to provide a thorough and rich description of the phenomenon, and who collectively represent the range of multiple, partial, and varied contexts that you have identified" (Vagle, 2018, p.147).

All recruitment materials, contact and scheduling documents, informed consent, and protocol documents were piloted with two former refugees whose first language is not English. Communication was reviewed for understanding by potential participants, particularly around informed consent, and with special consideration to ideally eliminate, if not minimize, language that may appear coercive. All documents were drafted for initial review and were revised after review for clarity and readability. To conduct interviews with participants, I submitted an application to conduct research involving human subjects to the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board.

Study participants were recruited via the following methods. Local refugee support organizations and first-point-of-contact agencies were informed, via emailed letter, about the

study, its purpose and aims, the participant criteria required, and how potential participants could contact the author (Appendix A). Families and individuals being served by those organizations were given a similar letter via email, if that method was available, and shared in paper format, as well (Appendix B). Within the letter, multiple methods for indicating potential interest in participating were included.

A recruitment flier (Appendix K) was distributed to Roanoke Refugee Partnership and Blue Ridge Literacy contacts and via electronic communication platforms for further sharing. Flyers were also distributed within service provider physical space and business locations frequently patronized by refugee populations. This included local restaurants, food markets, laundry facilities, and social gathering places. The recruitment flier was also posted on information boards at two local institutions of postsecondary education. This flier included participation criteria, contact information for the researcher, and both a link and QR code for accessing the online demographic questionnaire (Appendix D).

As a result of these two methods, a total of five participants completed the demographic questionnaire. Two participants were excluded given their current immigration status and were communicated with (Appendix E). Three participants met the inclusion criteria and were contacted initially by email, or text, depending on the method they indicated was their preferred method of contact on the demographic questionnaire. All participants indicated they had seen the flier posted in their community and utilized the QR code to learn more about the study and ultimately completed the demographic survey. From the three participants who were determined to be eligible for participation, five more participants were identified through snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). These five individuals were sent information about the study and were offered the online demographic survey to determine eligibility. Four of these individuals completed the demographic survey and were determined to be eligible to participate in the study.

One potential participant did initially respond to contact but subsequently decided not to participate. In all, seven individuals participated in the study.

Data Collection

I employed phenomenological interviewing due to its philosophical tradition of studying the lived experiences of individuals and how they understand those experiences. According to Marshall et al. (2006), phenomenological interviewing is useful when attempting to attribute the meaning individuals prescribe to a phenomenon. Mosselson (2010) has identified this kind of interviewing to be particularly successful with refugees. With this in mind, I used this approach to understand how refugees experience the phenomenon of postsecondary education access.

Selected participants were contacted via the method they indicated they preferred to discuss their continued interest in participation and, if appropriate, to solidify a time to discuss the study and informed consent. Once the selected participant responded by scheduling a day and time to connect, a meeting was scheduled to take place via a mutually agreed upon virtual platform. At the outset of the appointment, previously voluntarily submitted demographic information was verified. The informed consent document (Appendix D) was shared with them via email prior to the first scheduled appointment and via screen share during the appointment. Because written informed consent forms assume literacy in English, each potential participant had the informed consent read aloud in its entirety at the beginning of the first appointment and the researcher answered all questions regarding the study. The following was incorporated into gaining informed consent and explained to each participant: the specific parameters and purpose of the study; the ability to participate and to withdraw at any point in the process without any personal ramifications; the minimization of risks to the participant; and the steps taken to protect the participant's identity (Marshall et al., 2006). Informed consent was obtained verbally from potential participants who agreed to be a part of the study. This was an important part of the

consent process given that refugees may not be comfortable with the informed consent process and may see the process of adding their signature to a document to imply a responsibility to the researcher that is not required. Sensitivity was shown to individuals for whom signing documentation may seem dangerous based on cultural beliefs and values (Marshall et al., 2006). Also, refugees may feel pressured or a duty to participate in the study as opposed to a desire to contribute to the knowledge and the process of voicing their experiences to a broader audience. Great care was taken to facilitate checking the comfort level of participants throughout the data collection process.

To protect participant confidentiality, participants selected a pseudonym for use within the results section of the study. This research followed rules and procedures for the protection of human subjects as dictated by the institutional review board at Virginia Tech. A copy of the IRB approval letter (Appendix L) is included in the appendices.

This qualitative analysis relied on face-to-face (virtual), semi-structured, in-depth interviews to "capture productions and provocations" of accessing postsecondary education as it is lived by the participants. All interviews with participants were semi-structured with the intent of gathering views, beliefs, experiences, and knowledge from them. Over three months, February 2023 through April 2023, in-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted via Zoom. One participant completed a single interview lasting approximately an hour and a half, at his request. All other participants were interviewed twice for approximately one hour per interview.

The first interview focused on educational background and, time permitting, began exploring the experience of accessing postsecondary education, what challenges were experienced, and the educational expectations participants had for themselves. A second interview served to revisit any experiences shared during the first interview and continued exploring how aspirational capital was utilized during the postsecondary access process and

delved into learning about how navigational capital was utilized in their pursuit of postsecondary education. At the conclusion of the final interview, all participants were given a $25 gift card sent via email or mail.

A table located within the appendix (Appendix H) details more specifically the interview protocol and areas of focused and sub-focused research that provided the basis for corresponding questions. All interviews were video recorded and are stored on a password-protected hard drive. The initial interview, and any subsequent interviews, were transcribed verbatim and all transcriptions are stored on a password-protected hard drive. All interviews were arranged on days and at times that were mutually agreed upon and utilized the same virtual format throughout the interview process. All interview procedures were performed in such a way that took great care to minimize both the risk to confidentiality, as well as the impact on participants' daily lives.

Prior to, during, and post-data collection, a post-reflexive journal was kept by the researcher. This chronicling of both pre-understandings and developing understandings of the phenomenon was a part of the analysis process and was utilized to

> "move with and through the researcher's intentional relationships with the phenomenon—not simply in the researcher, in the participants, in the text, or in their power positions, but in the dynamic intentional relationships that tie participants, the researcher, the context, broader social issues, and matters, the produced text, and their positionalities together" (Vagle, 2018, p.32).

Data Analysis Procedures

Qualitative data analysis generally "proceeds from the central assumption that there is an *essence* to an experience that is shared with others who have also had that experience" (Marshall et al., 2006, p.18). Vagle (2018) pushed a bit further and moved beyond the concept of *essence* to a place of understanding the phenomenon as both produced and producing, provoked and

provoking, moving through and making up the phenomenon itself throughout social structures. This assumption provided an overarching structure to the data analysis phase of this inquiry and set the stage for "distinguishing lived experience from the phenomenon" of pursuing access to postsecondary education in the U.S. (Vagle, 2018, p. 140).

Data analysis followed guidance provided by Vagle (2018). Utilizing a post-intentional phenomenological approach requires one to employ theory, post-reflection writings of the researcher, and the phenomenological material gathered (Vagle, 2018). For this study, "phenomenological material" refers to interview transcripts. Analysis was conducted via whole-part-whole analysis.

First, all interviews conducted were transcribed verbatim. I then listened to and viewed the recorded interviews while reading through all transcriptions line-by-line to verify the accuracy of the transcribed data. After transcribing each interview verbatim and verifying their accuracy, all transcripts were uploaded into Atlas.ti Qualitative Analysis Software for organizational and coding purposes. Once uploaded, data was arranged according to participant, interview sequence, and particular research area covered within each interview. I read over each transcript as a whole, in its entirety, to become reacquainted with the material (Vagle, 2018). This process afforded me the opportunity to get an overall picture of the phenomenon of interest and how experienced by the participants. Saldaña (2013) indicated this process can be identified as structural coding and provides a "grand tour" overview of the data (p. 73). I then proceeded with line-by-line readings of each line of each participant's transcript and in this process began making note of text that may have relevance or provide enlightenment of the phenomenon within the experiences shared. Throughout this process, I noted post-reflexive thoughts about the phenomenon as experienced by participants. This process was replicated with each participant's transcript until I had completed one round of careful line-by-line reading of each individual's

interview (Vagle, 2018). During this process, I highlighted lines of text that resonated with the posed research questions and noted text that resonated with scholarly literature to date. I also noted text that surfaced aspects of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) operating within the phenomenon. I made comments within the comment section for each line of text that surfaced a question or a thought of what meaning the text might hold as it pertains to the phenomenon.

In a second line-by-line reading of the texts, I gathered my post-reflexive writings, notes, and voice-recorded notes, along with scholarly writings centered around community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), to explore the data in ways that call into question my propensity to lean on "either or thinking" (Vagle, 2018) and challenged myself to delve deeply into the uncertainties of the phenomena while probing into what seemed obvious and taken for granted. This step in the data analysis process also encompassed thinking with theory (Vagle, 2018) - in this case, community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) - and aided in creating analytic thoughts about the ways phenomena exist and are constructed within various sociocultural contexts and how they singularly and collectively conceal power dynamics.

This step in the analysis process allows one to deconstruct the wholes of the gathered phenomenological material by "carefully and persistently" considering the whole-part-whole analysis and my post-reflexive material and exploring what about the phenomenon has yet to be considered and how might I, as the researcher, have leaned into my own "understanding" or taken the safer route in my analysis instead of embracing the uncertainty of what surfaces in the data (Vagle, 2018). Concurrently, a reconsideration of the use of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) as a theoretical construct is warranted. This process intensifies the deliberate and intentional use of this particular theoretical framework and the specific forms of capital, aspirational and navigational capital, chosen for this study.

Along with thinking with theory (Vagle, 2018) during the analysis process, I incorporated considerations and critical thinking of my assumptions and where I envisioned connections and disconnections, and my initial interpretations of the data as it materialized throughout the gathering process.

A third line-by-line reading involved reading participants' transcripts and looking for themes within each participant's experience but also noting those themes that span across the experiences of all participants within the study. I crafted preliminary descriptive headings for these overarching themes as well as for the more nuanced themes that appeared within and throughout each participant's phenomenological material. The text that accompanied each theme was combined across all participants and read with a refocus on the tenets of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and my analytic notes.

This iterative process of thinking with theory, considering my post-reflections, and engaging with the phenomenological material took place over the course of four months and led to the following emergent themes.

Situating My Positionality Through Post-reflection

It is important to consider my pre-understandings, assumptions and beliefs, perceptions and perspectives, bottom lines, and the frames through which I see the phenomenon and contexts where it exists. This is a process I continued to visit over the course of this study. I have had sustained engagement with both postsecondary access for marginalized and underrepresented populations and with refugee populations who have resettled within the U.S. I have counted it an immense privilege to have worked in the postsecondary education sector for more than 20 years, with much of that time spent standing in allyship with underrepresented aspiring and current postsecondary student populations and their family systems. My lived experiences of postsecondary access have led me to believe I have a duty to share the knowledge and

understanding of the education system with others and to serve as an encourager, supporter, advocate, navigator, and champion for those who are battling systemic barriers to postsecondary education. I have struggled to stay mindful of respecting the autonomy of others as they work through their decision-making process where educational aspirations and opportunities are concerned. I believe that access to postsecondary education is restricted through the complexity of a myriad of systems, none of which are designed with underrepresented populations in mind.

My trajectory as a first-generation/low-income student, with experience living and teaching abroad in country in the Global South, who has devoted a large majority of my career focused on postsecondary access for underrepresented populations, and who volunteers with refugee populations in the city in which I reside, have all woven together to shape my interest in, and concern for, the lack of postsecondary educational access for those individuals who often remain powerless and under-educated after resettling in the U.S.

Over these years, I have seen very little change to the benefit of marginalized and underrepresented populations. While resources are available, the trickle-down of information, setting aside of barriers, and simplification of some aspects of the process, have not occurred at the level needed to make real change.

I believe access to higher education is a human right and that knowledge should not be for sale. Nor should it be difficult to obtain due to bureaucratic nuance and should be readily available at each and every level desired. It should not be “gate-kept”, partitioned out, or selectively offered. This is non-negotiable for me. I would like nothing more than to have my research questions not be questions at all but we are not there yet. Postsecondary access is complex, composed of hidden boxes to check, forbidden without reason, a trophy awarded to winners of a game that not all are given the rules for, if they are invited to participate at all.

This is where I exist. These are the experiences through which my understanding of postsecondary access is framed. These are the positionalities that shape the form of this inquiry.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study has both limitations and delimitations. Participants were drawn from the local refugee population, had completed a high school diploma from within the U.S., had interest in pursuing postsecondary education, and/or currently were actively pursuing or had pursued postsecondary education within the U.S. This eliminated individuals who had come into the U.S. having completed secondary educational attainment from another country. While being able to have a deeper understanding of the experiences of those who access postsecondary education without a high school diploma or GED from the U.S. would be of value, it is outside of the scope of this current study.

Drawing from the local area limited potential participants to a smaller population of refugees and narrowed exposure to refugee populations who have migrated out of the area after resettlement and may have influenced how barriers to postsecondary access are experienced. Because snowball sampling became necessary as an avenue for recruitment, potential participants who did not have a network of local refugees they are connected with may have been overlooked (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Given the population of current or former refugees who are located in the geographic area, and who fit the participant criteria, may not result in data that is generalizable beyond those participating in the study (Creswell, 2014). However, this study did not aim to understand all the populations who are refugees in the area or beyond. This study is situated in the discipline of higher education and does not aim to be generalizable.

Not focusing on one particular group of refugees (based on geographic area, country of origin, religious beliefs, and gender) was a limitation of this study. It is the experience of the phenomenon across and among the diverse refugee population that was of interest for this study.

A broad understanding of the experience of refugees as a whole provides a base of experiential information that can be built upon in future studies.

Responses of participants were only as in-depth as their comfort in responding to and answering the interview questions and their willingness to disclose personal information. Additionally, the presence of a researcher may have also affected the responses of the participants. Gender of the researcher may have also impacted the level to which male-identifying refugees were willing to participate (Bloch, 1999). Refugee populations in Bloch's (1999) study of three case study groups in Britain describe interviewed refugees as being suspicious of what would be done with the information shared and what possible repercussions could arise as a result of participating. This fear of retaliation or of having information shared that could endanger them may have limited participation.

By choosing to focus on the access experience, to include information gathering, application process, and enrollment process, other questions and aspects of the postsecondary process were not given the same exploration. In an effort to explore as much of the refugee postsecondary access experience as possible without adding to the complexity and nuance of the process, these three areas were given preference in this study. Findings from this study provide deeper clarity to these aspects of the process and shed light on where future research can focus within the complexity of postsecondary access.

Also, by focusing on aspirational and navigational capital, and not purposely inquiring about other forms of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), the level at which other capital came to bear on individual experiences of the phenomenon of interest were not as deeply explored, and was a delimitation of this study.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the methodology that was used in this study, identification of participants, data collection and analysis procedures, and trustworthiness and quality assurance procedures. In addition, I discussed my positionality as a researcher and noted the limitations and delimitations of this study.

Chapter Four will consist of an in-depth analysis of the participants' responses and findings of this post-intentional phenomenological study. Participants' experiences as described through the interview process and the resultant major themes identified through data analysis will be presented.

In Chapter Five, I will discuss how findings connect to the research questions, how findings illustrate the utilization of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), and compare and connect major themes to the current literature. I will conclude by discussing the limitations of the study, the implications of the findings for secondary and postsecondary practitioners, school administrators, and community service partners, implications for federal policy, and areas for future research. The chapter will conclude with a final reflection and conclusion.

Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter provides in-depth narrative profiles of the seven individuals who participated in this study. This chapter also presents the emergent themes and major findings of this post-intentional phenomenological study.

Phenomenology, as an approach, seeks to understand a phenomenon through the voice of those living in, with, and through the phenomenon of interest. For this study, the phenomenon of accessing postsecondary education as a current or former refugee is understood more fully through the stories told, experiences conveyed, feelings and thoughts explored, and hopes, dreams, and aspirations shared. A deeper understanding of what is experienced by refugees as they traverse the postsecondary access landscape through the lens of an asset-based framework, community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), provides a more nuanced understanding of educational trajectories. To surface a deeper understanding, this phenomenological study employed the following research questions:

- What are the experiences of resettled refugees in the postsecondary exploration, application, and enrollment processes?
- Do resettled refugees encounter barriers in the postsecondary exploration, application, and enrollment processes?
- How, if at all, do resettled refugees utilize navigational and aspirational capital to negotiate exploration, application, and enrollment processes?

Summary of Participants

Participants consisted of three women and four men ranging from age 21 to age 42. A table detailing participant profiles is included in the appendices (Appendix M). Study participants were resettled to the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. from three primary global regions (Central Africa, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia) as a result of conflicts spanning years

and running the gamut of human-instigated discord. Each individual came to the U.S. with limited to no English proficiency and with some level of education gained from either their home country or while in a protracted refugee context. The level of education varied due to situational factors at the time of displacement, resources available in protracted refugee locations, and age before resettlement.

All were part of an existing family unit that was resettled intact except for any older siblings who were determined to be independent adults by USCIS. Three of the participants joined previously resettled extended family members upon arrival to the U.S. Additionally, each family unit was resettled by a local resettlement organization and received the services and benefits afforded to refugees under federal legislation, regulations, and guidelines that existed at the time of resettlement. At the time of interview, all participants had graduated from secondary school within the U.S. and had accessed postsecondary education before study participation, with four having already completed a bachelor's degree. Three of these participants had also completed master's degrees. The remaining three participants continued to work on acquiring a bachelor's degree. As a whole, the study participants represented the "range of multiple, partial, and varied contexts" of the phenomenon identified (Vagle, 2018, p.147).

Participant Narrative Profiles

Without understanding, in their own words, the experiences of aspiring to and accessing postsecondary education by participants in this study, we cannot contextualize our understanding of the efforts of refugees and former refugees. Nor can we adequately situate an understanding of how a theoretical construct, like community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), comes to bear upon and can be utilized to the advantage of those who possess it. The following participant profiles provide a glimpse into the multiple and varied contexts (Vagle, 2018) in which refugees' and

former refugees' experiences of postsecondary aspiration and navigation are shaped by the immersion of families into a system that is new to them.

Yosef

Yosef, 25 years of age, was born in 1998 in a refugee camp in Nepal after his parents fled Bhutan when the King of Bhutan forced those of Nepalese descent to leave the country. For more than 11 years, Yosef, who is the oldest child, lived with his family in a protracted refugee setting in Nepal with limited access to resources like food, healthcare, and education. According to Yosef, he and other children in the camp attended a basic school where they learned "British English" and other subjects like mathematics at an elementary level. By the time Yosef left Nepal, he had an elementary understanding of mathematics, could speak some English, and even read at a very basic level.

On September 18, 2009, Yosef arrived in the U.S. with his parents, younger brother and sister, and his grandmother. It is a trip he recalled with wonder and amazement given it was his first time on an airplane and his first time to see skyscrapers. Upon arrival to their resettlement city, Yosef and his family were picked up at the airport by local refugee resettlement agency staff and some extended family members who had been resettled to the same city just a few months prior. Yosef and his family were provided a rental house, clothing, food, and all the basic necessities. Yosef described this experience of having so much at their disposal as "shocking" for their entire family. Yosef distinctly remembered arriving at the house and seeing a refrigerator for the first time:

> It was my first time ever, our first time ever, and seeing those type of food in there, it's like a dream comes true because we are the same person, same people, who ate once a day back in the refugee camp.

The refugee resettlement agency also provided Yosef and his family with another vital resource soon after arrival that continues to have an impact on his family - a resettlement family support volunteer. Yosef described it this way:

> She just showed up one day and said, My name is this, and I am the volunteer, and she, you know, took us around like Walmart. She showed us how to shop properly and how to talk to people and how to respond.

For Yosef and his family, this volunteer became a part of their family and Yosef further described how deeply his parents care for this woman, how close their relationship is, and that the entire family still talks with her very often all these years later.

Even with the initial benefits and supportive assistance from the resettlement agency and this assigned volunteer, the transition to the U.S. was difficult for Yosef and his family. Neither of his parents spoke English, which limited their communication abilities and therefore, their work placement. Yosef's parents were placed as housekeepers at a local hotel. Initially, they were provided with transportation vouchers to utilize a local cab service. After a few months, this support ended. With no money to spare and no way to drive, his parents were left to rely on the public transportation system. This option was less than ideal given the location of the bus pick up and drop off where Yosef's family lived and the location of the hotel. This change resulted in the added burden of walking an additional hour to weekday work travel each way and more time on weekends due to limited bus routes. As the oldest child, Yosef often found himself responsible for the care of his younger siblings both day and evening. This need for childcare and subsequent reliance on Yosef was both a blessing and a curse. Yosef was given the opportunity to focus on school and his education while caring for his siblings and yet, without being able to capitalize on Yosef's ability to work and earn money, the family continued to struggle financially for years in low-wage jobs.

