

THE ROLE OF RESILIENCE: ANALYZING THE DIFFERENT RESPONSES TO
ADVERSITY AMONG REFUGEES IN THE UNITED STATES

by

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Refugees in the United States

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my parents who have supported me throughout my life and have always been there when I need them most.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to sincerely thank my friends and family for being great supportive outlets as I pursued this degree. The assistance and insight from my professors during this project were invaluable. My advisory committee was instrumental in helping me complete this thesis.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

English as a Second Language.....	ESL
United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund.....	UNICEF
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees	UNHCR

ABSTRACT

THE ROLE OF RESILIENCE: ANALYZING THE DIFFERENT RESPONSES TO ADVERSITY AMONG REFUGEES IN THE UNITED STATES

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This thesis analyzes the role of resilience in refugees when faced with adversity and identifying the strategies or resources used to overcome social and cultural challenges. The ethnographic information came from three separate interviews conducted over Zoom with individuals who previously held refugee status in the United States. All the interviews provided excessive amounts of empirical data that allows for an in-depth analysis of the various factors promoting resilience throughout their lives as refugees. Starting off with their time in a refugee camp before migrating to America and adjusting to a new society, then transitioning to the individual challenges they encountered and finally analyzing their resilience through the myriad resources available to them that allowed them to overcome adversity. Prevalent themes such as a sense of “community” and “cultural awareness” occurred in each interview, establishing a connection to the social challenges of being a refugee in a new society and how a sense of belonging can promote cultural agency re-enforced by their individual resiliency.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Throughout human history, there have been a plethora of events leading to mass migration and entire cultural groups abandoning their homes to seek safety somewhere else. The presence of internal conflicts, natural disasters, decade long wars, as well as cultural genocide are just some of the precursors to mass migration around the world. The determining factors that influence people leaving their homeland have not changed as we progressed to modern times. In fact, the amount of people being displaced has reached close to 80 million people per statistical calculations from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (UNHCR) Information collected from the last decade indicate this number is going to continue increasing due to the previously referenced factors causing people to seek safety abroad. The globalization and interconnectedness of our world has created further problems such as political tensions between countries, leading to a myriad of other issues influencing this high number of displaced people. The grouping referred to as “displaced people” is anyone forced from their home, but this project will focus solely on those categorized as refugees. The term refugee is defined by the United Nations as “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHCR,

2021). Another aspect of being a refugee not mentioned in this legal definition is the reality of some being displaced due to economic struggles, droughts, or other natural phenomena destroying their homeland. Not everyone facing discrimination is going to fall under the refugee category, but these are the legal parameters that have been established.

My interest in refugees came from reading through many anthropological works describing the arduous life of refugees and everything they encounter throughout their time in refugee camps as well as when migrating to a new society. I decided the most effective way to tell their story was to talk to them and analyze the concept of resilience as it came up in their life experiences. This approach became a way to also see how they were able to overcome adversity. Contemporary discourse on refugees comes anthropological fieldwork detail the myriad circumstances of refugees, including the crossing over into new social and cultural boundaries that will pose a challenge to their own traditions and values. This phenomenon is known as a change in “cultural context” or “their meaning system,” referring to how crossing over into new social boundaries is going to alter how refugees understand what is going on around them. Accepting these cultural differences lies at the heart of the arduous challenge of assimilating into a new society, adjusting to a “new way of existence” that very well could impact the very essence of life for refugees and their families (Gungor, 1, 2020). When one’s way of life drastically changes with cultural beliefs challenged, refugees will look to familiar outlets for support as well as other resources easing the transition to their new life. Cultural agency, autonomy, and determination are three elements to refugee resiliency, a concept

that is the focal point of this project. Individual and community resilience are unique concepts with which to discuss all angles of refugee discourse which I will use consistently throughout this project. Community resilience can be broken down to the familial level providing “a coping system to survive effectively in times of stress, crisis and emergencies” (Omata, 268, 2012).

I was able to interview three refugees from Burundi, a small country in East Africa- All three experienced life in a refugee camp before migrating to the United States and beginning a new life in a society that wasn't always welcoming. These refugees were all in their early 20's, so the memories of refugee life were still prevalent in their minds. I carefully chose questions that would illicit responses pertaining to life in a refugee camp, the migration journey, and finally the social and cultural challenges of life in a new society. These phases of their lives make up the three separate chapters in this project, as I go in detail about the prominent themes that go over the development of resilience and how it helped them overcome adversity during the transition to American society. The purpose of this research is to identify the various methods and adaptive strategies implemented by refugees that demonstrate their personal manifestation of resilience. I argue individual resilience develops from the arduous and often traumatic experiences refugees encounter during their lives and eventually manifests when they experience new challenges of living in a foreign society. Resilience manifestations in this context are referring to the different social networks, supportive outlets, or resources that refugees use to create their own adaptive strategies when faced with adversity. While refugee experiences are often traumatic living in the camps or having negative interactions in the

new society, I wanted to present refugee resilience as something positive that reinforces their agency and personifies their voice on important social and cultural issues present in U.S. society.