Yosef's first exposure to education here in the U.S. occurred shortly after resettlement. It did not go well! Yosef began sixth grade in late fall 2009. On his first day, a counselor accompanied him around the school and he spent only two hours there. The next day, he was totally on his own and totally unprepared. He remembered having no idea where his classes were and feeling lost. He did, however, ask other students for help:

> Nobody responded. They probably did not understand what I was saying, so I was very nervous and very emotional, and I just, you know, I could not hold it. I was about to exit and go ahead and go home.

A school counselor saw him, recognizing him as a new student who needed help, and stopped him from leaving. Yosef remembered this counselor and his interaction with her as a positive one. She took him to his ELL class where he connected with other students from all over the world. He came back the next day. And the next.

Yosef became involved in soccer and excelled both academically and athletically. Yosef attended school year-round and he was well on his way to graduating from high school a year early. This was not something he was planning on doing and was not something he, or his family, was aware of until he received a letter in the mail the summer between what he thought was his junior and senior years to let him know he would be graduating in August. The lack of information sharing on the part of his high school resulted in the loss of scholarships at universities that had communicated interest in him as a goalkeeper for the men's soccer team. Yosef told a heartbreaking story of going to watch his younger brother play soccer the following year only to learn that a college coach was actually there to see him play. He described this experience as "a heartbreak because they came to look at me in my senior year and I wasn't there. I was graduated." He also missed the opportunity to participate in the guaranteed tuition coverage that is offered to all students who graduate from the public school district he attended.

While surprised to learn he would be graduating early, Yosef did not let that stop him. He went straight away to the local community college and asked for help. The first individuals he met there happened to be from Nepal. They were attending the college and understood how to navigate the process from preliminary testing for class placement to financial aid application. While enrolled full-time, Yosef worked three jobs: waiting tables at a local cafeteria, serving as a student guide at the community college, and serving as a translator for various organizations. It was necessary for Yosef to work several jobs to supplement his parent's income and support his family.

Education was viewed as a vital necessity for success by both Yosef and his parents. Yosef reported that his parents (Yosef's father has a seventh-grade education and his mother has no formal education) motivated, supported, and showed him that education is the key to his future and is of great value. After completing his associate's degree, Yosef decided to continue his education and obtain a bachelor's degree in Healthcare Administration. Utilizing the opportunity to complete his bachelor's degree online, Yosef was able to continue working multiple jobs and complete his degree at a quicker pace than if he had been enrolled in a traditional bachelor's program. Yosef secured employment in his field of study quickly upon graduation. In less than 6 months after graduating with his bachelor's degree, Yosef was applying to master's programs in healthcare administration. He will graduate with a master's degree in healthcare administration in the spring of 2024.

Tomas

Tomas, age 24, came to the U.S. as a refugee from Tanzania with his dad, mom, and sisters in 2006 when he was seven years old. His family was originally from Burundi; however, Tomas was born in Tanzania where his family fled during a civil war and genocide that put their lives in danger. They lived in Tanzania in a refugee camp until Tomas was seven years old when

his parents and some of his siblings were offered resettlement to the U.S. as refugees. They were first resettled in Michigan where Tomas's dad struggled to find work at age 65. A family friend, living in the mid-Atlantic, contacted the family and encouraged them to move to their location where work was plentiful, even for older adults. Only Tomas's father understood English and Tomas reported that, as a small child, this lack of English language skills led to many fights between him and other children. He shared, "I used to get in fights just because I didn't understand the language of English." In fact, Tomas could not read or write in his "native tongue" when he arrived in the U.S.

Tomas's parents were not educated beyond what they could self-learn and what they could acquire through missionary-offered educational opportunities while living in Africa. While they provided the expectation that education was important and would be pursued, Tomas said it was each child's responsibility to make sure that they were attending school and that they were pursuing education. He remembered his parents getting numerous notifications about his behavioral outbursts and fighting. His parents were overwhelmed with the day-to-day pursuits of making ends meet. While elementary, middle, and high school staff would reach out to his family about school-related things, Tomas said his parents did not understand how the system worked and there was no one to explain to them the value of education beyond what they believed to be the need. While education was important to his parents, Tomas recounts numerous times when he had to "miss school to go help translate" when his mom or dad could not navigate a situation on their own.

Tomas struggled in elementary and middle school to learn and to stay out of trouble, often finding himself in fights with other kids. He shared,

> I would get in fights because I didn't understand what somebody was saying. If I heard my name talked about with people in like a circle that I wasn't a part of, it was gonna be a problem so like learning English became very hard.

During his middle school years, he became involved in wrestling through a relative which provided an outlet for his energy. He excelled in his sport and wrestling gave him a reason for focusing in the classroom and keeping his grades at a level where he could compete. He shared that his dad gladly signed the permission form for him to participate in wrestling because it would ensure Tomas had to "have good grades", "go to practice", and "stop fighting and getting suspended." In the wrestling community, he found coaches who were supportive of him and his future. Tomas' first wrestling coach was instrumental in the progress Tomas made to turn his personal and academic pursuits around. Tomas remembered his coach telling him, "'Hey, I'm gonna teach you how to wrestle but I'm also gonna teach you the lessons of life.'"

He also spoke of teachers who recognized his academic ability and encouraged him. He recalled, "Even my high school teachers saw the person that I could become compared to the person that I was at the moment."

Unfortunately, in his senior year, at a state wrestling match, he was disqualified after losing by one point and reacting in a way that was excessive and "could have been interpreted as violent." He retold the story with a sense of regret and explained how his temper resulted in the loss of opportunity for him. He shared the story:

> I was devastated because of that match. After I was done I got disqualified. And I went outside. I realized what I'd just done, cause I had 3 different colleges that were calling me saying, 'Hey, we would like to check you out and see if you would come to our university. And after my match, the phone calls dropped.

However, he had a coach who was committed to finding an alternative for him educationally that would also allow him to compete in wrestling and receive financial support. His coach helped him navigate what could have been a costly reaction on his part. Through the encouragement of his coach, Tomas enrolled at a private Christian, liberal arts university where he was able to compete and receive some scholarship funds to augment the financial aid he

received from the federal government. As he became more acclimated to the system and understood its inner workings, he discovered that if he became a resident director, he would have his dorm and living expenses covered by the institution. This opportunity allowed Tomas to cover the cost of his room and board while wrestling covered the cost of his tuition. He also had a work-study job to pay for expenses like having a cell phone and his car insurance. Tomas said, "I tried everything to make sure that I wasn't going to owe too much money when I got out of college cause my goal was to not have to owe any money."

Tomas worked two jobs, attended school full-time, and was a student-athlete. Time management was imperative. He completed his bachelor's degree early in Marketing and enrolled right away in a master's program that he also finished early. At the time of the interview, Tomas was preparing to leave for basic training in the Army National Guard where he would be commissioned as an officer upon completion and planned to request an active duty assignment.

Sam

Sam, a 23-year-old, was born in a refugee camp in Nepal and introduced himself as "someone who never received citizenship from his home country." He came to the U.S. with his parents, grandparents, and older brother on September 18, 2009. He was about nine years old when he and his family were resettled by the local refugee resettlement organization in the mid-Atlantic region. Sam said he remembers that he and his family had an opportunity to go to any country in the world; "Canada, America, Australia, the UK, Norway, all the countries," but they "ended up choosing America." Sam shared that it took him seven years to become a U.S. citizen and it is something he is very proud of. Upon resettlement, the resettlement organization helped his mother and father find jobs that were instrumental to their survival. Sam's family brought their savings with them and it amounted to approximately $100 to support six people.

Sam's aunt and uncle had already been resettled to the same location with their family, so he and his family were able to learn from those who came before. His extended family helped explain transportation, shopping, and how the electricity, heat, and air conditioning worked. Sam shared that while living in the refugee camp, their house was made of a bamboo-type material with no flooring, electricity, or running water.

Sam also remembered the resettlement office was instrumental in other ways besides getting jobs for his parents. They helped with securing other benefits so the family could buy food and have access to healthcare. Sam also recalled transportation being a long-standing problem for his family. His father had never driven, and because they could not read or speak English, the likelihood that driving would be something they could do soon was just not a reality.

He remembered begging to go with his parents when they went to the store and his mother telling him she could not take him and manage multiple bags of rice on a city bus. Sam's parents' jobs were located in an adjacent town and again, transportation was an issue in this area as well. His parents had to get up very early in the morning, take multiple buses, and wait at each stop for bus transfers in the weather. This was especially difficult on his mother, who came to the U.S. with ongoing health needs. Sam said that his mother:

> tried so hard to work for two years, even though she was going through pain every day, every single minute. After working hard in the factory for two years she became disabled. The doctor said she can't work no more so ever since then she's not been working so it's only my dad who was who had to feed a family of six…. he had no options.

Through friend connections, Sam's dad was able to leave his factory job and work at a local hotel as a dishwasher earning $7.25 an hour. Sam also mentioned that one of the groups of people who provided them with the most consistent help for the longest period of time were those from a local church. They helped the family find the house that they eventually bought, provided transportation, and even at times supported the family with financial assistance. While

Sam's family's religious beliefs are grounded in another belief system, they still attended church services on Sundays out of respect for those who were helping them so much.

Sam began school in the U.S. in fourth grade. He remembered his family being without a phone, or any other form of technology, such as a TV when they first arrived. In the coming months, this made it difficult to know when things like school were canceled. He shared:

> We didn't know the bus was coming late or not, like you know, there's no school or a delay or something. Me and my parent will be standing in the corner for hours and hours just waiting for the bus. So we would stand for a long long long time.

Sometimes Sam and his mother would come back day after day standing and waiting for hours for the bus to arrive but it would not. No one told them school was closed for two weeks over Christmas break.

Sam's initial foray into public education was a difficult one. He said, "When I walked into my classroom I was very, very scared, very nervous." Sam's first class was an ELL class where he saw "people from all over the world, different colors, different sizes, different shapes." His first thought was to go home; he did not want to be there. But the next morning, much to his dismay, his parents brought him back. It was on the second day that he met his other ELL teacher and Sam realized that she could help him with the difficulties he was experiencing:

> I spoke a little English. She taught me how to use vocabulary and how to learn. She was the best teacher I could ever find. She gave me a cassette player with tapes and told me to listen to the words over and over again and practice them.

Throughout his elementary and middle school career, Sam shared he was a good student, making "A" and "B" honor roll. Because he had an older brother, he was able to navigate by utilizing his brother's experiences. Sam also played on the soccer team, where he excelled as an athlete. Sam related if it were not for both his middle school coach and his assistant principal in middle school, he would not have been able to play soccer. Sam shared that because his parents

worked, they were unable to take him to practice so the assistant principal would take him to practices and games.

Before Sam began high school, his parents found and purchased a house, and he moved to a new school district. Also, around this time, he began to need to work to help his parents. So he began to work at a warehouse where he described the conditions as “hot and humid.” When Sam graduated from high school, he got a job working as a waiter in a restaurant where his brother was already employed.

College was very important to both Sam and his parents. Sam’s parents always pushed him to get an education so they could live better lives. What little information his parents were able to obtain about postsecondary education in the U.S. came from extended family and he shared, “They knew what they were told…they didn’t know what they didn’t know.” He had the advantage of seeing his brother navigate postsecondary access and had some idea of what he needed to do. His brother was instrumental in making the process easier for him. His brother had already attended the local community college and was able to tell Sam “about the placement testing you to take, how to apply, how to receive financial aid, and how to contact an advisor about taking classes” he needed. Sam only remembered talking about college with a guidance counselor at his high school once in his senior year at his high school. He also noted that even though he was an excellent soccer player and an excellent student, his coach never shared information about college with him. Despite the lack of guidance from secondary school personnel, he shared, “I had an opportunity to attend a couple of four-year colleges right out of high school and play soccer.” However, he felt he needed to stay close to his family, so he “decided to decline all the offers” and attend a local community college for two years. It was at this college where he received an associate's degree in management. He found that initially going to community college right out of high school was a good option for him and that the

"community college experience prepared" him "mentally and physically to continue education at a four-year school" without having to jump right in and get lost like he anticipated he would at a four-year institution.

The cost of attending community college was affordable for Sam and his family. He completed the FAFSA with the help of his brother, and he received a community-based scholarship that covered all tuition and fees. He also received an additional scholarship that paid the remainder of his cost. He was required to do volunteer work to receive and retain the scholarship, but he was "happy to do it." Federal access programs also played a part in his success. He "was also able to join TRiO at [community college]" and he sees his experience in TRiO as playing a huge role in how successful he was. TRiO was able to help him with "class registration and navigating the college." While he did well academically, Sam said that he "did not feel happy during this time." He was not happy with his direction career-wise and was able to talk with a trusted advisor and mentor who had been a soccer coach for the local parks and recreation team Sam had been a team member on. Coincidentally, this individual was also a former refugee. They talked about his interests, and how they might align with a career field. Through this mentor's support and guidance, he discovered that human resources was a field he might be interested in.

Sam graduated from community college in the spring of 2021, and soon after, his family moved to an adjacent state. He decided to take time off from his education and work while he decided what he would do next. After conducting research to see where he might be able to attend near his new home, he decided to enroll in an online degree program offered through a large, R1 Research university. To meet residency requirements, he had to work full-time and take a year away from school so that he would not have to pay out-of-state tuition rates. Around the time he was to begin his coursework, he was laid off from his job. Despite these barriers, Sam

graduated with his bachelor's degree in Human Resources in the spring of 2023 and thought that it was the right degree and institution for him. He admitted, though, that his family does not understand what "human resources" is and they do not understand the work that he does nor the value of this particular career path. He has been driven to accomplish his goals related to postsecondary education so that he would not live paycheck to paycheck. Sam is currently exploring additional educational options and is hoping to eventually finish a master's degree.

Alex

Alex, 42 years of age, arrived in the U.S. from Bosnia in August 1995 after spending a year with his family living in a refugee camp. Alex was 14 years old, and in seventh grade, at the time of resettlement to the mid-Atlantic region. At the time, Alex spoke very little English but still served as the primary interpreter for his family. He found himself in the role of "gatekeeper to a lot of information" that his parents needed to understand. Because his parents were working, he found himself as a caretaker for his younger brother. Alex struggled in school and found that even with the help of ELL, learning English was very hard. He did better with math.

His family moved around quite a bit within the community they were settled in. There were domestic problems at home which further complicated what he describes as a "difficult" resettlement transition. While in high school, Alex stated that he had no aspirations for college. He did not enjoy school and found it to be difficult to just pass his classes. He described himself as a "quiet, shy kid, who never got into trouble, was never tardy, never skipped classes, never got suspended." He was invisible. Alex stated that counselors and teachers never talked with him about what he might do after high school on any level. He did, however, excel athletically as a soccer player. He described soccer as providing him with "the only glimpse into the possibility of higher education" while he was in high school. He received information through his coaches about two colleges that were interested in having him attend and play soccer. However, any

glimpse of college attendance ended when those next-level coaches saw his grades. Alex reported he "graduated from high school with a 1.9 GPA" and sadly realized in his senior year that there was no way to bring up his grades no matter how hard he worked. He also stated that he "did not know it is an option to receive a scholarship to play soccer here in the U.S." or that he could use his passion for playing soccer in "an intentional way… to possibly gain access to postsecondary." Even as a student-athlete for several years, none of his coaches ever discussed this critical piece of information with him. Upon graduation, Alex entered the workforce and began working in an automotive and transmission shop. One of his shop teachers who taught him in welding and automotive classes noticed he had interest and talent in both fields and assisted him with getting his first job. He described the work as "hard, and not something" he could imagine doing as a career. His parents, however, were very happy about his job, particularly his dad who enjoyed working on cars himself. Alex's dad encouraged him to consider opening up his own shop. He admitted that "this was not necessarily my dream" because money was difficult to come by to start a business. The transmission shop job was not offering adequate pay, so he transitioned to warehouse work where other immigrants were working making three to four more dollars an hour. He spent the next six years working in this position and recalled that those he worked with would often tell him that he was wasting his time and that working in a warehouse was something for "old people who don't speak English." Alex shared that more than any other group, these were the people who encouraged him to consider going to college.

Another pivotal moment for Alex was when his father was severely injured while working and the injury impacted his ability to stay employed. This event led to a conversation with his father where he told Alex, "You should consider an education so you do not have to worry about losing your ability to work if your body is injured." This led to additional conversations with his parents, and he decided to enroll at the local community college as a

full-time student. The cost of a four-year institution was prohibitive, the distance was problematic, and his educational track record was not impressive. Community college was his postsecondary option. Alex attended community college full-time during the day and worked full-time at night. He also lived at home with his parents so he could save money, contribute to his family's income, and still provide much-needed support to his parents. Initially, at the community college level, he struggled academically. He said he "never learned how to study" and continued to struggle with writing just as he had in high school. However, he knew that he needed to continue with his education if he wanted to have opportunities. After completing his associate's degree he talked with his family, and together, they decided that he would stop working full-time and transfer to a four-year, comprehensive, state university within driving distance from home.

Alex was older than many of his peers at the four-year university. He did not feel that he fit initially. Alex did not see himself reflected at the institution, which made it hard for him to identify social support at the peer-to-peer level. Given the financial risk he and his family were taking to send him to this university, there was a tremendous amount of pressure for him to do well. He was still struggling with grammar but found some support academically from his course instructors, advisor, and head of the department where his major was housed. Alex reported the support he received at the four-year college level was significantly different than he had received thus far in his education experience. There he found individuals who were experienced working with students of similar backgrounds (those who had immigrated, those who came from refugee backgrounds, those who were older students, and/or for whom English was not their first language) to Alex. His professors proactively "met him where he was at" and offered the support and assistance he needed to begin to build confidence in his ability to be academically successful. He described one particular individual in the department, his advisor, who became a

champion for him and opened doors and provided some of the navigational know-how he did not have at the time. It was this support that gave him the capacity to become “a lot more connected to other professors in the administration and realize I am no longer struggling but kind of thriving in the environment.” He did so well that in his senior year, he was nominated and received an “award of excellence” within his department.

Alex graduated with his bachelor’s degree and decided to continue his education in the same department within the master's program. His decision to continue with his education was spurred by both “an abysmal economy that negatively impacted job prospects” as well as the sense of being able to “come back to his education family.” Within his department and degree program, he felt he had found his niche and was both challenged and encouraged by what he was learning in his master's program. He described this time in his academic trajectory as one that provided him with “a lot of growth academically and psychologically,” and gave him an “opportunity for self-exploration” that he would not have had otherwise. With much hard work and perseverance, he successfully completed multiple degrees and has found himself in a career field that allows him to give back within the realm of postsecondary education. Alex is currently considering a Ph.D. both because he loves to learn and because he realizes it will help him advance in his career. For the moment, though, he is happy and proud when he reflects back on how far he has come. His story exemplifies hard work, perseverance, identifying where your aspirations lie, and continually pursuing dreams.

Shelia

Shelia introduced herself as a woman of faith who is very committed to her Christian religious beliefs. Her mother named her “God gives” because “God gave Shelia to her as a gift.” Shelia is a 22-year-old college student majoring in commercial music performance at a large, Christian-based university. She dreams of one day being a singer. Shelia’s family fled Burundi

due to the Civil War and ended up becoming refugees in Congo. War also broke out in Congo during their time there, so they fled to Tanzania to a refugee camp where Shelia was born weeks earlier than she should have been. Luckily, there was a hospital nearby.

While her family was at the hospital after her birth, "missionaries came to the hospital and were offering people opportunities to come to the U.S." It was at this point she said her parents began "telling everyone they were going to go to America." She said that people "often mocked them telling them they weren't going to go anywhere." Her mom and dad held on to that belief. Ultimately, her parents did go through the refugee interview process and received approval to come into the U.S. as refugees. The process was very long, and Shelia was around six years old when her family came to the U.S. Shelia shared that those who had mocked and laughed at her parents were "shocked when we left for America." Her mother, father, and five siblings arrived in the winter of 2008, and she described this as her first experience seeing snow. She did not speak English when she came to the U.S. nor did any member of her family. They were settled in the mid-Atlantic region where they already had family living. Shelia recalled this was a great benefit to her family. She shared, "We did have people who knew we were going through the exact same experiences that they were going through so we all had each other. We leaned on each other and helped one another."

For her family, it was very important to find a church right away. While the refugee resettlement program helped Shelia and her family a great deal, the help they received from their new church family "really did make us feel at home." Initially, her parents worked factory jobs where they did not need to speak English to do the work. Eventually, the relationship between her father and the refugee resettlement office soured. Shelia shared that the resettlement office received the family's paychecks first and would then send them to her father. Those paychecks came later and later, and he noticed he was not receiving his pay in full or when he should have.

Her father confronted the organization and the relationship ended, leaving Shelia's family without navigational support. While Shelia was not aware of it at the time, her family struggled with money. They were unsure of how to complete applications for financial benefits after their initial enrollment period had expired. Shelia often wondered why when she would ask her parents for money related to a school need or event, the answer was always "no." She shared that one saving grace for her family was a man who worked with her parents who taught them English and helped them with other needs they had related to understanding systems and navigating the complexities. Things were better with his help.

Shelia's first experience with public education began in kindergarten even though she should have started in first grade given her age. She shared being older than most other students in her grade is something that negatively affected her throughout her time in elementary and secondary school. Initially, she assumed the reason she was held back in school was because she was not smart enough to be with other students her age.

For Shelia, she knew early on she wanted to go to college and felt in high school that she was ready to be done with that phase so she could move on to the college experience. For her, it was just "assumed that after high school you go to college, and then you do a master's." Ultimately, she decided to go to college because she knew how much it would benefit her in the long run. Her desire to acquire knowledge in the broadest sense was evident as she recalled her thoughts about college-going. She shared, "I wanted knowledge, I wanted experience, I wanted networking, I wanted to meet different people. I just wanted to expand my experiences and the knowledge that I knew."

She saw the college experience as a place where you are tested as to "whether or not, you're actually serious about education" and for her, "it's been a life-changing experience" that

has “taught a lot of life lessons.” She also viewed her refugee experience as a contributing factor as to why education is something she is so serious about:

> My parents have taught me since I was in like elementary school and it’s been my goal to graduate and to excel, to be the best that I can. For my parents it was difficult because they didn’t have the opportunity….just seeing them navigate because they don’t have education.

There has been conflict with her family around education though. Shelia’s parents were not happy with her choice of major and questioned what she planned to do after college as a music major. Another conflict was that she did not want to live close to home and many of the colleges she considered were too far away for her parents. They set parameters for her choices that included selecting a college and one that was no more than a few hours away. She chose the university she currently attends and has been happy with that choice. A third area of conflict centered around housing. Her parents were not happy about her choice to live in a dorm. They wanted her to live with them and commute. They would have preferred that she attend community college as opposed to a four-year institution. Shelia felt she had some leverage since her parents have not contributed financially to her education, nor have they contributed to her living expenses. Financially, she has been covering her expenses since she began working at 15. She completed the FAFSA on her own and applied for as many scholarships as she could find. Shelia admitted that she has never really had a conversation with her parents about paying for her college education.

Amid conflict with her family about where she would continue her education after high school, Shelia did have a plan of her own. She made a list of colleges she wanted to consider and what she expected from these colleges. She leveraged technology and social media together to find as much information as she could about these colleges and universities. She also had an opportunity to attend college for a weekend with her best friend. For Shelia, the deciding factor

for her was whether the institution aligned with her Christian faith. She said “I prayed a lot” and her ultimate decision to attend her current institution checked all the boxes including her parent's desire for her to stay relatively close. She also shared:

> I did everything by myself. I don’t know. It’s just the cultural thing like in American culture parents usually like come with their kids to everything that they do. Growing up, that was not the case for me.

Her college experience has not been without its challenges. Attending the institution she is currently enrolled at was quite a “culture shock given that it is not very diverse.” Shelia stated, “There’s not really that many people of my color, that many people from my culture, so you kind of have to adjust to it.” She attributed the Office of Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity to being helpful in her adjustment. She described finding this office and the programs that it offers as a “life-changing experience.” Through this office, she was able to “meet people from lots of different cultures and backgrounds” and felt this has been instrumental in helping her overcome conflict she felt about being a minority at the institution.

She also talked about how important it is to her to “pay it forward” and help others navigate the postsecondary access process. She has helped her younger brother navigate the process by giving him information about what he needed to do and when. She also sees gaining knowledge as an opportunity to make an impact on others through what she learns and what she may one day be.

Bri

Bri, who is 23 years old, resettled from Nepal in 2008 with her family when she was eight years old. She traveled with her dad, mom, aunt, and younger brother. She was born in a refugee camp where access to resources was extremely limited. She described relocating to the U.S. as “very difficult to navigate” and that her parents never had any formal education in Nepal. None of the adults in her family spoke English when they arrived. Because her brother was very

young, he also spoke no English. It was left to Bri to initially assist her family with all aspects of communication. She described this as bewildering and her lack of understanding, of both the language and the culture in the U.S., compounded other difficulties they experienced. Unlike other refugee families who come to the U.S., who oftentimes have other relatives already established here in this country, Bri's family did not have this advantage. Her family was one of the first groups of people to arrive from Nepal as part of the refugee relocation initiative, and she described this experience as essentially "learning how to live again." With the help of the refugee organization that resettled the family, they were able to find a place to live and had basic support for rent, food, and medical care. Within a couple of months after resettlement, her parents were able to find jobs and begin to "pay back the refugee organization, what we owed them for the support they had given us."

When Bri's family moved to the U.S., the economy was struggling and job prospects where they were resettled were not promising. To support the family better through stable employment and better pay, Bri's father went to an adjacent state to find work in a chicken factory. He would leave the family for a couple of months at a time. This is especially hard for Bri. In her father's absence, as an 8-year-old child, she took on the sole responsibility of assisting her mother and aunt with all translating, reading, writing, and answers to all navigation that was required. She described how this lack of understanding on the part of her parents and aunt made the transition experience particularly difficult. She recalled:

> It felt like we were literally in prison. We were sheltered in the apartment because my parents didn't like us going outside. It's a strange country, if we get lost, I don't know where to go to find help, they kept us inside, we saw no one, we talked to no one.

She began attending elementary school approximately four months after arrival to the U.S. where she was immediately placed into an ELL class. Bri said, "The first year I went to school, I did not know anything that was going on at all." Early in her time in school, she

described a “mentor“ who “kind of took me under her wing”. This mentor also assisted Bri’s mother and aunt with more complex things like job applications. There were also individuals who served as volunteers with the refugee organization who supported the family in getting medical care when needed. However, when individuals were not available, Bri admitted that her family would make the best of difficult situations alone. She shared that it took about two or three years to figure out things like where the hospital was located, how to access healthcare anytime they needed it without assistance, and how their insurance worked. For Bri’s family, this type of navigation was essential because her younger brother suffered from complex medical conditions that required extensive and ongoing care.

Bri described elementary school as being particularly difficult. She had no help with homework and was consistently “figuring it out on my own because my parents, bless their hearts, could not help me.” She also described how difficult it was to make friends given that she could not communicate, and that many people did not like the fact that she was “from a different country, dressed differently, looked different, and sounded differently.” She could “see, feel, and hear” the discrimination. At a young age, when not in school, Bri related that she became her brother’s primary caretaker watching and babysitting him for days at a time while her mother and aunt worked.

High school was a very different experience for Bri. She was bullied less by those who did not understand her. There were additional families and children who had been resettled from Nepal. She stated that she “knew by high school how the system worked and where to go for help.” There was the added benefit of her father being able to drive by then so she could participate in clubs and afterschool activities. It was in high school that she found out about AP classes and enrolled in those. However, she did state that she “learned about some valuable resources and opportunities that were available in high school too late.” There were teachers who

encouraged her, motivated her, and guided her to resources. These teachers were predominantly ELL instructors. Bri shared that her parents always encouraged her to consider continuing with her education. She suspected that because her parents did not have the same opportunities, and they understood that education was highly valued in American culture, they were very supportive and encouraging. By the time Bri was in high school, and her brother was older and could care better for himself, her parents allowed her to free up her time to focus on more academic endeavors. She stated, "They understood the importance of spending time focused on education and spending time focusing on things that create a well-rounded learner and student."

Both her mother and father would tell her, "We never got to go to school, and look at how we are struggling now. I don't want this for you. I want you to do better in school." While they supported and encouraged her, the downside of having parents who were not formally educated meant, according to Bri, that "they don't understand how things work or how hard it is when you're studying anatomy and chemistry and physiology. They can't help you and don't understand when you don't do well." While she "knew from the very beginning" of arriving in the U.S., that she "wanted to achieve higher education" she did not know exactly what that meant.

She also shared that she always felt drawn to healthcare as a career path. For her family, living in a refugee camp, healthcare was not available, and what was available was not advanced. She said "I saw people being sick and dying from things that could've been prevented."

Much of Bri's knowledge about postsecondary education came from her research. Looking back, she shared "I always did my own research ahead of time." She also had cousins who had already graduated from high school and had begun college.

In her initial foray into postsecondary access, she recalled that individuals from the local community college came to her high school and assisted her and other students with completing

the FAFSA, and shared information about scholarships and other resources to help afford college. She found the financial aid process difficult and confusing partly because, yet again, she served in the role as both student and parent given that her parents did not understand what was being asked of them nor did they understand the process itself. Bri initially decided to attend the local community college. She said, “I don’t think I was ready to go out in the world by myself and leave my parents because I was still helping them.” Before graduating from high school, she did apply to other institutions besides community college and was accepted. However, she did not feel like she could go. Bri confided:

> I talked to my parents and told them I’d gotten scholarships, but not quite enough to cover my rent. They knew I had enough to cover tuition and it was going to be a financial burden for them and also the fact that I would have to like go there and live there.

Bri’s parents told her to go to the community college and transfer. She said:

> Someone told them, ‘oh, she can go to community college and transfer’ but they don’t really know about college”.I just felt that I wasn’t like able to go, but I also understood…. I felt bad it’s just a bad situation.

Community college was a successful endeavor and she obtained an associate's degree. She transferred to a state institution in a large urban environment, much different from the environment she had grown up in. Her first year coincided with COVID-19 and she found herself living in an apartment, in a city she was unfamiliar with, with no connections to her community. She also found it problematic to live in a city where she was attending all of her classes online and expending quite a bit of financial resources to pay rent. Ultimately, within a year, she had withdrawn from that institution citing her deteriorating mental health and extreme anxiety. She returned home to attend a local, four-year, state institution where she could move back home with her family and continue both her education and caring for her brother’s increasingly complex healthcare needs.

At the time of this interview, Bri was finishing up her last semester of her bachelor's degree. We talked about her future plans and how she intends to work for 2 to 3 years before applying to a nurse practitioner program. Ultimately, she intends to open her own family practice where she can give back to her community. She said others have told her that the nurse practitioner program is difficult to access but she is making that her focus.

> I'm trying not to give myself any other options…. I'm trying not to have a backup plan so I can focus on what I can do. I'll look and research and ask for help. I have to do this no matter what because there's nothing else for me.

Nan

Nan, a 21-year-old, arrived as a refugee from Nepal in 2010. She was born in a refugee camp and reported that she and her family barely had enough resources to survive. There was no running water, no adequate housing, not enough food, and no access to healthcare in the camp where they were staying. She lived with her mom, dad, grandparents, and younger brother. Her dad's brother and his family also lived in the camp in housing next door. She shared that her father and uncle wanted to come to the U.S., but that her grandfather, her father's father, did not. He was not interested in leaving Nepal and moving to a new country where he would have to start over again. But when pressed, and with the realization that his two sons and their families were going to the U.S., he and his wife decided they would go as well. During the process of applying for resettlement, Nan's brother became ill so their resettlement was put on hold. This led to her uncle and his family coming a year earlier than Nan and her family arrived. This provided some support in terms of system navigation to Nan and her immediate family when they arrived the following year. Nan was eight years old when she arrived in the U.S. and she remembers arriving in the winter and seeing snow for the first time. She recalled the refugee resettlement organization helping her parents find jobs and helping her parents enroll her in elementary school. She said there were "many people around helping" her family to "resettle and

acclimate." Nan recalled individuals "coming to our house, buying stuff, talking to us, taking us grocery shopping and buying us food, buying us clothes."

Initially, only her father worked. He barely knew English. Because her grandparents were elderly, her mom stayed at home to care for them. The family had no transportation and her father had to learn how to navigate the city transportation system. Nan reported that he would get up at 4:00 A.M. every day to catch the bus and go to work. She stated that because she was so young, her "ability to help out in a meaningful way was limited," and for years, she felt bad about her lack of ability to help.

Not only was the refugee resettlement organization helpful, but a local church, and its members, were instrumental in helping Nan's family with transportation and healthcare appointments. This is where Nan learned to translate, began to learn English, and how to complete forms by watching translators and other helpers who were familiar with English and with the system complete forms and respond during interactions. Nan began school in third grade. She remembered this:

> It was really, really difficult for me because I didn't understand anything they were saying. I was struggling I was getting bullied in school because I didn't understand English and I used to wear old clothes and stuff like that.

However, Nan found the teachers, particularly those in the ELL program, to be very nice and helpful. She knew how to write some basic English having been taught the alphabet, some basic words, and how to speak some English while living in the refugee camp. Once she was embedded in the ELL program, things began to take off for her academically. She reported that she had amazing teachers throughout her public school career who also aided her parents in better understanding the primary and secondary school process. She recalled, "They were very supportive of my parents. They were patient and explained everything to them. They were very supportive and they would talk to my parents and tell them what was going on."

She enjoyed high school much more than elementary and middle school because she had developed an established friend group that she could spend time with and who related to her. She had no problems getting her schoolwork accomplished or understanding the material. Not only did Nan excel academically, but she also played soccer and was a solid athlete. Despite all of this "success" in the secondary school setting, she did not initially know what college was exactly or how to get there. She knew it was something that she wanted to be a part of and something she should consider. She realized that a college education was how one could "do well in life." Her father was also instrumental in her desire to learn and created freedom from other responsibilities and gave her encouragement to learn. Nan shared:

> My dad is a big person for education. He wants me to go to school. He wants me to get good grades because he always wanted to study but he couldn't, because he had to earn money. He was always saying 'after you graduate college and get your degree I'm gonna do GED classes and get a GED diploma' and I'm like 'OK you can do that.'

Nan said her dad always came to school parent-teacher conferences and, while he did not know a lot about the process or how school in America worked, he was still very supportive of her and wanted to be involved as much as he could be. He would remind her to "Just focus on your school, do well in school, get good grades, that's all that matters. You have to get an education, it's really important."

At the end of her 10th-grade year, Nan remembered a high school advisor, mentioning the "things we needed to do to prepare for going to college." Nan said:

> I knew I needed to do things to fill out forms and look at colleges and get good grades, but I didn't know I needed to take SATs or that I should take AP classes to get into a good college.

Then, she noticed she was enrolled in an AP class that none of her friends were enrolled in. She approached her counselor who explained that "an AP class would help her get into college." It was at this point that she asked, "Oh, okay so what else do I have to do to get into college." For

Nan, the beginning of the college process was something she found out about at the end of her sophomore year. In her junior year, she began taking AP classes and learned that she needed to take SATs. She learned about the SAT from someone within a church organization named Miss Connie. Nan said that Miss Connie gave her an SAT book and helped her do practice tests. Nan found out about the Common Application from her English teacher. Without knowing much about the colleges and universities that accepted the Common Application, she decided to apply to a wide range of institutions. Because her family income was low she discovered she did not have to pay an application fee for any of the institutions she applied to. It was through completing the Common Application that Nan learned about the FAFSA. Up to that point, no one had mentioned the FAFSA was something she needed to learn about and complete.

According to Nan, "I did ask my counselor about it after I saw it on a Common App, but I don't think it was very helpful, so I used to search for things I could not understand." The FAFSA and the Common Application both fell into this category of "things" Nan found out about on her own. Interestingly, as Nan learned these things about the postsecondary access process, she shared this information with others. As a senior, while preparing for her own college-going, Nan also helped her friends complete the FAFSA form, fill out various college applications, and write personal statements because she did not want to see anyone struggle.

Although she helped others, Nan found the FAFSA process to be particularly daunting. She shared she did not understand many of the questions nor how to use the IRS Retrieval Tool. The warnings on the website about giving false information terrified her. Her parents were also concerned about the cost of college and how they would pay for it. They knew college was very expensive and Nan reassured her father, in particular, that the FAFSA could help them get at least student loans. She also reassured her father that she could apply for scholarships, which she did.

Nan was able to visit colleges she applied to with her parents and a few friends. She visited two universities she was most interested in. As her senior year drew to a close, Nan was notified that she had been waitlisted at her first-choice university. She was disappointed and began to wonder if her lack of taking strenuous classes earlier on in high school had impacted her ability to be accepted. She was, however, accepted at the two universities she had previously visited. One of the universities offered her enough financial aid to cover all of her costs so she decided to enroll there as a biology student on a pre-med track. She admitted the financial aid aspect played a big role in where she decided to attend. Nan attended this university for two years and shared it was an "amazing experience" even though she felt the transition to a much larger educational environment was "a difficult one." However, she was able to do what she had always done and teach herself how to navigate such a large complex educational institution. Near the end of her first year of enrollment, COVID-19 appeared. When she went back for her second year, she found that all of her learning was online. This was not a transition she found easy and it was "hard to justify paying rent in [location]" if she was not actually attending class in person. At that time, she was also under a lot of pressure from her family to change her major because they were concerned about the cost and time it would take to go to medical school versus getting a nursing degree. Nan shared, "They kept telling me you should do a Bachelors of Science in Nursing. My parents told me if I wanted to go back to medical school, then I could." But the doubt and worry were already there. She also missed her parents and knew the struggle they were under paying rent for her in the city she lived in so she decided to apply to a local 4-year university and transferred at the end of her second year. She also changed her major to nursing from pre-med.

Nan shared her experience at this university had been an easy transition and she finally felt like she knows what she is doing both academically and in the college-going process.

Additionally, her cost of attendance and living is much less expensive and less of a burden on her parents.

Nan's younger brother is currently enrolled at a 4-year state university as well and majoring in engineering. She shared that she provided a lot of guidance to her brother, giving him information about the application process, what classes he should take, providing him with SAT material, and making sure he understood the process and the transition to college. He is not the only person she has done this for and has made a point of helping others who are struggling to understand the college-going process and opportunities. Nan shared, "I was always telling them [freshmen], 'These are the things you should look into as soon as possible because these are the things that will help you get into college'."

Many of Nan's decisions about education and career path were tied back to her family and what she experienced before being resettled to the U.S. Nan said that "thinking about" her parents and "where they've come from pushes" her to do the things she does to have different outcomes. Her career path in healthcare is something that she has always been drawn to. She shared, "We didn't have healthcare. We didn't have any access to good healthcare. We had to wait and depend on home remedies, so I've always wanted to go into the medical field and help people." She will graduate with her BSN in the coming months and plans to become a nurse practitioner, open her own clinic, eventually go back to the country she left, and help those who are struggling like her mother's parents who were left behind.

Emergent Themes

The themes in the coming pages are emergent, reflective of participants experiences of postsecondary access, and illustrative of the ways in which aspirational and navigational capital interplay with both lived experiences and the processes of postsecondary access. The following themes are structured to elevate how community culture wealth begins to take shape across

these collective experiences with an understanding that each individual experiences this formation of cultural capital in their own unique way.

Aspirations of Postsecondary Education are Real

Each participant recollected their desire over time to gain additional knowledge about and access postsecondary education surfaced at the micro-level. While "finishing high school is every refugee's dream" according to Yosef, striving past that dream in search of postsecondary education was the aspiration participants in this study spoke of.

Tomas remembered saying to himself in middle school that he wanted to go to college even though "I didn't know anything about it. I was going in there with a blind eye." Tomas stated, "I worked my butt off and made sure I had at least a 3.1 GPA and I graduated a semester early" with his bachelor's degree.

For Yosef, he was:

> So hungry to take advantage of the great opportunities that we have in this country that we never, you know, even dreamed back in the refugee camp, because I knew that if I was still in the refugee camp, we would probably be in the street begging for money. We could not afford any college over there.

And he realized during his educational journey that "education is the key of life."