Resilience in Contemporary Anthropological Discourse

What is resilience? Resilience is a multi-faceted concept applicable to many fields of study due to its abstract nature being associated with many fields of study. It's original usage in literature described an ecological environment's ability to overcome natural disaster, loss of life, or human involvement such as deforestation. Moving forward social scientists adopted using resilience to describe a human's ability to overcome adversity, cope with the events through various methods, and continue moving forward through perseverance. Resilience is described as a "new culture of disaster response" applied to humans who have encountered extremely stressful or harmful threats to their well-being (Barrios 2016). Anthropological research of the concept involves researching human's relationship to their environment and the social structure of their society. Internal or external threats can derive from within one's environment or originate from tense social relationships. Human ideals and behavior are anything but static, so why should efforts to persevere through adversity be any different? Everyone is going to respond differently to physical, emotional, or social challenges and perceive the situation according to a variety of factors. Such factors could include cultural beliefs and traditions, religious upbringing, or socially acceptable ways adhered to by all within a certain society. The overall point correlated to resiliency and human behavior is both are constantly changing due to an infinite number of factors impacting someone's life and their decision making.

The historical context for the use of resiliency through the analysis provided by Barrios dictates how this concept has steadily found its way to global discussions pertaining to human movement, especially mass migration of displaced individuals and refugees to different areas of the world. The anthropological usage of resilience revolves around contemporary discussions including the continuous globalization of the world and its effect on the social and cultural dynamics of an ever-changing world. The refugee crisis currently observed across the globe has millions of people crossing over cultural, national, and political boundaries with so many ambiguous components that can dictate how society views these individuals coming at such a rapid rate due to a variety of factors as I previously mentioned (Simich, 7, 2014). Refugees are going to face so many unique challenges that may affect them socially, economically, or emotionally. The assessment of resilience among refugees in Lebanon as mentioned through the fieldwork of Esther Doron is like my application of the concept throughout this project. Doron expresses resilience as “the ability to thrive, mature and increase competence in the face of adverse circumstances. These circumstances may include biological abnormalities or environmental obstacles. The adverse circumstances may be chronic and consistent or severe and infrequent...” (Doron 184, 2005). Doron’s fieldwork focuses on individual and community resilience, two concepts I applied throughout my fieldwork conducting interviews as they correlate to the major topics and themes covered in all three of my chapters. Individual and community resilience are interconnected due to the adaptive strategies and resources used to demonstrate resiliency develop over time and often aren’t the same methods implemented by everyone.

While the discussion around resilience often focuses on it being a product of resources or other factors, my central argument aims to diagnosis resilience as something that develops over time and becomes an element to one's identity. The opposite end of this discussion is the presence of resiliency humanitarianism found in refugees camp around the world. This concept describes a manufactured resiliency implemented on the refugee camp residents, making them reliant on camp resources and establishing their own communities within the camp. Suzan Ilcan goes in depth about the application of resiliency humanitarianism, outlining how the previous strategy from humanitarian organizations was to design camps to “warehouse” refugees amidst a growing global displacement crisis (Ilcan, 2015). Resiliency humanitarianism is the new trend found in refugee camps, where the camp residents are “now expected not only to withstand adversity but also to thrive by becoming empowered and involved in the management of camp life” (Ilcan, 334, 2015). This puts a tremendous amount of stress on refugee camp residents and manufacturing a sense of resiliency which is as a result is “disempowering” and putting a damper on their cultural agency and sense of autonomy. The pressure to stay in the refugee camps to create a new community impedes refugee mobility as it prevents them from moving on to the next phase of their migration. Preventing refugees from moving on via resettlement or returning to their homeland directly impacts their ability to use their voice regarding political activism. In this instance, resilience is forced upon a vulnerable population that may not have the social relationships or resources to generate the resiliency humanitarian groups are looking for from their residents.