Shelia recognized that postsecondary education could provide benefits for her. She said, "I decided to go to college because I knew how much it would benefit me." She also understood that postsecondary education is a process that requires both "hard work" and "taking things one step at a time to actually reach the destination." Tomas also shared this realization that aspiration alone would only get you so far. He shared, "If you wanna reach this stage in your life, you gotta do the work. You gotta push."

For others, it was less of a concrete plan or really knowing the benefits initially that drove them and was more of a feeling. Alex shared, " I know that I know that I just have to. I just have

to find a way to do it."

Family Systems Influence Aspirational Capital

The family system is an integral part of the micro-level structurally in this study and it was this family structure that encouraged the infusion of aspirational capital within the micro-level and into the meso-level for participants in this study. The input, support, and influences of family members, particularly parents, contributed greatly to the utilization of aspirational capital by participants as well. Educational attainment was seen as very important to the immediate family of participants in this study. Nan described her father and his thoughts about postsecondary education in this way:

> He never could like he couldn't go to school because he had to earn money and he is like a big education person. Like even now he's like, he's saying, 'Oh, after you graduate college and get your degree'.

Yosef's dad, who has a seventh-grade education, and mom, who has no formal education, encouraged him continuously to pursue postsecondary education and instilled in him that "education is a key of the future." His parents "motivated every day," "supported every day," and "always had [his] back."

Even if the postsecondary access process in the U.S. remained largely unknown for participants' parents, they were acutely aware that postsecondary education was the path to a life that was different and they passed this awareness onto their children. Nan explained that her father would "see people going to college and stuff like that. So he had an idea that oh, people go to college like after school." Each of the participants described how postsecondary educational attainment would mean their lives, and the lives of their immediate family members they would continue to support, would "provide a better life."

Parents of the participants encouraged postsecondary education in ways that were positive and consistent. Nan's dad "really emphasized getting a good education and getting good

grades and was always telling me ‘Oh, you have to.’” Yosef’s parents consistently told him to “make sure you go to school” while also “pushing and motivating every day.” Shelia’s parents likewise encouraged her to pursue postsecondary education and began doing so as early as elementary school. This early encouragement shaped her aspirations for postsecondary education. Shelia remembered, “Since elementary school, it's been my goal to graduate and to excel to the best that I can of course. They were encouraging us to go to college.” She also shared that her mom “used to just tell me stories, and how she worked hard to try to get us to have an education.”

Two of the participants described how parents would take on additional financial hardship to free their child up from work so they could focus on their education both at the secondary level in preparation for applying to postsecondary education and to focus on their education after enrolling at a four-year institution. Bri shared:

> Some people have to like come home and cook and do all of this, and take care of their siblings, but by then my brother had grown up and my parents really encouraged me and allowed me to be free from like other things so I could focus.

This freedom to focus allowed Bri to study, join clubs and organizations, and more fully experience her time in secondary school. Her parents “understood the importance of spending time focused on education and spending time focusing on the things that create a well-rounded learner and student.”

Alex also had an opportunity, with the blessing of his parents, to take a step back from working to pursue education. Alex approached his dad “to see if I'm able to quit my job and not have that extra income in the house and go to school full time, and they fully supported that” so he was able to transfer after completing his associate's degree.

While parents may have consistently encouraged and made concessions so their children could prepare for and gain postsecondary education and have aspirations for what they would

achieve, they did not often know what it would take to see those aspirations through or what it would require to make those aspirations a reality. They also relied on incomplete or flawed information in their advising participants. Bri experienced the effects of such information. Her parents advised her to "go to the community college" in the local area and then "transfer cause someone told them." This advice was given in response to Bri leaving home to attend a four-year institution after graduating from high school even though this had been her goal and aim educationally. Sometimes, the information parents operated from was limited and relied heavily on what they had learned from others with limited experience within the system.

Bri, whose parents have no formal education, "could not help me" and did not "understand it [college] can be difficult and not everyone will do well." Tomas' parents also did not understand the level of difficulty completing a postsecondary degree represented. He said, "My parents never went to school. My parents never actually had a structure or an understanding of this is what school is like. This, how stressful it is!"

This lack of understanding of the postsecondary process can lead to participants protecting their parents from the worries of what it takes to succeed and experiencing the additional toll it takes to go through the process alone. Alex explained:

> My parents never knew my grades. I don't think they ever went to a PTA meeting or anything like that, because they would need a translator and plus I don't know if I ever informed them about it because it was just something that I didn't think it was important because there were things happening in their world, you know.

Nan's experience in this regard was similar:

> My parents used to feel really bad because they couldn't help me, like my dad used to say, 'Oh, like we couldn't. We can't help you with this and that, like we forgot' and I used to say, like, 'it's okay, like, I will get the information like, it's not a big deal.' But it kind of was a big deal, because I didn't know who to reach out to, so I was really struggling. I didn't want to tell my parents that I was struggling. But yeah, I did manage to fill out forms and applied to colleges.

Shelia, Bri, and Yosef shared very similar experiences of managing this aspect of life on

their own so their parents could focus on just making it day-to-day in support of the larger family needs.

Invisibility of Refugee Aspiration within the Education System

Meso-level barriers explored in scholarly literature included perceptions of postsecondary aspirations, lack of knowledge-sharing, lack of understanding regarding refugee status and eligibility, and discrimination. Each of these, with the exception of lack of understanding regarding refugee status and eligibility, emerged from the experiences shared by participants in this study.

None of the participants in this study indicated they perceived their educational dreams or aspirations as being outright ignored, questioned, or doubted, as Perry et.al. (2011) found in previous research with refugees. However, the educational system, and actors within it, appear to be complicit in the process of ignoring, doubting, and questioning participant aspirations of postsecondary education through lack of resources to guide participants about the processes and lack of consistent communication about postsecondary access processes. Six of seven participants shared that they performed well academically and had overcome challenging experiences at the elementary and middle school levels to learn English, to feel a sense of belonging, and to navigate a system they were constantly having to learn about. Shelia shared one example of how those early experiences set the stage for challenging educational experiences:

> They ended up starting me in kindergarten when I should have started in first grade. And so then this became like the trajectory of me just being in a grade level where I'm older than most of the students.

Shelia found this a choice by those in power that impacted her perception of self and created a lack of sense of belonging within her class group during her elementary and middle school years. Her ability to create a community of peers she connected with was hampered early

on and was shaped by this placement. Alex's experience in the secondary system was one that indicated he was ignored and potentially unnoticed by those working within the education system. He shared:

> The goal was essentially to get me through the class. I was a quiet kid. I was a shy kid, and never got in trouble. Never got suspended. Was never tardy, never skipped classes. I was there to show up, you know, and just leave.

Even for several participants who were heavily involved in academic and athletic pursuits, the failure of secondary school professionals to recognize participants' potential interest in postsecondary education is surprising. Alex, for example, shared that he "never knew it [sports] would be an intentional way to possibly gain access to postsecondary that was practically paid for." But there was, in his high school career, "nothing from counselors, nothing from other teachers" about preparing for or attempting postsecondary education. Sam shared a similar experience that the only time he talked to his guidance counselor was his senior year of high school even though he was an outstanding athlete and academically equipped for postsecondary education. Sam said, "We barely talk about college stuff. Most of the ideas and information that I got is from my brother because he went through that." With the distance that time and educational experience create, Alex shared that "at some point, you know, adults are gatekeepers, schools are gatekeepers, you know the counselors, the professors…gatekeepers."

Lack of Information/Knowledge Sharing about the Postsecondary Exploration, Application, and Enrollment Process

Barriers faced by participants in this study were predicated on a lack of information and knowledge sharing about the postsecondary access process. This lack of knowledge and information sharing starts early and is not unlike barriers that are experienced by refugees and former refugee populations surfaced in scholarly literature (Baker et al., 2019; Hannah, 1999; Unangst et al., 2020) at the meso-and macro-levels. Bri was forthright in her assessment of the

lack of support given in high school. She said, “There's not a lot of support being given while you're in high school to help you navigate the way that the postsecondary works, and what you need to do to prepare for that.”

It is also complicated by the fact that all the participants in the study are first-generation college students. Nan explained this beautifully:

> I did know that I had to go to college, but I didn't really know how to get there, because no one has been to college from my family like nobody. I didn't know who to reach out to, so I was really struggling.

For students from refugee backgrounds, it is not just the overall college access process that is unknown, each small piece of the process that can have consequences for postsecondary access is a mystery. Bri provided one example when she shared that “the SAT’s that you have to take like not a lot of people know about that until it's like too late.” Alex provided another such example when he shared that he completed his “financial aid application just because it was required.” Yosef’s experience learning about financial aid was only slightly better as he described attempts to learn about the financial aid process. Yosef stated, “They explained to me thoroughly. Every question, but there are few that, like they're not willing to explain early, like, you know, this and that.” For Nan, the information needed to understand the postsecondary access process came in small tidbits of information like puzzle pieces but never as a complete picture. She shared:

> When I first found out that I needed to do things to get into college was when in my sophomore year, I think, that’s when they put me in a AP class. So, I went to my counselor and I talked to her about it, and she was like, ‘Oh, AP classes like this will help you to get into college’.

Nan’s lack of clearly understanding the role that AP courses could potentially play in her postsecondary application process became more evident when she shared that her top postsecondary choice gave her a waitlist placement. Her first thought was “Oh, maybe it was

because I didn't take enough AP classes" and narrowly considered this being the reason she was not accepted outright. For some participants, it can be as egregious as not even keeping students aware of their pending graduation status. Yosef stated he received "mail on July fourteenth, saying, 'Hey, your graduation is in August seventh.'" This was "very surprising mail" because he "wasn't expecting to graduate in Junior year."

Just as seen in scholarly literature to date, gatekeeping at the meso- and micro-levels continues to negatively impact refugee educational pursuits. Some information sharing occurs in partial ways and not always with completeness and this partial sharing continues across the education continuum. Bri, who attended a four-year institution after graduating from high school explained that she was not clear about the requirement to live in a dorm her first year and this lack of clarity negatively impacted her family. She shared:

> There's like certain requirements where, like, if your first year in some colleges that you have to live at dorm, and that's like extra financial burden on students like us who have to like also help out in our family.

The lack of information sharing at the postsecondary level also created a burden for Yosef. He recalled, "I went to the financial office. They did explain about those loans, but I don't remember them telling me about the parent ones." Yosef only took out student loans in his name because that was all the information he was given by those with knowledge about financial aid. To completely afford his education, he worked three jobs while going to college full-time. Tomas also experienced a near financially devastating outcome due to a lack of information at the postsecondary level. For him, not understanding the requirements to keep his athletic scholarship nearly resulted in losing that very scholarship.

A lack of information sharing did not only directly impact the participants in the study but they saw firsthand how lack of information impacted others at the postsecondary level. Yosef provided an example of this from his own experience of seeing how the lack of information

affected his peers at the postsecondary level:

> I use the writing center at the college that most of the students from my country or like other refugees from other countries did not know about that. They don't know the process of college. They don't know what to take in college.

However, for the participants in this study, this lack of information sharing did not stop them from exploring, accessing, pursuing, and completing postsecondary education goals. It was the utilization of aspirational and navigational capital that propelled them to fill in the blanks a lack of information and knowledge sharing about the postsecondary access process created.

For Sam, the lack of information sharing was both acknowledged and made manageable in part by tapping into the knowledge of others who had previously navigated the same system:

> There's lack of information. But if this one, if it's just one family that you know, that is from same country and has been here before, you did, it's so much easier, so much easier. And yeah, knowing somebody will make your life so much easier than you know, trying to find out so much stuff.

For some participants, like Yosef, questions regarding why information sharing does not happen remain unanswered:

> That's something I am still questioning. Why, there wasn't any resource, and because, coming from different countries, I see a lot of my friends just lost after high school. They are so lost. I wish back in high school like there was a teacher or some counselor that actually had the same background, or some sort of ambassador.

Missed Opportunities

Missed opportunities appear for participants during the secondary school timeframe and in the transition to postsecondary education. Numerous examples at the the meso-level surfaced as participants recalled their lived experiences of traversing the postsecondary access landscape. In their recounting of experiences of the access process, participants did not articulate they perceived the experience they were describing as a “missed opportunity.” However, for someone with a background and understanding of the inner workings of postsecondary access, the stories shared are clearly missed opportunities that are the direct result of a combination of

discriminatory practices both at the individual and systemic level, a lack of knowledge and information sharing, and/or a manifestation of unconscious bias regarding the capabilities of current and former refugees.

One example of missed opportunity that was experienced by six of seven participants occurred within the secondary school district all participants graduated from. These participants were completely uninformed of a scholarship opportunity that would cover all tuition and fees for students who enrolled at the local community college. Astoundingly, the one who realized the district would completely cover the cost of tuition and fees at the local community college learned this information from his older sibling who missed out on the opportunity previously!

Throughout interviews when this topic emerged, participants were candid about this missed opportunity as one they did not even know existed and they relied on federal financial aid which included loans. Yosef, for example, indicated he “didn't even know that existed" so he “applied for financial aid.” Had they received the scholarship, student loans would not have been necessary given their low-income status.

Missed opportunity resulted in taking a different path or detour than one would have taken in hindsight. Yosef, realized too late that he “graduated early, for some reason, and it was too late to apply for universities, even though I was capable of it.” He applied to a local community college at the last minute, despite his high GPA and demonstrated skill set to manage time and academics as a student-athlete, because he had run out of time.

Missed opportunity is woven in and through opportunities where a lack of information sharing by teachers, counselors, and others who work within secondary schools accumulates. Such is the case for Nan who had to interpret on her own what phrases like “waitlist” meant and how one negotiates such nuances of the application process. She shared, “They put me on a waiting list, and I kind of felt like, Oh, maybe it was because I didn't take like enough AP.” Nan

did not understand the waitlist process and assumed “they just didn’t want me there.” She turned down a later offer and subsequent generous financial aid package. In hindsight, she shared that she tries not to consider what she missed.

Multiple participants competed in athletics at the secondary school level, were competitive athletically and academically, and drew the attention of college coaching staff within the state and regionally. However, except for one participant, no one came forward to support the participant, or their family, in understanding the nuances of navigating and capitalizing on the opportunities that could be realized through athletics. Alex relayed:

> So the only glimpse into during my high school career only glimpse into possibility of higher education was, while I was playing. Actually, I was asked to be a kicker, a place kicker in a football team. When one college did kind of seriously look at me as a potential applicant, first, they wanted to look at my grades, and even as even as a senior, I had no, I had no way of bringing my grades.

Alex had served his purpose on the football team but no one cared to impart the importance of his grades and how the combination of good academic performance and athletic performance could equate to postsecondary opportunities. The lack of information sharing was only compounded in retrospect in that he also did not “know that it's an option to get a scholarship playing a sport.”

Yosef, however, did realize much earlier the egregiousness of the opportunity he missed to play soccer at the collegiate level and be supported financially in that endeavor. Yosef recalled:

> I was in the line to get a scholarship. A full-ride college scholarship for soccer, goalkeeper, because I became the best second goalkeeper in the State, and it was my dream to play soccer in college and get a scholarship.

He unexpectedly graduated early the summer before what he assumed would be his senior year in high school. He continued to say:

> My younger brother was still playing on that team. I went back to support him, watch him

> play, and this college coach was there looking for me. That's a heartbreak because they came to look at me in my senior year and I wasn't there. I was graduated, and that was heartbreaking.

One participant whose story deviated from the manner through which other participants experienced missed opportunity is encompassed in the experience of Tomas. His missed opportunity was a direct result of his behavior and actions during a championship wrestling match that cost him, not only a state title but also the interest of college scouts who brought with them promise and a future path to postsecondary education. Tomas regretfully shared:

> I went outside. I had realized what I've just done, cause I had three different colleges that were calling me and offering me, saying, 'Hey, we would like to check you out and see if you would come to our university. I had George Mason and VMI, looking at me, and then I had another school in South Carolina, and after my match the phone calls dropped.

Tomas realized that "because of one decision, a decision, that changed everything….the outcome of how I would and where I would go to college." His coach was the exception in that he helped Tomas find another possibility for postsecondary education and utilized his own cultural capital and advocated strongly on Tomas's behalf:

> I trusted my coach, he told me about this school. They offer me some scholarship money, and I take it, and I was like, 'All right. Let me take it a chance, because I trust I trusted him, and even throughout college he helped me out.

Navigating Starts Early and is a Learned Behavior

Participants in this study each had stories of employing navigational capital across the macro-, meso-and micro-levels very early on in their resettlement journey. From translating at medical appointments to completing paperwork to reading documents from elementary and secondary schools for their parents, these participants quickly learned the value of navigation for others and themselves. Navigating on behalf of parents was a common occurrence and learning how to navigate an observed, learned behavior. Bri explained, "I just knew a little bit of English, and I didn't know about the culture or how things worked. So my parents did not speak any

English. They just knew their names, basically." Alex had a similar experience and shared, "Once I arrived here, my role, as I guess, some newcomer and sort of a teenager who spoke some English, was to be an interpreter for my family, so I was." Tomas too learned the importance of navigating and translating as a young child. He recalled, "Translating was a huge part of us, because, like our parents, one, if they needed to go somewhere, they weren't gonna call the translator."

Navigation was a learned behavior picked up by observing others. Nan shared, "So I basically kind of learned how to translate and learn English and how to fill out forms and stuff by looking at the translators because my parents didn't know." Bri shared a similar experience of learning to navigate by observing others. She remembered, "That was all very new to me, but I did know a little bit of English that I would use to talk to people and try to figure out like where to go."

Not only do they have stories of navigating social institutions but their experiences navigating complex social atmospheres empowered them to maneuver within and through environments that were unsupportive and even downright hostile at times. For Shelia, the experiences of navigating for her parents, even for basic things, carried a tremendous amount of weight in terms of how difficult navigation was. She said, "It was hard. It was hard because parents don't speak the language, so when it comes to like even going to the stores, something like that, or if they need any small things, it was hard."

Similarly, for Alex, he found himself thrust into situations where navigation was difficult. Alex shared, "I became a little more acquainted with you know how things go, and at the same time my English got better and better because I forcibly had to get into that situation" on behalf of his parents.

Yosef's navigational duties continued for his family given his first-born status within his

immediate family. Yosef stated, “I was the older son so it was my responsibility to take care of my parent’s understanding. No matter what I had going on, that was my first responsibility.” Sometimes these responsibilities competed with where and when participants participated in the postsecondary education enrollment process.

The skills acquired navigating these early experiences form the basis for navigating the postsecondary exploration and access journey. As surfaced in the scholarly literature, these navigational capital repositories that refugees and former refugees hold can empower academic paths. The participants in this study drew upon their navigational capital as well as their aspirational capital to create success and opportunity around postsecondary exploration and access.

Participants in this study shared experiences full of navigation with only half of the information needed being at their disposal. Postsecondary pursuits were not discussed with teachers or guidance counselors. Participants were given scraps of information only when asked and individuals did not share the complete details needed for ease of navigation. Participants were not deterred from their educational aspirations though and utilized the navigational capital they had acquired through other experiences to persist. Nan shared an example of how this process played out. She shared, “I did ask my counselor about it, but I don't think it was very helpful, so I was just starting things off like, ‘Oh, how do you fill out of half the form?’” She also continued on with this example and explained that she would take what information she could obtain from an interaction and find clues about what she would do next to keep moving forward in her efforts to complete college and financial aid applications.

> I found out about this online thing called, I think, Common App. I think my English teacher told me so. That's when I went there. And I added all the colleges that I did research on that I wanted to go to. And then I found out about the financial aid application.

While Nan did make progress and complete the steps needed to begin postsecondary education after high school, her process was piecemeal, without a step-by-step plan and with no guidance. At any point in her trajectory, her progress could have been halted by a misstep she had not discovered.

Yosef also did a lot of research on his own to find out what the steps for accessing postsecondary education were both on his computer and by going to the community college and asking. Shelia also shared that she did her own personal research to learn about the postsecondary access process. She stated, “I've always provided for myself and that also included college, I am the one who had to go and learn about FAFSA.”

The need to navigate does not end when participants are accepted into a postsecondary institution. The ability to navigate in an unfamiliar environment becomes even more pronounced. The key to navigating at the postsecondary level is to use a systems perspective. Tomas explained:

> Just understanding how the system works and how you can leverage certain parts to benefit yourself over areas where you may struggle. Use the system for what it is. The system is gonna spit you out, it's no-brainer.

System-savvy Navigators are Important

Navigators come in all varieties, span all systemic levels, and serve multiple purposes in the lives of refugees and their family systems. The importance of these individuals cannot be overstated. In the recalled experiences of each participant, navigators provided some measure of guidance, knowledge, and advocacy from the moment each of these participants arrived in the U.S. From Nan’s experience, she remembered:

> There were a lot of people here that were like helping refugees find jobs, apply like, do the whole like school process like, take you to school and let you like, see how schools are before you actually start going to school.

Navigators come and go in the lives of each of these individuals yet, what they share, teach, and

encourage remains long after they have moved on.

Before the participants in the study knew how to navigate, they were learning it from the navigators who met their families at the airport, who took their families shopping, offered transportation to healthcare appointments, and other activities of basic living. Yosef recalled one such individual:

> She just showed up one day and said, My name is this, and I am the volunteer, and she, you know, took us around to like Walmart and showed us how to shop properly, and how to you know, how to talk to people and how to respond and all that.

A family volunteer also provided an example of navigating for Shelia. She shared that the volunteer assigned to her family would "do English classes for them. I would look at him, and then I would teach them English and help them out in any way that they could possibly need help." Bri also shared that she had a mentor who often helped her with getting clothing that fit and was more like what her peers were wearing.

Navigators often showed up in the lives of participants as a part of community agency or resettlement organization support or teachers and teachers aids who went above and beyond to notice and provide knowledge and guidance to young students. For Nan, it was a woman named "Miss Connie" who sparked her interest in postsecondary education. Nan recalled, "She used to help refugees a lot, so she was like, Oh, okay, like, if you want to go to college, this is what you have to do, and then she gave me the SAT book." Then her guidance counselor provided additional information when Nan would approach her with specific questions.

Bri remembered her ELL teachers as being "encouraging" about school and providing a source of motivation and guidance "toward resources." Sam and Yosef also remembered particular individuals who made lasting impressions on them in their early years in elementary and middle school as people who helped them navigate when they "spoke little English" and did not have anyone else to rely upon in the school setting. These navigators also provided support to

parents who were unsure of the inner workings of the educational system. Nan shared that her teachers were "very supportive and they were very patient. They did talk to my parents and let them know what was going on." Of all the participants in the study, Tomas could make direct connections to educators who provided him with direct support and guidance in the postsecondary access process and were instrumental in his success. For Tomas, he found that:

> having people in your life who've gone through the college process, where my parents did not understand. I had three or four people who are just like "do this process". And they were like, "Okay, let me help you". So each like even my high school teachers they saw the person that I could become compared to the person that I was at the moment.

Navigators can show up as coaches who provide transportation, clothing, and the equipment needed to compete. Sam and Yosef both had soccer coaches who provided transportation, mentoring, and items needed to participate in sports on multiple occasions from middle school through high school and when transportation became available given changing family circumstances. Tomas shared that numerous wrestling coaches, from middle school onward, who "developed" him to be where he is now and challenged him to put as much effort into his academics as he did into his wrestling interest. He shared, "They all like see the potential in me and they all cared enough to say, 'Let's see if I give, let's pour into him, but also give him a good goal to achieve towards.'"

Even after entering postsecondary education, navigators played a significant role for participants. Alex "relied heavily on" advisors and professors in order to navigate an unfamiliar environment and he found that these individuals "created a great sense of belonging because they really genuinely cared about" his progress and he began to excel academically. Alex also recognized the support and guidance provided by his professors and some of his peers in postsecondary education as important to his learning and his interest in his courses and program overall.

Yosef also surrounded himself with a core group of individuals he could turn to for support and navigation. He recalled, “I would always go to my counselors and let them know, like the situation that I had.” Tomas described an intricate navigational system that contributed to his educational success. He was very candid with his description and recalled, “With my undergrad, I created a system where I could have people who would help me, but not just me, but also help me understand like this is how college works. This is how things work.”

Navigators were also identified as other refugees who arrived before and had learned something about the complexities of the systems. For Yosef and his family, they were able to rely on “family members who came before us so they were kind of used to this environment.”

Sometimes navigators were other students, siblings, or cousins who had previously navigated a similar path. Sam’s path to postsecondary education was made a bit easier because his older brother had already navigated the application, financial aid, and enrollment process. According to Sam, his brother told him “about the placement test, about when to apply and see an advisor” and generally helped him a lot. Sam also shared that much of what his brother understood about the postsecondary process was learned both through his own experience and help he had gotten from older friends who had gone to the same community college. Yosef also spoke of older college students who showed him the way:

> There were a couple Nepali students, previous students that were actually working on the front desk so I was able to get help. So I was lucky and they showed me the right directions. Showed me a way to apply properly and help me with the financial aid. So I am very thankful for them, and because of them I am where I am right now.

Yosef stayed in close contact with these students and relied on them in the coming months as a new college student. Bri relied on cousins who had already gone to college to augment the information she gathered about the postsecondary process. Tomas provided some insight to the importance navigators can have in the lives of others:

> They see the future of you before you even see it. I can never say that I did everything myself. I gotta give credit to those people who are around me. Those people who who guided me because, like they played a huge, significant role in in my growth as a not just as a person, but as a human being in general.

Navigators open doors, dig in, and dig through with you.

Recreating Community is What You Do

The majority of participants in the study were among the first to be resettled from their respective protracted refugee settings. As a whole, these families came to the U.S. lacking a community that understood them from a cultural or social perspective or could adequately provide them with needed social capital from which they could draw. This is not to say that resettled families did not bring their social capital with them but it did not retain its value upon resettlement to the U.S.

Shelia's experiences seeing her family struggle with just the basic necessities of life formed her understanding of the important role community plays. She shared, "So you really need that kind of support. So if somebody knew us, or any information, they would tell the other, especially since my parents don't speak English."

For six out of seven participants in the study, they were among the first in their family to navigate accessing postsecondary education, not only in the U.S. but, even within their countries of origin. This left them without a community within the meso-level from whom they could draw the resources needed to access postsecondary education. Alex recalled not realizing he was first-generation or considering how it could have mattered. He shared, "I did not even know this was something that could be showing up and causing difficulty for me. Not until I started working with college students did I realize this had been me too."

Sam described the complexity well, "without a community or refugee community, or someone from your country, you get lost in this country because there's a lot of resources."

Sometimes, the barrier is the complexity of it all. Each participant in this study talked through how this lack of community led them to build their own communities comprised of other former refugees or people from different parts of the world who did not share the same background as them and how they utilized these newly created communities to build a repository of mental navigational capital. Shelia shared, "I grew up just being surrounded with people of different cultures, and I think that's where I started having my appreciation of people from different cultures."

Much of the navigational capital shared centered around educational opportunities. Nan recalls in high school that:

> There were a lot of refugees. So we had like this whole table that we used to sit at lunch, and at breakfast, and I used to tell them to like, 'Hey, like I don't know if you know but these are the things that you should like look into as soon as possible.'

Participants described supporting other refugees in these recreated communities through the college exploration and access process. Nan created community across the region through friendships with former refugees at two separate high schools:

> I used to tell them, like, oh, like 'this is what we have to do to get to college.' I did provide them with information as well. I used to tell them like, 'Oh, like we have to do the SAT, we have to take AP classes like it's not easy to get into college like you need a lot of things done.' So they didn't know the process, obviously.

The desire to continue pouring knowledge about postsecondary access into these communities did not stop once participants graduated from high school and/or left the area. Numerous participants discussed continuing to encourage siblings, cousins, and younger acquaintances to persevere in the exploration and access process. Nan encouraged her younger brother to understand the process of accessing postsecondary education by "doing well in school if you want to go to a good school," "start taking AP classes," and "start taking the SAT seriously." Shelia also found herself supporting her younger sibling's postsecondary access

journey. She shared, “I even helped my younger brother apply for FAFSA. When he went to college, every issue and conflict I had became a lesson even when it came to money and stuff like that.”

Participants also noted a desire to continue providing support for former refugee populations in their pursuit of postsecondary education. Alex explained that since he graduated from college, he has been “trying to open doors for people and trying to at least motivate them and provide assistance where needed.” Alex has created a scholarship fund specifically for current or former refugees to use to offset the cost of postsecondary education not covered by federal financial aid. Nan described her desire to continue supporting other’s educational goals:

> I want to help them in any way that I can like education-wise or even in any way that that I can help them, so that also keeps me going like okay, this is my future plan, I have to do this.

Both Sam and Yosef shared their work with youth in their respective communities as soccer coaches and their commitment to helping those individuals understand the value of postsecondary education and how to successfully access those opportunities.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided expansive summaries of each participant’s narratives, provided an in-depth analysis of participants’ responses, and presented the emerging themes and major findings of this post-intentional phenomenological study.

In Chapter Five, I discuss connections of the findings to the research questions, compare the themes that emerged from the data and analysis process to current literature, and explore further how Aspirational and Navigational capital are utilized by participants to reframe barriers they encounter in the postsecondary access process. Further, a discussion of study limitations, implications for practice, research, and policy, and areas for further research will conclude the chapter.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications

Chapter Four encompassed participant narratives for theme contextualization and an in-depth analysis of participant responses. Then, I presented emergent themes to illuminate the major findings of this post-intentional phenomenological study. This chapter begins with a discussion of the ways in which these themes map onto the varied and complex system of policies, procedures, systemic, and social structures consistent with Escandell et al.'s (2015) macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors that influence postsecondary educational access. Doing so superimposes the findings of this study on this complex system, provides a conduit for direct conversation with the literature, and assists practitioners in identifying spheres of influence through which they can act on recommendations based on the findings.

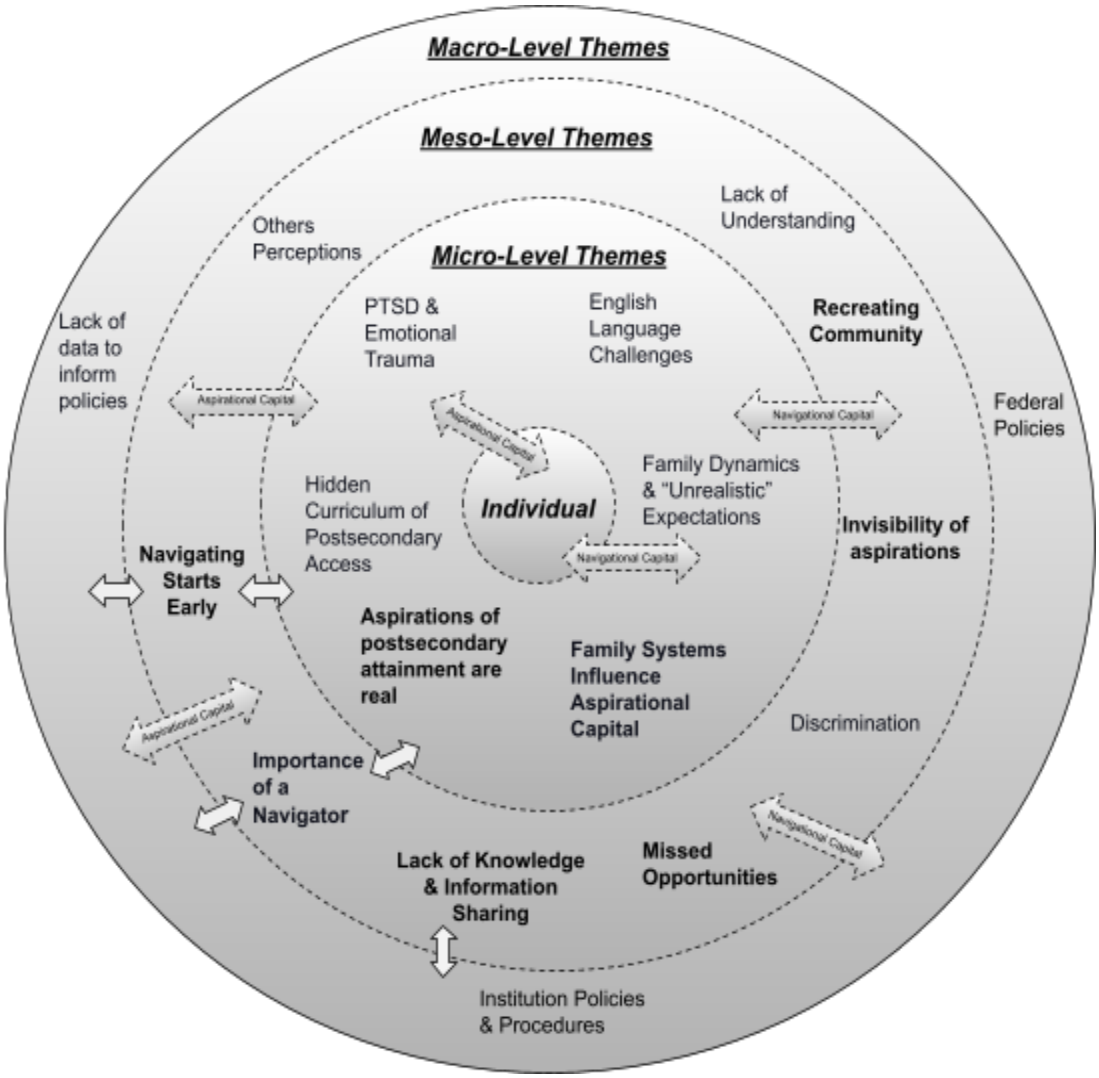
Accordingly, Figure 2 illustrates the barriers surfaced in current literature (identified in plain text) and emergent themes surfaced through this study (identified in bold text). As this diagram illustrates, these emergent themes are not contained within one specific level but can permeate multiple layers across the experience and varies by individual.This figure also illustrates how aspirational and navigational capital (identified by arrows) are infused throughout the lives of resettled refugees who have postsecondary goals and how both forms of capital span the complexities of postsecondary education access.

Connections to Research Questions

The research questions provided a guide for discussing the major findings of this study. Each question served as a guide for this inquiry and as a channel for discovering meaning attributed to the phenomenon of postsecondary access for participants. All three research questions were answered by the data gathered over the course of the study.

Each participant had experienced the phenomenon of postsecondary exploration, application, and enrollment. Each participant distinctly recalled their initial experiences in the first few months and years of resettlement to the U.S. While resettlement was distant in terms of time

Figure 2 - Postsecondary Access Barriers, Emergent Themes, and Impact of Aspirational and Navigational Capital for Refugees



passed from postsecondary exploration and beyond, those early experiences shaped the aspirations of, and navigational experience needed for, the successful pursuit of academic goals. All participants shared the importance of family member involvement in the postsecondary process throughout the larger experiential context. Even though there was a wide age range

among the participants, and one may have anticipated experiences would potentially reflect changes and shifts to experiences collectively over time, there were striking similarities regardless of the time that had passed since navigating the postsecondary access process. Motivations for postsecondary educational attainment were similar across all participants.

The first research question was: *What are the experiences of resettled refugees in the postsecondary exploration, application, and enrollment processes?* While unique and varied, participants' responses to questions centered on their experiences of this phenomenon revealed difficulties in acquiring, understanding, and activating information needed across all facets of the process. Their experiences also highlighted the importance of having individuals with agency who operate within larger complex systems providing information, guidance, and support about each step of the postsecondary access process as opposed to gatekeeping. Participant stories surfaced a veil of invisibility to the aspirations of refugees who are seeking postsecondary education and assumptions about their interests and abilities to pursue postsecondary education. Participants were rarely encouraged to pursue education beyond secondary education. They are left to discover answers, pathways, and possibilities on their own. Yet they continued pursuing their goals and utilized education to achieve the lives they imagined for themselves.

The second research question was: *How do resettled refugees encounter barriers in the postsecondary exploration, application, and enrollment processes?* As reflected in the scholarly literature to date, barriers to postsecondary education continue to persist unabated and unchallenged and have surfaced in the stories of participants in this study. Barriers at each level, macro-, meso-, and micro-emerged in the telling of resettlement to the U.S. and the difficulties faced by individuals and family systems to understand the complexities of life in their new environment. Despite being confronted with a web of barriers, participants remained focused on future outcomes and were willing to attempt working through and around these barriers.

The third research question was: *How, if at all, do resettled refugees utilize navigational and aspirational capital to negotiate exploration, application, and enrollment processes?* Participants actively engaged in utilizing both forms of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) across the exploration, application, and enrollment processes. Both aspirational and navigational capital surfaced early in the lives of participants. While navigational capital grew from necessity to support the needs of participants' immediate family members upon resettlement, those experiences of learning and exercising such capital served participants well as they began exploring postsecondary education. Acquisition of navigational capital was not constrained to one aspect of life but spanned multiple systems within the U.S. and permeated through the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. Aspirational capital emerged in the recollection of participants and certainly, within timeframes that would have given them ample time to further operationalize this capital had they been given adequate information and support around postsecondary access.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Scholarly Literature

In Chapter 2, I identified the refugee population as defined by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2016), surfaced the numerous reasons why postsecondary education is imperative for refugee populations, and summarized and synthesized the scholarly literature concentrated on the barriers faced by current and former refugees in the postsecondary access process. In this chapter, I connect the emergent themes (presented in Chapter Four) to relevant scholarly literature and to the theoretical constructs of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) to reframe deficit-based barriers and illuminate asset-based navigation of the postsecondary access process.

Aspirations of Postsecondary Education are Real

The first theme presented provided a discussion of the desire to obtain postsecondary education. Educational aspirations were evident both in thought and action as reported by

participants.

Findings of this study supported current literature (Brunton et al., 2019; Evans et al., 2017; Perry et al., 2016; Uptin et al., 2016) that refugees have the desire and drive to pursue postsecondary education, have high aspirations for educational goals, and determination to navigate barriers to reach degree attainment.

New data surfaced that brings a deeper understanding of when aspirational ideas of postsecondary educational attainment begin to surface. Aspirations do not always materialize as goals or plans but are also desires and feelings about how one would like their future to look. Participants in this study recognized that there were educational opportunities in the U.S. that would not have been a reality in their former countries. For some, this idea began to form in middle school, and for others, in high school. They also began to see education as a way to improve their place in society for themselves and their immediate family members. Postsecondary educational attainment was both an aspirational goal because of a love of learning for some and a means to achieve additional goals like financial security or a particular career path for others.

Family Systems Influence Aspirational Capital

The second theme presented provided a discussion of the ways in which the family members making up participants' family systems influence the emergence and growth of aspirational capital for participants in this study. Family members provided foundational ideas about the possibilities of education, prioritized education in word and/or deed, encouraged it for the potential benefits, and fed the desire and hope for "better" outcomes that education could provide.

Findings of this study supported current literature that resettled refugees make decisions about their postsecondary education trajectory in response to family concerns and needs such as financial support, the continued need to serve as a navigator, and contributing to family

well-being in a variety of ways (Ferede, 2018; Perry et al., 2016; Rumbaut et al., 2001; Shakya et al., 2014). Participants also demonstrated that they were making great strides toward postsecondary degree attainment and were on par with their peers who were born within the U.S. (Evans et al., 2017). With regards to postsecondary educational interests and pursuits, parents of participants in this study understood neither the large picture aspects nor the nuanced particulars of the postsecondary access process. They were unable to help their child navigate the process, were not involved in ways that participants noted their friends' parents, who were not refugees, were involved in the educational process (Ascher, 1985; McBrien, 2005; Roy et al., 2011; Rumbaut et al., 2001). Additionally, participants in the study did have family members who were supportive of educational goals and were a source of aspirational capital (Mwangi et al., 2021).

New data surfaced that adds to the literature regarding how family systems use aspirational capital to "maintain hopes and dreams for the future even in the face of real and perceived barriers" that impact postsecondary educational attainment (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Parents of participants encouraged them to pursue educational dreams continuously and reminded them that education was not only possible but critical. Parents and other family members would discuss what life would be like in the future once participants graduated with a college degree. While parents did not generally understand how to obtain postsecondary access and were "without the objective means to attain", they spoke the words that created and encouraged aspirational capital, removed the barriers they had control over that hampered navigational capital, and created space that would "allow themselves and their children to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances" (Yosso, 2005, p. 78).

Parents did encourage specific areas they knew were instrumental in successfully moving through the postsecondary attainment process such as studying and getting good grades in secondary classes. They also took on additional work responsibilities or other financial hardships

so participants could redistribute their time in ways that benefited secondary school education in preparation for the college application process and achieving success in coursework at the postsecondary level.

Invisibility of Refugee Aspiration within the Education System

The third theme presented included a discussion of the ways in which participant's postsecondary educational aspirations go unseen in the pre-and postsecondary environment and sets the stage for educational trajectory.

Findings of this study support current literature that deficit-based views of refugee postsecondary aspirations, or perceived lack of aspirations, led to perceptions that were inaccurate and detrimental to educational trajectory. This study also supports current literature findings that refugees do have educational aspirations but it is this ignoring and doubting that contributes to the invisibility of refugee aspirations (Perry et al., 2011). This invisibility also allows those in power within educational systems to excuse behaviors that create barriers for refugees (Hannah, 1999). This invisibility paradigm also provides a breeding ground for isolation, microaggressions, and discrimination (Lee, 2002; Roy et al., 2011).

New data surfaced that adds to the literature that despite the invisibility of educational aspirations, participants consistently asked questions, conducted their own research, and were resilient in working through setbacks in the pursuit of their postsecondary goals. They also performed well academically and were active in extracurricular activities when able. However, the invisibility of participants' academic potential did lead to myriad complications and unnecessary barriers that slowed participants' educational pursuits.

Lack of Information/Knowledge Sharing about the Postsecondary Exploration, Application, and Enrollment Process

The fourth theme presented a discussion of how withholding information and knowledge

about the postsecondary exploration, application, and enrollment process can hinder progress toward reaching educational goals, can create confusion, and result in ill-informed decision-making. Participants who did receive information about aspects of the process did not receive complete information but instead only were given partial pieces of information that left gaps in knowledge and a lack of comprehensive understanding of processes. Lack of information and knowledge sharing also left participants to make choices without understanding the potential outcomes or impacts on their educational paths.

These findings support current literature shedding light on the implications of not providing timely, accessible information about the postsecondary attainment process (Unangst et al., 2020). The need for tailored information provided by those operating within the broad education system is necessary for informed decision-making and creating a supportive, encouraging environment for exploration and preparation (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2017; Mwangi, 2015; Sontag, 2019). After families, educational institutions, and those who work within those systems, have the greatest impact on access to postsecondary education (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2017).

New data emerged as a result of this study indicating that participants are observing how information is withheld from them and the larger refugee populations. Participants verbalized realizing that not all the information they needed was provided to them. They took note of when information was withheld and by whom in the form of gatekeeping. They also realized that other refugees were being impacted by this lack of information sharing.

An additional contribution to the literature emerging from this study is that refugees with postsecondary aspirations did not let a lack of information sharing stop them. Each participant recalled their experience of exploring, accessing, and enrolling in postsecondary education as being full of unknowns. However, they utilized both navigational and aspirational capital to

search for information across resource areas like siblings, technologies, friends, coaches, trusted community members, and others.

These findings further illustrate the need for structured, accountable sources of information on the postsecondary access process and ensuring that information is provided in timely, accessible ways through trustworthy avenues.

Missed Opportunities

The fifth theme presented provided a discussion of ways in which a lack of information and knowledge sharing comes to bear on the opportunities that participants were able to recognize or capitalize on. For each participant, missed opportunities shaped how, when, and where they were able to move forward with their aspirations of postsecondary education.

The findings of this study supported current literature illustrating that gatekeeping of information and resources is a producer of missed opportunities in explicit and tangible forms (Perry et al., 2011; Yi et al., 2018). It also supports current literature indicating discrimination in its subtlest forms and presumption of others' capabilities and interests in postsecondary education does create unnecessary barriers and unanticipated burdens within an already tenuous journey for refugees with aspirations of postsecondary education (Baker et al., 2019; Dougherty et al., 2017; Hannah, 1999; Lee 2002; Roy et al., 2011).

New data surfaced that adds to the literature that discrimination and perceptions from a deficit perspective lead to missed opportunities that are unnecessary. All participants in this study had opportunities that did not materialize but were within their grasp. For some, it was a means of financial support, for others it was attending a specific educational institution. For some, it resulted in educational aspirations being put on hold.

Also, participants' recollections of events and experiences were not framed by them as missed opportunities at the time they were unraveling. This provides additional evidence of the

importance of sharing knowledge about all aspects of the postsecondary access process. Without the knowledge of what opportunities are, one does not see them when they are within one's grasp. In retrospect, with the postsecondary access process behind them, participants were fully cognizant of what had been missed and the temporary derailment that ensued.

Navigating Starts Early and is a Learned Behavior

The sixth theme presented focused on navigation as a behavior that begins early in the resettlement process and is a responsibility that often falls to younger family members who may have a better command of English. Additionally, the skillset needed to navigate a complex and unfamiliar system is a learned behavior that can be applied broadly once acquired.

Findings from this study support current literature exposing how the hidden curriculum of postsecondary access creates barriers to postsecondary attainment and that refugees are left to discover information and resources on their own. Participants were unaware of how and where to engage information to support their exploration efforts and were not afforded the opportunity to utilize support programs to guide their application and enrollment activities (Brunton et al., 2019; Hannah, 1999). However, just as in current literature, participants in this study also showed agency through navigating adversity to pursue educational goals.

New data from this study provides new knowledge to a gap in the literature regarding how navigational capital is acquired by young refugees who are resettled to an unfamiliar environment and relied upon to support their families through navigating complex systems, often in languages they are largely unfamiliar with. Participants in this study supported parents and other immediate family members through written and oral communication with outside entities, completed official documentation on behalf of adults, and negotiated for the needs of their individual and collective family members.

Navigation was a learned behavior picked up by observing others within the system and

mimicking observed behaviors and language. The nuances of navigating are at times learned under difficult circumstances that participants would have rather avoided such as interacting with others in an environment that does not feel welcoming or safe, or navigating a health situation between a parent and provider that ultimately results in sharing unexpected news.

It was this learned behavior of navigating that provided participants with the needed skills to find knowledge and information when needed and to process that information into actionable outcomes. Participants understood that part of navigating included asking questions and continuing to ask questions throughout a particular process. They also were aware that part of navigating required applying the information they had acquired and looking for clues as to next steps.

System-savvy Navigators are Important

The seventh theme presented provided a discussion of the vital role navigators who are experienced and knowledgeable about postsecondary exploration, application, and enrollment can play in demystifying the hidden curriculum of postsecondary access, providing guidance to build navigational capital, and encourage growth in aspirational capital for refugees.

Findings of this study supported current literature demonstrating that with support in place that spans the educational, family system, and community at large, refugees can sustain academic goals and standards in the face of barriers (McBrien, 2005). Navigators are the providers of individualized, multifaceted knowledge about the postsecondary access process which has been found to be critical to educational attainment (Mwangi, 2015; Sontag, 2019). Navigators are the "bridge to educational information" as described by Dryden-Peterson et al. (2017, p.7).

The new data surfaced as a part of this study adds to this literature by expanding on the ways in which system-savvy navigators contribute to refugees accessing both power and privilege which can counter barriers created by lack of information sharing as one prepares to explore

postsecondary education (Uptin et al., 2016). Navigators who are willing to demystify the hidden curriculum of postsecondary access also facilitate the shift from viewing refugees and their experiences from a deficit-based lens focusing on what they do not have to an asset-based lens which focuses on what they do have such as interest, aspiration, persistence, support of family, and navigational know-how. The encouragement and guidance of a navigator also serves to welcome refugees into the community they have been resettled which can positively impact educational outcomes (McBride, 2005; Tandon, 2016). System navigators can also combat isolation and exclusionary practices within K-12+ educational settings.

In this study, navigators consisted of volunteers within the community who supported the family post-resettlement, K-12+ educators, secondary and postsecondary coaches, ELL/ESL instructors and educational staff, former refugees who arrived before, and siblings who had previously navigated the postsecondary education system.

New data surfaced that adds to the literature that navigators can make a difference in the lives of refugees as they navigate across macro-, meso- and micro-levels of systems within the U.S. Navigators provide information about the systems in which postsecondary education is situated at each of these levels. For example, navigators who interfaced in the lives of participants in this study provided information regarding the macro- and meso-level policies of postsecondary education access such as completing the SAT. Navigators also served as points of reference along the educational pathways for participants and families and were the guides who could be relied upon to be a source of information one could reliably return to when needed. Navigators created a sense of belonging, demonstrated care, and were the disruptors of barriers such as lack of information sharing.

Participants in this study surrounded themselves with a core group of navigators who could be relied upon to provide needed support and navigation - essentially, a system of

navigators. This system of navigators was identified as reliable, consistent providers of information with an acquired understanding of systemic navigation either through experience or inhabiting the particular system participants were attempting to understand themselves.

It is in this context and space where social capital as a "dynamic process" interacting with other forms of community cultural wealth becomes evident in the postsecondary access process for resettled refugees in this study (Yoso, 2005, p.77). Social capital, within the context of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and for this study's participants, consists of networks of individuals with knowledge and resources of value to the postsecondary educational process. Just as noted by Yosso (2005), social capital in this study "provides both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions" (p.79). Navigators, in this study, are the individuals who provide the building blocks for social capital given that resettled refugees have little to none in the first generation post-resettlement and rely greatly on others to assist them in acquiring it.

While social capital was not initially identified as a form of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) of focus for this study, it is important to discuss when such capital emerges and is interwoven in the experiences of postsecondary access for resettled refugees. Because the six forms of capital that comprise community cultural wealth build upon one another, the illustration of additional emerging community cultural wealth, such as social capital, within the resettled refugee community is of note and provides support for the growth of other forms of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005).

Recreating Community is What You Do

The eighth theme presented provided a discussion of recreating community to both gather and provide support around postsecondary access in an effort to enhance navigation, encourage aspiration, and combat barriers that participants are or have experienced in their educational

pursuits.

Findings of this study supported current literature that community, however constructed, plays an important role in the success of resettled refugees academically (Crosnoe et al., 2011; Mukiibi, 2015; Vigil et al., 2021). It also supports current literature indicating that belonging within a community and perceiving that one is a contributing member of a community plays a valuable role in the healing of trauma experienced prior to resettlement (Ryan et al., 2008).

Participant's descriptions of the desire and need for a community to support them in their educational goals provided new findings that add to the literature. Participants, many of whom did not have a community to rely on when they first resettled, were left floundering in their efforts to understand the systems they were living within. First and foremost was their lack of community to navigate the needs of daily life with the product of that experience being a generation of former refugees who had learned to navigate complex systems and gained navigational capital for themselves and their families. They also lacked community, what would be termed social capital in the community cultural wealth theoretical framework (Yosso, 2005), in the K-12 education system. They describe the difficulty of not knowing anyone they could turn to to understand even basic processes of the educational system and what would be important to understand for future aspirational endeavors. This lack of community reemerged in the postsecondary setting when participants transitioned to new educational settings.

To answer this need for community, participants began to create communities of their own, composed of other refugees, immigrants who were not refugees, and other minoritized individuals who did not understand the postsecondary access processes or the navigation needed once enrolled in a postsecondary setting. Participants were heavily involved in providing information they had gathered about the postsecondary access processes to their peers and to their siblings, broader family members, and the wider refugee community as they explored and

navigated through the postsecondary preparation, application, and enrollment processes.

The desire to continue providing guidance and knowledge to other refugees in the future was a long-term interest of most participants in this study and an actual pursuit of three participants. This finding of the recognized need for an active re-creation of community provides further evidence that social capital is a necessity and works hand-in-hand with navigational and aspirational capital in the lives of resettled refugees. Within the community cultural wealth theoretical framework, social capital is created and gained through navigating institutions and systems and is shared through knowledge transfer and resource sharing back into the community which includes family members, other resettled refugees, and other underrepresented individuals in the case of this study's participants.

Limitations of the Study

Drawing from the local current and former refugee populations, requiring participants to have completed a high school diploma or equivalency from within the U.S., and only including those that have an interest in pursuing postsecondary education, and/or who were actively pursuing or had pursued postsecondary education within the U.S., were limitations for this study. Given the lower numbers of individuals with refugee status resettled to the area in the past 10 years, fewer individuals meet the criteria for this study. Also, the ongoing outward migration of resettled refugees from the region to areas with greater access to employment minimized the available participants.

Because snowball sampling was employed, those individuals who are connected within the broader community and within the former refugee community were more likely to be included in the study (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). This is a limitation given those who are not as well connected may not know about the study and therefore, their experiences of the phenomenon are not reflected in these findings.

While the participants in this study included individuals from geographically diverse backgrounds, conflict timeframes, and displacement circumstances, the vast possibilities of refugee resettlement experiences as they pertain to postsecondary exploration, application, and enrollment are outside the scope of this study given the limitations on resettlement community capacity and the propensity to resettle family groups within the same community if possible. In other words, individuals from a geographic region where a conflict may be occurring may not be well represented in the local community.

This study is also limited to the degree to which participants willingly shared their experiences of the phenomenon. Great care was taken to reassure participants and create a virtual environment where participants felt comfortable and safe to share their experiences. However, participants likely shared only what they were comfortable disclosing.

Implications

This study contributes to policies and practices within the broad U.S. education system, as well as the policies under which refugee populations are resettled in the U.S. This study fills gaps in the small collection of literature that explores postsecondary access for resettled refugee populations. It also utilizes an asset-based approach which differs from much of the existing literature which assumes a deficit-based lens through which to view the refugee postsecondary access experience. Additionally, it is important to note that one of the tenets of post-intentional phenomenology is to consider how and where social change occurs. In the following paragraphs, as I consider implications for practice, research, and policy, it is with a desire for social change that I write.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

First and foremost, the aim of all systems and individuals who intersect with the lived experiences of refugee populations should, regardless of purpose, facilitate creating navigational

capital in intentional ways and encourage aspirational capital in all facets of life. Where the postsecondary education access process is concerned, individuals who work within the U.S. educational continuum must operate with the assumption that all students within the system have the desire to learn and seek educational opportunities beyond their current attainment. This shift in assumption would combat barriers such as lack of information and knowledge sharing which contribute to missed opportunities for resettled refugees. It would also naturally recalibrate when information about college-going is shared and in what ways.

This study can provide a guide map for secondary education administrators, teachers, coaches, guidance counselors, postsecondary administrators, and practitioners, regarding the impetus for, and ways to become, the navigator students need. It is more clear from the experiences shared by participants in this study that complete, accessible, and timely information about all aspects of the postsecondary access process must be crafted and shared with intentionality.

This study sheds light on the vital need for postsecondary administrators and staff to prepare their institutions to welcome and create "to and through" initiatives with refugee populations in mind. While participants in this study did not experience barriers such as difficulty providing documentation of educational attainment in their home countries or requirements to take TOEFL exams as part of their admissions process, they did experience profound disadvantages with respect to transition difficulties, missing deadlines that impacted financial aid, and surprise costs that held implications for initial and/or continued enrollment. Postsecondary intuitions can modify existing programs for underrepresented populations to embrace this potential student population as well. Considering and preparing for resettled refugee populations would broaden accessibility and make the institution better prepared to serve all student populations.

Implications and Recommendations for Research

This study provides a deeper look into the barriers that surfaced in previous literature exploring the refugee experience pursuing postsecondary education and how those barriers can be both propagated but also chipped away at by refugees. It also provides an understanding of how community cultural wealth can be created and utilized by refugees in ways that support their postsecondary educational goals. Broadening the focus to include the shifting populations who are refugee-adjacent such as special immigrant visa holders and those who have been given asylee status with special designations would be of importance to those seeking to understand how macro-level factors such as federal policies create postsecondary access barriers. At the same time, a narrowing of the focus to look very specifically at one aspect of the postsecondary access process, like financial aid for example, could provide additional clarification as to which barriers arise within particular parts of the process and how refugees are navigating the nuances of those barriers. An additional study of gender or cultural differences in postsecondary educational aspirations and attainment could create opportunities for tailoring resources to best assist individuals seeking postsecondary access.

Future research exploring how other forms of capital within community cultural wealth surface and are utilized by refugees is warranted. In this study, former refugees created their own cultural wealth once they learned some of the navigational nuances and obtained some of their aspirational goals (completing the steps to access postsecondary education like college applications and FAFSA). They began to create their own social capital and share it with others. They began to form their own types of resistant capital through conversations about creating opportunities for others who aspire to enter postsecondary education and actively provided those resources for access in intentional, organized ways.

Also, familial capital begins to be recognized, organized, and shared in a way that effectively removes barriers to postsecondary access for those within the broader refugee and former refugee community through extended family and community networks. The refugees in this study were some of the first, if not the first, from their village, refugee camp, or former country to resettle in the local region. A deeper understanding of the evolution of this capital-building process is needed. While this study provides a glimpse of how various forms of community cultural wealth capital begin to take shape, deeper questions remain about how various forms of community cultural wealth capital are formed and how they evolve. Additionally, are there forms of capital that have yet to be identified? Future research will need to delve into this further.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy

Continued policies that punish the desire for postsecondary educational attainment and complicate the ability of resettled refugees to capitalize on educational attainment prior to resettlement exposes people to generational poverty that can be avoided. A clear pathway to educational attainment and prior educational attainment recognition is desperately needed.

Clarifying and simplifying the FAFSA process to include a one-step process to indicate a student was resettled under refugee status which would lead to an automatic zero estimated family contribution would make the financial aid process less confusing and foreboding for resettled refugees and their families.

Changing state and federal policies that would encourage the creation of partnerships between community resettlement organizations, secondary school systems, and college access providers would create a system of education navigators and provide wrap-around services for children and their families so that direct support and information can be provided about educational possibilities. Programs such as TRiO already exist and could be given the charge by

the U.S. Department of Education to make enrolling resettled refugees, both those in secondary school and those who have graduated or aged out, a priority area within the grant application. The same charge could be applied to refugee resettlement organizations as well.

Final Reflection

This study provides new insight into both the lived experiences of former refugees who have pursued postsecondary education and the ways in which these individuals have utilized their aspirational and navigational capital to negotiate a complex web of systemic barriers. It was an honor to have each person share the intimate details of painful transitions into and through resettlement, educational quests that surfaced self-doubt and anxiety, and their amazing progress in claiming goals they had set for themselves. Their individual and collective tenaciousness to create their unique stories of success on their own terms, despite the countless setbacks and needless bureaucracy encountered, is inspiring.

I did find it striking to discover the level of outward migration of resettled refugees from the local area while recruiting for this study. The lack of employment opportunities that can support a family, coupled with the shortage of affordable, safe housing has resulted in an uprooting of previously resettled refugees to more urban areas. This is a great loss for the local area on many levels and creates added burdens for families who once again find their lives disrupted through relocation.

Participants in this study exhibited a consistent spirit of both gratitude and positivity. They each shared how fortunate they felt to have been resettled within the U.S. and how meaningful it was to become a citizen (something that each of them had done). They were quick to point out the opportunities they recognized as being a part of resettling within the U.S. In the retelling of the hardships and setbacks they shared with me, participants wrapped their retelling of those experiences in threads of hope and persistence. They shared their joy at what they had

accomplished and their confident expectations for what was to come. It was as if the words "no" and "can't" just had no power over the ultimate trajectory of their journeys.

Each participant spoke of their desire to give back in some way and to demystify the postsecondary access process for others who are marginalized, silenced, and invisible. They shared how in retrospect they were questioning why the process had been so complex and burdensome for them and why those missed opportunities were even a possibility. They have plans to continue asking "why" and to continue using their collective voices to challenge policies and status quo positionality.

In all transparency, I struggled greatly during the process of this study to not let my anger at what I perceived to be blatant injustice cloud my focus while listening and later, in analyzing data. While I was incensed at the multiple missed opportunities and needless hardship, had I been taken over by my own emotions, I would have missed hearing how participants refused to be sidetracked but looked for detours and alternative choices and took gambles and risks that made them stronger in the process.

This study also solidified my understanding of just how broken our immigration system truly is, how collectively we are failing to protect, defend, and empower those who most need us to do so, and how we resist change at our own peril. Every single one of us can do better. Each of us holds a bit of information or a piece of the puzzle or a resource that we could freely give to ease the journey for those living among us who have come here in search of freedom, safety, and a different future.

I am gladly forever changed by what was shared with me and the trust others placed in me to share their stories. My hope is something you have discovered in these pages has changed you as well.

Conclusion

This study's purpose was to explore how individuals resettled in the U.S., with current or former refugee status, experience the exploration, application, and enrollment processes and utilize community cultural wealth, specifically aspirational and navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) while in the process of accessing postsecondary education.

The overarching question guiding the study was: *How might accessing postsecondary education take shape for refugees in the U.S.?* However, more specifically, the following sub-questions provided the structure around which the research study was created:

- What are the experiences of resettled refugees in the postsecondary exploration, application, and enrollment processes?
- Do resettled refugees encounter barriers in the postsecondary exploration, application, and enrollment processes?
- How, if at all, do resettled refugees utilize navigational and aspirational capital to negotiate exploration, application, and enrollment processes?

A post-intentional phenomenological research design was utilized for deeper consideration of the research questions listed above. This approach was selected for the ways in which it encourages deeper inquiry into understanding how phenomena are experienced in the context of systemic structures, how it requires the researcher to think with theory in the process of data analysis and to explore how the research plays a part in producing the phenomenon of interest (Vagle, 2018). The results of this study emerged through data collected from seven former refugees during one to two face-to-face, virtual, semi-structured in-depth interviews. Once data analysis was completed, 8 themes surfaced: (1) Aspirations of Postsecondary Education are Real, (2) Family Systems Influence Aspirational Capital, (3) Invisibility of Refugee Aspiration within the Education System, (4) Lack of Information/Knowledge Sharing about the Postsecondary Exploration, Application, and Enrollment Process, (5) Missed

Opportunities, (6) Navigating Starts Early and is a Learned Behavior, (7) System-savvy Navigators are Important, (8) Recreating Community is What You Do.

These eight emergent themes add to the existing literature focused on the lived experiences of refugee populations and their experiences accessing postsecondary education. It also broadens the utilization of the community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005) as an option for understanding how current and former refugees navigate complex systems within the U.S. and how they foster and operationalize aspirational capital in a barrier-laden environment.

Based on the findings from this study, recommendations can be offered across the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of structures that comprise the resettlement and education systems within the U.S. Recommendations for practice include reevaluating assumptions held regarding refugees' postsecondary educational aspirations; creating and planning timely information delivery about each step in the postsecondary access process as well as the support structures needed to carve out space for successfully supporting refugee aspirations of postsecondary attainment; and the dismantling of unnecessary barriers that only serve to hinder postsecondary access and success for refugee populations.

Recommendations for research encourage both a broadening of focus to encompass a wider range of refugee classifications and a narrowing of focus around cultural and gender differences in the postsecondary access process. Additional research to understand how other forms of community cultural wealth come to bear on the postsecondary education access process and how community cultural wealth is cultivated and emerges within this extensive process would be of benefit.

Recommendations for policy focus on streamlining existing systems to decrease process and bureaucratic burdens on refugee populations who encounter complex requirements created without them in mind. It also calls for encouraging and removing barriers to increased

community partnerships among already established support structures that could more effectively encourage postsecondary aspirations within refugee populations.

In closing, this study contributes to the existing literature focused on current and former refugees and their experiences of accessing postsecondary education from an asset-based perspective and through the lens of community cultural wealth. With continued and growing unrest around the world, Global North countries such as the U.S. will continue to be expected to be providers of safety, hope, and opportunity. We must evaluate our policies, procedures, support structures, and assumptions in light of scholarly literature that offers suggestions grounded in experientially-based research.

References

Ariel, S. K. (2014). Ethnic identity in children of immigrants: identity pathways, academic outcomes, and the mediating effect of parents and peers. [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Michigan]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

Ascher, C. (1985). The social and psychological adjustment of Southeast Asian refugees. *The Urban Review, 17*(2), 147–152. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01108254

Bacchus, N., Birman, D., & Trickett, E. (November 2001). Somali refugee youth in Maryland: *Needs Assessment. Report prepared for The Maryland Office for New Americans.* Maryland Department of Human Resources.

Bailey, L. F. (2014). The origin and success of qualitative research. *International Journal of Market Research, 56*(2), 167-184. https://doi.org/10.2501/IJMR-2014-013

Bajwa, J., Couto, S., Kidd, S., Markoulakis, M., Abai, M., & McKenzi, K. (2017). Refugees, higher education, and informational barriers. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, *25*(3), 56-65.

Baker, S., Ramsay, G. & Lenette, C. (2019). Students from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds and meaningful participation in higher education: From peripheral to fundamental concern. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, *21*, 4-19. https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.21.2.4

Bankston III, C. & Zhou, M. (2002). Being well vs. doing well: Self-esteem and school performance among immigrant and non-immigrant racial and ethnic groups. *International Migration Review, 36,* 389-415.

Barkdull, C., Weber, B., Swart, A., & Phillips, A. (2011). Refugee resettlement policy and programs: A social work call for action. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 1*(1), pp. 107-119.

Biernacki, P. & Waldorf, D. (1981). Snowball Sampling: Problems and Techniques of Chain Referral Sampling. *Sociological Methods and Research, 10*, 141–163.

Blakely, M. M. (1983). Southeast Asian refugee parents: An inquiry into home-school communication and understanding. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 14,* 43-68.

Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society and culture.* Sage.

Brunton, J., Farrell, O., Costello, E., Delaney, L., Foley, C., & Brown, F. (2019). Duelling identities in refugees learning through open, online higher education. *Open Praxis, 11*(4), 397-408.

Capps, R., & Fix, M. (2015). *Ten facts about U.S. refugee resettlement.* Migration Policy Institute. Retrieved from http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/ten-facts-about-us-refugee-resettlement.

Crea, T. (2016). Refugee higher education: Contextual challenges and implications for program design, delivery, and accompaniment. *International Journal of Educational Development, 46,* 12-22.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method approaches*. Sage Publications.

Crosnoe, R., & Turley, R. (2011). K-12 educational outcomes of immigrant youth. *The Future of Children, 21*(1), 129-152. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/41229014

Detourbe, M., & Goastelle, G. (2018). Revisiting the issues of access to higher education and social stratification through the case of refugees: A comparative study of spaces of opportunity for refugee students in Germany and England. *Social Sciences, 7*(186), 1-20. doi:10.3390/socsci7100186

Dietz, G.A., Wishah, L., Douglas, E.P., McCray, E.D. (July 2021). WIP: Assessing Community Cultural Wealth and Funds of Knowledge for Students Attending a Co-Op-Based

Engineering Program. *American Society for Engineering Education Virtual Annual Conference Virtual Meeting.*

Dona, G. (2007). The *Microphysics* of participation in refugee research. *Journal of Refugee Students, (20)*, 210-229. doi:10.1093/jrs/fem013.

Dougherty, K. J., & Callender, C. (August 2017). English and American higher education access and completion policy regimes: similarities, differences, and possible lessons. *Centre for Global Higher Education, No. 24.*, 1-72.

Dryden-Peterson, S., & Giles, W. (2010). Introduction: Higher education for refugees. *Refuge, 27*(2), 3-9.

Entigar, K. (2017). The limits of pedagogy: Diaculturalist pedagogy as a paradigm shift in the education of adult immigrants. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, *25*(3), 347-356.

Escandell, X., Marí‐Klose, M., & Marí‐Klose, P. (2015). Gender gaps in educational outcomes among children of new migrants: The role of social integration from a comparative perspective. *Sociology Compass*, *9*(12), 1036-1048.

Evans, W.N., & Fitzgerald, D. (2017). The economic and social outcomes of refugees in the U.S.: Evidence from the ACS. National Bureau of Economic Research, 1-52. http://www.nber.org/papers/w23498.

Felix, V. (2021). Understanding the lived higher education experiences of students from refugee backgrounds: Recommendations for future practice. *New Directions for Higher Education, 2020*(191), 91-102.

Ferede, M. (2018). Higher education for refugees. UNESCO. Retrieved on September 26, 2020, from https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000266075.

Fincham, K. (2020) Higher education and Syrian refugees' navigation of economic, social and political constraints in exile. *Education and Conflict Review, 3,* 29–36.

Fox, P. G., Burns, K. R., Popovich, J. M., Belknap, R. A., & Frank-Stromborg, M. (2004). Southeast Asian refugee children: self-esteem as a predictor of depression and scholastic achievement in the U.S. *The International Journal of Psychiatric Nursing Research*, *9*(2), 1063–1072.

Gitlin, A., Buendia, E., Crosland, K., & Doumbia, F. (2003). The production of margin and center: Welcoming-unwelcoming of immigrant students. *American Educational Research Journal, 40*(1), 91-122.

Grace, B.L., Nawyn, S. J., Okwako, B. (2017). The right to belong (If you can afford it): Market-based restrictions on social citizenship in refugee resettlement. *Journal of Refugee Studies, 31*(1) 42-62. DOI:10.1093/jrs/few046.

Graml, G., Meyer-Lee, E., & Peifer, J. S. (2021). Decolonizing Global Learning and Internationalization: A Human-Scale Case Study of Innovation. In G. Malfatti (Ed.), *People-Centered Approaches Toward the Internationalization of Higher Education* (pp. 133-148). IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-3796-1.ch007

Greenberg, M., Gelatt, J., Bolter, J., Workie, E., and Charo, I. (2018). *Promoting refugee integration in challenging times: The potential of two-generation strategies.* Migration Policy Institute, 1-57.

Hannah, J. (1999). Refugee students at college and university: Improving access and support. *International Review of Education, 45*(2), 153-166.

Harris, A., Chi, M., & Spark, C. (2015). The barriers that only you can see: African Australian women thriving in tertiary education despite the odds. *Generos: Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies*, *2*(2), 192-202.

Hiramori, D., Knaphus-Soran, E., & Litzler, E. (July 2021). Critically Quantitative: Measuring Community Cultural Wealth on Surveys. In *2021 ASEE Virtual Annual Conference Content Access*.

Hirano, E. (2014). Refugees in first-year college: Academic writing challenges and resources. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 23, 37–52.

Hynes, T. (2003). The issue of 'trust' or 'mistrust' in research with refugees: choices, caveats and considerations for researchers. *New Issues in Refugee Research.* Working Paper No. 98.

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx

Kanno, Y., & Varghese, M. (2010). Immigrant and refugee ESL students' challenges to accessing four-year college education: From language policy to educational policy. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education, 9*, 310-328. DOI: 10.1080/15348458.2010.517693

Kerwin, D. (2012). The faltering U.S. refugee protection system: Legal and policy responses to refugees, asylum-seekers, and others in need of protection. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 1-33. DOI:10.1093/rsq/hdr019.

Khanlou, N., Shakya, Y., Islam, F., & Oudeh, E. (2014). Newcomer youth self-esteem: A community-based mixed methods study of Afghan, Columbian, Sudanese and Tamil youth in Toronto, Canada. In L. Simich & L. Andermann (Eds.), *Refuge and Resilience*: *Promoting Resilience and Mental Health among Resettled Refugees and Forced Migrants* (pp. 109-129). DOI: 10.1007/978-94-007-7923-5_8.

Knaphus-Soran, E., Hiramori, D., Litzler, E. (July 2021). Antiracist Institutional Transformation

Matters: How Can Community Cultural Wealth and Counter-space Processes Illuminate Areas for Change? American Society for Engineering Education. In *2021 ASEE Virtual Annual Conference Content Access*.

Koyama, J. (2014). Constructing gender: Refugee women working in the United States. *Journal of Refugee Students, 28*(2), 258-275.

Lambrechts, A. (2020). The super-disadvantaged in higher education: Barriers to access for refugee background students in England. *Higher Education, 80*(5), 803-822. Law Insider. (April 20, 2022). High School Equivalency Definition. Retrieved from https://www.lawinsider.com/dictionary/high-school-equivalency.

Lee, S. (2002). Learning "America": Hmong American high school students. *Education and Urban Society, 34,* 233-246.

Lenette, C. (2016). University students from refugee backgrounds: Why should we care? *Higher Education Research and Development, 35*(6), 1-5.

Luu, D. & Blanco, G. (2019). Exploring U.S. Federal policy discourse on refugee access to postsecondary education. Higher Education Policy. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-019-00144-2

Mamgain, V. & Collins, K. (2003). Off the boat, now off to work: Refugee in the labour market in Portland, Maine. *Journal of Refugee Students, 16*(2), 113-146.

Marshall, C. & Rossman, G. B. (2016). *Designing qualitative research* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Martinez, M.A. (2012). Wealth, stereotypes, and issues of prestige: The college choice experience of Mexican American students within their community context. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, 11* (1), 67-81.

McBrien, J.L. (2005). Educational needs and barriers for refugee students in the United States:

A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research, (75)*3, 329-364.

McHugh, M., & Doxsee, C. (2018). *English plus integration: Shifting the instructional paradigm for immigrant adult learners to support integration success.* Migration Policy Institutue.

Means, D., Clayton, A., Conzelmann, J., Baynes, P., & Umbach, P. (2016). Bounded aspirations: Rural, African American high school students and college access. *The Review of Higher* Education, 39(4), 543-569.

Mendenhall, M., Russell, S. G., Buckner, E. (March 2017). Urban Refugee Education: Strengthening policies and practices for access, quality, and inclusion. Teachers College: Columbia University.

Morrice, L. (2013). Refugees in higher education: Boundaries of belonging and recognition, stigma, and exclusion. International Journal of Lifelong Education, 32(5), 652-668.

Mosselson, J. (2010). Subjectivity and reflexivity: Locating the self in research on dislocation. International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 23(4), 479-494.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods.* Sage Publications.

Mukiibi, E. (2015). African immigrant children's educational experiences in California: Racial discrimination and identity construction. *International Journal of Arts & Sciences, 8*(3), 587-598.

Mwangi, C.A.G. (2015). (Re)Examining the role of family and community in college access and choice: A meta-synthesis. *The Review of Higher Education, 39*(1), 123-151. https://doi:10.1353/rhe.2015.0046.

Mwangi, C.A.G., Mansour, K., & Hedayet, M. (2021). Immigrant Identity and Experiences in U.S. Higher Education Research: A Systematic Review. *International Journal of Multicultural Education, 23*(2), 45-69.

Perry, K. H., & Mallozzi, C. A. (2011). 'Are You Able … to Learn?': Power and Access to Higher Education for African Refugees in the USA. *Power and Education*, *3*(3), 249–262. https://doi.org/10.2304/power.2011.3.3.249

Perna, L. W. (2006). Understanding the relationship between information about college prices and financial aid and students' college-related behaviors. *American Behavioral Scientist, 49*(12), 1620–1635. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764206289144.

Potocky-Tripodi, M. (2001). Micro and macro determinants of refugee economic status. *Journal of Social Services Research, 27*(4), 33-60.

Potocky-Tripodi, M. (2004). The role of social capital on immigrant and refugee economic adaptation. *Journal of Social Service Research, 31*(1), 59-91.

Office of Refugee Resettlement: An Office of the Administration for Children & Families. (August 2012). *The Refugee Act.* Retrieved from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/the-refugee-act

Ramsay, G. & Baker, S. (2019). Higher education and students from refugee backgrounds: A meta-scoping study. *Refugee Survey Quarterly, 38*, 55-82. doi: 10.1093/rsq/hdy018.

Ramos, D. & Taylor, M. (January 25, 2017). Aligning demographic shifts and college participation: Increasing Latino degree attainment. *Higher Education Today*. American Council on Education. Retrieved from http://www.higheredtoday.org/2017/01/25/aligning-demographic-shifts-college-participation-increasing-latino-degree-attainment/

Refugee Act of 1951. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.unhcr.org/4ca34be29.pdf

Refugee Act of 1980. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-94/pdf/STATUTE-94-Pg102.pdf

Roy, L. & Roxas, K. (2011). Whose deficit is this anyhow? Exploring counter-stories of Somali Bantu refugees' experiences in "doing school". *Harvard Educational Review, 81*(3), 521-541.

Rumbaut, R. & Portes, A. (2001). Ethnogenesis: Coming of age in immigrant America. In R. Rumbault & A. Portes (Eds), *Ethnicities: Children of Immigrants in America* (pp.1-14). University of California Press and Russell Sage Foundation.

Ryan, D., Dooley, B., & Benson, C. (2008). Theoretical perspective on post-migration adaptation and psychological well-being among refugees: Towards a resource-based model. *Journal of Refugee Studies, 21*(1), 1-18.

Samuelson, C. C. & Litzler, E. (2016). Community cultural wealth: An assets-based approach to persistence of engineering students of color. *Journal of Engineering Education, 105*(1), 93–117. doi: 10.1002/jee.20110.

Schroeder, J. (2003). The refugee space as "total space": Educational institutions and their boundaries. In U. Neumann, H. Niedrig, J. Schroeder & L. H. Seukwa (Eds.), *Learning at the edge of society. Educational institutions mirrored by refugees' biographies* (pp. 379–396).

Seidman, I. E. (2013). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and social science* (4th ed.). Teachers College Press.

Shakya, Y., Guruge, S., Hynie, M., Akbari, A., Malik, M., Htoo, S., Khogali, A., Mona, S., Murtaza, R., & Alley, S. (2010). Aspirations for higher education among newcomer refugee youth in Toronto: Expectations, challenges, and strategies. *Refuge, 27*(2), 65-78.

Sheehy, I. (2014). Refugees need access to higher education. *University World New, 339.* Retrieved from https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20141015204738526.

Sontag, K. (2019). Refugee students' access to three European Universities: An ethnographic study. *Social Inclusion, 7*(1), 71-79. DOI: 10.17645/si.v7i1.1622.

Tandon, M. (2016). Resettlement struggles of Burmese refugee students in U.S. high schools: A qualitative study. *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement*, *11*(1) Article 4. Retrieved from http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/jsaaea/vol11/iss1/4

Taylor, S & Sidhu, R.K. (2012). Supporting refugee students in schools: what constitutes inclusive education? *International Journal of Inclusive Education, (16)*1, 39-56.

Timm, J.T. (1994). Hmong values and American education. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 27*(2), 36-44.

Tobenkin, D. (2006). Web extra! Financial aid challenges for political asylee and refugee students. *International Educator*. Retrieved from http://www.nafsa.org/Find_Resources/Publications/Periodicals/International_Educator/Web_Extra!_Financial_Aid_Challenges_for_ Political_Asylee_and_Refugee_Students/

Trueba, H. T., Jacobs, L., & Kirton, E. (1990). *Cultura*l *conflict and adaptation: The case of Hmong Children in American Society.* Routledge.

Unangst, L. & Crea, T. (2020). Higher education for refugees: A need for intersectional research. *Comparative Education Review, 62*(2), 228-248.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2019). Language and Literacy Programmes for Migrants and Refugees: Challenges and Ways Forward. *Paper commissioned for the 2019 Global Education Monitoring Report, Migration, displacement and education: Building bridges, not walls*.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2017). *Figures At A Glance*. Retrieved from: http://www.unhcr.org/en-au/figures-at-a-glance.html

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2018). *What is a refugee?* Retrieved from https://www.unhct.org/en-au/what-is-a-refugee.html

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2019). *Stepping up: Refugee education in crisis.* Retrieved from https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/publications/education/5d651cbd4/stepping-refugee-education-crisis.html?query=refugee%20education%20in%20crisis.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2021) *Persons of Concern to UNHCR.* Manila: UNHCR. https://www.unhcr.org/ph/persons-concern-unhcr.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (n.d.). *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.* Retrieved from https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/3b66c2aa10

U.S. Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM). *Refugee case management system Fiscal Year Arrivals: Refugee Arrivals by State and Nationality thru Fiscal Year 2023.* Retrieved from https://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/#

United States Department of State. (January 13, 2016). *Diplomacy in action. Refugee resettlement in the United States.* Office of the Spokesperson, Washington, D.C. http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/01/251176.htm

Upton, J., Wright, J., & Harwood, V. (2016). Finding education: Stories of how young former refugees constituted strategic identities in order to access school. *Race, Ethnicity and Education, 19*(3), 598-617.

Vásquez, C. (2007). Comments from the classroom: A case study of a generation-1.5 student in a university IEP and beyond. *The Canadian Modern Language Review, 63*(3), 345-370.

Vigil, D., & Lopez, S. (2021). Cultivating postsecondary aspirations in immigrant and refugee families through community education, engagement, and empowerment. *New Directions for Higher Education, 2020*(191), 11-20.

Voutira, E., & Dona, G. (2007). Refugee Research Methodologies: Consolidation and Transformation of a Field, *Journal of Refugee Studies, 20*(2), 163-171, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fem017

Yi, V., & Kiyama, J. (2018). Failed educational justice: Refugee students' postsecondary realities in restrictive times. ASHE-NITE Paper Series, 1-31.

Yosso, T. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education, 8*(1), 69-91. DOI:10.1080/1361332052000341006

Yrigollen-Robbins, M. S. (2022). Finding Evidence of Community Cultural Wealth in Georgia: Testimonios of Latina Immigrants on Navigating Cultural, Social, and Economic Barriers. *Journal of Latinos and Education*. DOI: 10.1080/15348431.2021.2002151

Appendices

Appendix A – Outreach Letter to Connect with Potential Participants

Greetings colleagues,

My name is Sarah Harendt and I am a doctoral candidate in the School of Education, Higher Administration program at Virginia Tech. In the next few months I will begin my dissertation research. This research will be focused on current and former refugee experiences navigating through the postsecondary education access process.

The purpose of this study is to gather stories and experiences from current or former refugees resettled in the United States who may have engaged in postsecodary education or may be interested in doing so. To participate in this study, individuals must:

1. have earned a high school degree within the United States or an equivalency degree; and,
2. have an interest in educational attainment at the college level within the United States;

This study has been approved by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at Virginia Tech.

I am requesting your help to connect with potential participants who may be eligible to participate in this study. Eligible participants will be asked to participate in a series of short interviews that can be conducted virtually or in-person. Please forward this email to individuals who might be interested in participating in this study or to any of your colleagues who may know of individuals with potential interest in participating.

Those interested in participating in this study can click this **link** or use the QR code below to complete a demographic questionnaire. Interested participants can contact me via text at 540-915-8404 or via email at saumbarg@vt.edu with questions. I am also attaching a flyer for easy distribution.

Thank you,

Sarah Harendt

Appendix B - Consent Form to Complete Demographic Questionnaire (Online)

Virginia Tech
School of Education

Student Investigator: Sarah Harendt, Doctoral Candidate

Project Title: Resettled Refugee Experiences of Aspiring to and Navigating Through the Postsecondary Access Process

Hi! My name is Sarah Harendt, and I am a Doctorial candidate currently working on a research study. A research study is a way for student researchers, such as myself, to answer a specific question or questions and gather information that helps to answer that question or questions. For this research study, I want to find out more about the experiences of current or former refugees resettled in the United States and who are interested in, have attempted, are working on, or have completed a college degree in the United States.

If you are interested in being a part of this study, please complete the questions linked here. Completing the questions means that you agree to my contacting you further about the study. Your responses are appreciated and valued. There are no wrong answers. Not everyone who answers will be selected.

If you are chosen to participate in the study, you will be asked to participate in a series of short interviews (3 at the most). The interviews will take 30 to 45 minutes. The interviews will be either virtual or in-person, will be video or audio-recorded, and, if in-person, will take place in a private office at 15 Old Woods Avenue, Roanoke VA.

Potential risks related to your participation in this study are minimal but could include physical or emotional discomfort during your interviews. If you experience physical or emotional discomfort during the interview questions, you may stop answering at any time. To avoid fatigue, we can take short breaks during the interviews if you would like.

At the conclusion of the interviews, you will receive a $25 Amazon gift card.

Once I have finished the study, I will write a report about the information shared with me by all the participants. You will be asked to choose a pseudonym to be used at all times during the study and in the final report. Confidentiality will be protected to the extent that is allowed by law.

You can decide to stop participating in this study at any time for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty nor experience any negative consequences if you decide to withdraw from this study at any time. The researcher can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you may email me saumbarg@vt.edu or call me at (540) 915-8404. You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Claire Robbins, at

robbinsc@vt.edu, the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 540-231-3732 or e-mail irb@vt.edu.

If you consent to answering the questionnaire, please indicate your interest in participating by following this link.

Thank you,

Sarah

Appendix C - Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire (Online)

For the purposes of this research study, I will only interview individuals who fit the specific criteria outlined in my protocol. Please take a few minutes to complete this demographic survey. Please know that I cannot use the information below for any other reason than to determine if you match the criteria and to contact you about further participation.

Name:_____Email:_____

Phone: _____

Best day and time to contact you: _____

Best way to contact you: ⬜Call ⬜Text ⬜Email

May I leave voice mail at the number listed above? ⬜Yes ⬜No

Demographic Questionnaire

1. Did you enter the U.S. as a refugee? _____Yes _____No

2. Did your family come to the U.S. under recognized refugee status? _____Yes ___No

3. Did you attend high school in the U.S.? _____Yes _____ No
   - If no, do you have a high school equivalency degree? _____Yes_____No

5. Have you ever applied to postsecondary (college) in the U.S.? ____Yes _____No
   - If no, are you interested in applying to college in the U.S.?_____Yes _____No

6. Are you currently enrolled in an undergraduate degree program? _____Yes_____No
   - If yes, what degree program are you pursuing? _____
   - If no, have you earned a college degree, certificate, etc.? _____Yes ____No

8. How old are you? _____

Appendix D - Email to Potential Participants Who Fit the Criteria

Dear [participant's first name],

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study to learn more about the experiences of people resettled in the United States as refugees who have attempted to, who currently are, or who have attended college in the United States. Your responses to the demographic questionnaire indicate you fit the criteria needed to participate in this study. I look forward to learning more about you and your experiences!

For us to schedule a time to talk virtually or in person:

1. Please visit this **link** to choose a time that works best for you to talk with me about becoming part of this study. First, we will talk about informed consent and why this is important. If you decide being part of the study is something you want to do, we will set up a time for our first interview. You will receive email or text reminders of all scheduled conversation dates and times a few days before each interview.

2. Once you have selected a date, please indicate if you would like to meet with me virtually or face-to-face.

Our first conversation will take approximately 45 minutes. We can take short breaks if needed. Please block off one hour for our conversation, even though we may take less time than that.

I will ask you to review and sign a consent form or verbally consent, which will be recorded, prior to participating. A copy of the consent form is attached for your review. We will go over the consent form together before you sign it or verbally consent.

If I do not hear back from you within the next couple of days, I will send you an email or text reminder. I look forward to hearing back from you. Thank you again for your interest in participating in my research study and please contact me with any questions.

Thank you,

Sarah Harendt

VIRGINIA TECH
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Investigator: Sarah Harendt, Doctoral Candidate

Title of Study: Resettled Refugee Experiences of Aspiring to and Navigating Through the Postsecondary Access Process

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled *Resettled Refugee Experiences of Aspiring to and Navigating Through the Postsecondary Access Process*. This project serves as Sarah Harendt's dissertation for the requirements of the doctoral degree in the School of Education at Virginia Tech under the supervision of Dr. Claire Robbins. This consent document explains the purpose of this research study and will review the time commitment, procedures used in the study, and any potential risks and benefits of participating in the study. Please read this consent form completely and ask any questions you may need for clarification.

What am I trying to find out in this study?

I want to know more about the experiences of people resettled in the United States as refugees who have attempted to, who currently are, or who have attended college in the United States.

Who can be a participant in this study?

People resettled in the U.S. under refugee status, who have attended high school in the U.S. or received a high school equivalency, and those who have applied to, attended or graduated from a college or university in the U.S.

Where will this study take place?

You will be asked to participate in up to 3 short interviews (30-45 minutes in length). The interviews will be held virtually or in person, and if in person, will take place in a private location agreed upon by you and me.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?

You will be asked to participate in 3 short interviews. The interviews will each be 30- to 45 minutes long, depending on how much you would like to share with me and how often you may need to take short breaks.

What will you be asked to do as a participant in this study?

You will be asked to answer basic demographic information about yourself, like your age, gender identity, ethnic and racial identities, your country of origin, how you came to the U.S, your parent's level of education, your high school and/or college attendance, degrees you are pursuing, and possibly information about other immediate family members. You will be asked to provide answers to questions in an interview-type format. All interviews will be video and audio-recorded. You will be asked to look over your responses and offer feedback on the accuracy of the information if you would like. You may be contacted with follow-up questions if any clarifying information is needed.

What information is being analyzed during the study?

You will be participating in a qualitative study to find out more about your experiences related to gaining education at the college level as a person who resettled in the United States as a refugee.

What are the possible risks of participating in this study and how will they be minimized?

Potential risks as a participant in this study are minimal but may include both physical or emotional discomfort during the interview process. You may take breaks during the interview if needed. If you experience any physical or emotional discomfort related to the interview questions, you can stop answering at any time you would like.

Are there benefits of participating in this study?

You may benefit from knowing that you are part of a study focused on experiences of refugees and former refugees seeking access to higher education. Your participation may help provide a better understanding of these experiences and the barriers and challenges faced. This may allow high school administration, teachers, community service organizations, and college/university student affairs professionals to better serve needs of refugees and former refugees. The knowledge produced by this study may give policymakers a better understanding of the lack of support and services for refugees and former refugees who seek access to college and university educational opportunities.

Are there any costs associated with to participate in this study?

There are no costs to participate in this study.

Is there compensation for participating in this study?

At the conclusion of the interviews, I will present you with a $25 Amazon gift card.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?

Once I have finished the study, I will write a report about the information shared with me by all the participants. I will not use your name in the report. A pseudonym, instead of your real name, will be used at all times during the study and in the final report. Confidentiality will be protected to the extent that is allowed by law. All written transcripts and video/audio recordings will be locked in a secure filing cabinet in my office and also saved on an encrypted external hard drive. Once the study is completed, all data, including transcripts, video/audio recordings, and personal notes will be securely maintained in the principal investigator's office for three years, after which they will be destroyed.

What if you want to stop participating in this study?

You can decide to stop participating in this study at any time for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty or experience any negative consequences if you decide to withdraw from this study at any time. The researcher can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you may email me saumbarg@vt.edu or call me at (540) 915-8404. You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Claire Robbins, at robbinsc@vt.edu, the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board at 540-231-3732 or e-mail irb@vt.edu.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) as indicated by the attached letter.

I have read this informed consent document. Both the risks and benefits have been explained to me. I freely agree to take part in this study.

Please Print Your Name:_____ _____

Participant's signature Date

Appendix E - Email to Individuals Who Do Not Fit the Criteria

Dear [individual's first name],

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study focused on learning more about the experiences of people resettled in the United States as refugees. Based on the demographic questionnaire you completed, you do not meet the criteria to participate in this study. Thank you again for your interest in participating and for taking time to complete the demographic questionnaire. All information you shared will be destroyed.

Please contact me if you have any questions about the participant selection process or about the research study in general.

Thank you,

Sarah Harendt

Appendix F - Second and Third Reminder Email to Potential Participants Who Fit the Criteria

Dear [participant's first name],

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study to learn more about the experiences of people resettled in the United States as refugees who have attempted to, who currently are, or who have attended college in the United States. Your responses to the demographic questionnaire indicate you fit the criteria needed to participate in this study. I look forward to learning more about you and your experiences!

For us to schedule a time to talk virtually or in person:

1. Please visit this **link** to choose a time that works best for you to talk with me about becoming part of this study. First, we will talk about informed consent and why this is important. If you decide being part of the study is something you want to do, we will set up a time for our first interview. You will receive email or text reminders of all scheduled conversation dates and times a few days before each interview.

2. Once you have selected a date, please indicate if you would like to meet with me virtually or face-to-face.

Our first conversation will take approximately 45 minutes. We can take short breaks if needed. Please block off one hour for our conversation, even though we may take less time than that.

I will ask you to review and sign a consent form or verbally consent, which will be recorded, prior to participating. A copy of the consent form is attached for your review. We will go over the consent form together before you sign it or verbally consent.

If I do not hear back from you within the next couple of days, I will send you an email or text reminder. I look forward to hearing back from you. Thank you again for your interest in participating in my research study and please contact me with any questions.

Thank you,

Sarah Harendt

Appendix G - Interview Reminder Email

Greetings [participant's pseudonym],

I am looking forward to our upcoming interview and learning more about your experiences exploring, applying to, currently attending, or previously attending college in the United States. Just as a reminder, our interview will take approximately 30-to 45-minutes and is scheduled for:

Date: _____

Time: _____

Virtual _____ In-person_____

Please make sure you have set aside one hour for the interview, even though it may take less time.

Thank you again for your interest in participating in this research project. I look forward to learning more about you and your experiences. Do not hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Thank you,

Sarah

Appendix H - Interview Reminder Text

Greetings [participant's pseudonym],

I am looking forward to our upcoming interview and learning more about your experiences exploring, applying to, currently attending, or previously attending college in the United States. The interview will occur on DATE from TIMES at LOCATION.

Please make sure you have set aside one hour for the interview, even though it may take less time.

Thank you again for your interest in participating in this research project. I look forward to learning more about you and your experiences. Do not hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Thank you,

Sarah

Appendix I - Semi-structured Interview Protocol Building Grid

Focus of Research	Sub-focus of Research	Questions
Educational Background information ● Completion of high school degree or equivalency? ● Postsecondary education acquired thus far?	● Educational background of participant ● Demographics	1. Age, Gender identity, and country of origin. 2. What prior postsecondary experience did you bring with you to the U.S.? 3. What has your educational path been like since arriving in the U.S.?
Access to higher education in the U.S. ● What barriers impact the exploration and information gathering process around postsecondary education? ● What barriers impact applying to and enrolling in postsecondary education?	Barriers ● Language barriers ● Resettlement Policies ● School ● Family ● Housing ● Transportation ● Access to resource ● Employment ● Finances ● Other	1. What has your experience been like regarding learning about postsecondary education? 2. What does your family say about college? 3. What are your educational expectations? 4. What has helped or hindered your educational success? 5. What has made accessing college/university difficult for you? a. How are you working through those challenges 6. What is difficult about the application process a. How are you working through those challenges 7. What is difficult about the enrollment process a. How are you working through those challenges

Aspirational Capital ● Do refugees utilize aspirational capital to negotiate the postsecondary the exploration and information gathering process? ● Do refugees utilize aspirational capital to negotiate the postsecondary application process? ● Do refugees utilize aspirational capital to negotiate the postsecondary enrollment process?	Why pursue postsecondary education?	1. Tell me about your interest in college/university. 2. Tell me about your experience learning about going to college. 3. Tell me about your experience applying to college/trade school. 4. Tell me about your experience enrolling in college/trade school. 5. What do you hope to gain by accessing college/university? 6. What is your motivation for pursuing college? 7. What do you think the benefits of college are?
Navigational Capital ● Do refugees utilize navigational capital to negotiate the postsecondary the exploration and information gathering process? ● Do refugees utilize navigational capital to negotiate the postsecondary application process? ● Do refugees utilize navigational	How to navigate the postsecondary education access process.	1. Did anyone help you with the college exploration process? a. How did they help you /with what parts of the process? 2. Did anyone help you with the college application process? a. How did they help you /with what parts of the process? 3. Did anyone encourage you?

capital to negotiate the postsecondary enrollment process?		a. In what ways did they encourage you? 4. Who do you turn to for information and/or support with the enrollment process?

Appendix J - Interview Protocol

Pseudonym:_____ Date:_____
Location:_____ Time:_____

Introduction:

- (Introduce myself and briefly share my relevant background and motivation/desire for conducting the study.)
- I am conducting this study to learn more about the experiences of people who have resettled in the United States as refugees and have attempted to, who currently are, or who have attended college in the United States. This initial interview should last approximately one hour or less.
- I would like to video and audio record our conversation in order to allow me to listen carefully to what you are saying to me. May I have your permission to video/audio record? Please verbally express your consent so it may be recorded.
- Let's review the consent form together. You previously received an electronic copy of this form. After we've reviewed the consent form, and all your questions have been answered, you can sign this form before we go any further.
- This first part of the interview will focus on learning more about you, particularly your and/or your families' refugee resettlement experience. Next we will focus on your experiences accessing college/university.
- Before we start, please choose a pseudonym, which is a fake name used to protect your identity and confidentiality so that your real name does not have to be used during the study. If you are not sure right now, we can come back to this at the end of the interview.
- Do you have any questions or comments so far? , If not, I would like to begin the interview.
    - (Make sure this is being recorded.)

Interview Questions (Interview 1):

1. Please tell me a little about yourself.
2. What do you remember about you and/or your family's initial experiences when you first arrived in the U.S.?
    a. Language barrier
    b. School
    c. Family
    d. Housing
    e. Transportation
    f. Access to resource
    g. Employment

   h. Finances
   i. Food
   j. Friends
   k. Support

3. Let's talk about your educational experiences here in the U.S.
   a. Did you attend high school in the U.S.?
   b. Did you graduate or obtain an equivalency?
   c. What was that experience like for you?
   d. Did anyone talk to you about college or education beyond high school?

Interview One/Two: College exploration questions

Last time we were together you told me about your experiences coming to the U.S. and what your educational experiences were like as you considered college. Today, we're going to talk about any experiences you have had applying to college.

1. Did anyone help you with the college exploration process?
   a. How did they help you /with what parts of the process?
2. Did anyone encourage you?
   a. In what ways did they encourage you?
3. What was difficult about learning about higher education?
4. What is your motivation for pursuing college?
5. What do you think the benefits of college are?
6. What does your family say about college?
7. What educational expectations do you have for yourself?
8. What has helped or hindered your educational success?
9. What has helped or hindered your postsecondary access?

Interview Two/Three: Application Process

Last time we were together you told me about your experiences coming to the U.S. and what your educational experiences were like as you considered college. Today, we're going to talk about any experiences you have had applying to college.

1. Did anyone help you with the college application process?
   a. How did they help you /with what parts of the process?
2. Did anyone encourage you?
   a. In what ways did they encourage you?
3. What is your motivation for applying to college
4. What is difficult about the application process

    a. How are you working through those challenges
5. What educational expectations do you have for yourself?
6. What has helped or hindered your educational success?
7. Tell about your experiences with paying for college or getting information about the cost of college.
8. Are you currently enrolled in college?
    a. How did you decide to attend your current college/university.
    b. Have any of your friends or relatives attended this college/university?
    c. Did you apply to other institutions?
9. Who do you go to for information, support, and/or advice with the enrollment process?
10. Why did you decide participate in this study?
11. Is there anything I not asked you about\that you would like to share?

Thank you for sharing with me. If you did not provide a pseudonym earlier, can you provide one now? I will email you a document containing the text from our interview for your review. If you have any feedback or would like to discuss the document further, you may contact me at any time.

Appendix K - Recruitment Flier

LOOKING FOR PARTICIPANTS

Did you come to the U.S. as a refugee?

ARE YOU INTERESTED IN EDUCATION BEYOND HIGH SCHOOL OR ARE YOU CURRENTLY TAKING CLASSES AT A COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY?

Would you be interested in sharing your story about your interest in, or experience with, education beyond high school?

Scan this QR Code to learn more about how you can participate!

Contact Sarah Harendt at 540-915-8404 or saumbarg@vt.edu for more information.

IRB Statement

IRB Approval

Appendix L - IRB Approval Letter

VIRGINIA TECH

Division of Scholarly Integrity and Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board
North End Center, Suite 4120 (MC 0497)
300 Turner Street NW
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
540/231-3732
irb@vt.edu
http://www.research.vt.edu/sirc/hrpp

MEMORANDUM

DATE: December 15, 2022

TO: Claire Kathleen Robbins, Sarah Harendt

FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572)

PROTOCOL TITLE: Refugee Experiences of Aspiring to and Navigating Through the Postsecondary Access Process

IRB NUMBER: **22-499**

Effective December 15, 2022, the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104 (d) category(ies) 2(ii).

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit an amendment to the HRPP for a determination.

This exempt determination does not apply to any collaborating institution(s). The Virginia Tech HRPP and IRB cannot provide an exemption that overrides the jurisdiction of a local IRB or other institutional mechanism for determining exemptions.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

https://secure.research.vt.edu/external/irb/responsibilities.htm

(Please review responsibilities before beginning your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Determined As:	**Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category(ies) 2(ii)**
Protocol Determination Date:	**December 15, 2022**

ASSOCIATED FUNDING:

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this protocol, if required.

Appendix M - Participant Demographics

Participant Name	Country of Origin	Age at time of Resettlement	Age at time of Interviews	Postsecondary Education
Yosef	Nepal	11	25	Bachelor's degree completed. Currently working on a Masters degree.
Tomas	Tanzania	7	24	Bachelor's degree and Masters degree completed.
Sam	Nepal	9	23	Bachelor's degree completed. Considering a Masters degree.
Alex	Bosnia	14	42	Bachelor's degree and Masters degree completed. Considering a Ph.D.
Shelia	Burundi/Congo/ Tanzania	6	22	Currently enrolled in a Bachelor’s degree program.
Bri	Nepal	8	23	Currently enrolled in a Bachelor’s degree program.
Nan	Nepal	8	21	Currently enrolled in a Bachelor’s degree program.