This extended conversation about the origins of resiliency and its application to modern anthropological discourse allows a transition to other scholars who give their perspective on the paradoxical usage of this term. The use of resiliency became mainstream in humanitarian circles in the early 2010's when it was referenced by various European humanitarian groups who could not agree over its usage or how "resilience policies" would be implemented to help vulnerable populations such as refugees. Roseanne Anholt describes the origins for the debates that transpired over the term resilience and its application to the political policies for humanitarian groups. The primary critiques of resilience policies stem from three central arguments according to Anholt, the first being the reality resilience stems from a response to crisis which implies an inevitable development of crisis making humanitarian groups reluctant to find the root causes of crisis. Secondly resilience tends to "responsibilize" individuals, communities, and states for their resilience as well as making them responsible for being vulnerable. Finally, resilience can be used as an excuse to outsource security to vulnerable populations within refugee camps, taking responsibility off the shoulders of state governments (Anholt 295, 2020). The concept of "responsibilize" infers how refugees are essentially forced into these situations with the added responsibility of finding the social, economic, and cultural resources to support themselves. This concept relates to another similar topic within the refugee discourse referred to as social entrepreneurship, something contemporary refugee and asylum seekers have implemented as they continue find strategies to rebuild their lives in host societies within the neoliberal framework that is often exploitative and hinders opportunities for refugees.

Social entrepreneurship as a concept is applicable to a variety of field and discussions, like the usage of resiliency. With varying definitions of the concept being used, social entrepreneurship for the purpose of this discussion will be described as an “innovative, social value creating activity that can occur within or across the nonprofit, business, and public sectors” (Murphy 4, 2020). Ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Turkey addressed the role of social entrepreneurship among Syrian refugees residing in the urban cities to analyze the way they overcome the many hinderances preventing their ability to find economic opportunities. Social entrepreneurship organizations offer another path to finding ways to economically support one’s family. This ethnographic fieldwork addresses the reality of how the “responsibility” of finding economic opportunities is “over-emphasizing the economic resilience of refugees can also be read as an attempt to defer responsibility for addressing the protracted situations or asylum seekers and refugees” (Murphy 6, 2020). Social entrepreneurship fills the void for “policy failures” that have prevented the development of successful pathways of labor integration for refugees and asylum seekers. This concept directly correlates to the neoliberal policies implemented by the various state governments around the world who aim to limit refugee and asylum seeker opportunities within their society. Thus, resiliency in correspondence to the concept of social entrepreneurship demonstrates how some of these precarious circumstances are imposed on them making refugees find other methods to support themselves in a challenging environment.

I want to continue with my emphasis of resilience being described through context rather than with one set definition by looking at another qualitative field study

conducted to focus on resilience among refugee women. Maroussia Ahmed describes resiliency as “an individual’s ability to overcome trauma (catastrophic event or situation) and to continue his or her development (Coleman 161, 2012). Ahmed’s fieldwork consisted of interviewing female refugees from around the world such as Sudan, Iran, Bosnia, and Iraq through three different projects. The primary focus for these projects revolves around the many forms of resilience and how an individual’s creativity in navigating resources and finding other outlets for support are correlated to one’s ability to persevere. Ahmed’s study references another form of resilience but coincides with my emphasis on resiliency developing over time with refugees’ past experiences playing an integral role. One last reference to another definition of resilience connects the role of the individual, interaction with social actors, and the importance of resources. With this context resilience is defined as the “capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their wellbeing, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways” (Kuru 2, 2020). The development of resilience corresponds with past experiences, social networks, available resources, and the environment refugees find themselves in whether it be in a refugee camp or migrating to a host country. I have referenced many different perspectives on resiliency and its connection to refugee studies to show my application of the concept for this project as well as providing a foundation for why I want to focus on the resources and adaptive strategies used by the three refugees I interviewed.

My project focus on the specific “responses” to adversity is to analyze the various methods and factors promoting resilience. While my argument about resiliency is that it is something that originates from the negative experiences of refugee life, resiliency continues to develop as the individual encounters more tenuous challenges which may require the help of others or specific resources to overcome adversity. The foundation for resilience promoting factors lies in the social relationships within a community often described as the refugee camps as well as social networking with others from their homeland that have had success in other countries. These factors are specifically described as available monetary funds to meet basic needs, proficiency in host nation language, social support networks, maintaining cultural agency, educational support, as well as strong religious/spiritual beliefs. (Browne 2021) The examples of resilience promoting factors provided allow for a deeper conversation regarding their connection to a refugee’s ability to adjust to life in a host society. Assimilation into a new society is going to involve crossing over new social and cultural boundaries that may seem foreign or potentially limit a refugee’s ability to adapt to their new surroundings. The concept of assimilation is conventionally used to describe this “absorption” of migrants and refugees into a host society, while “integration” allows these individuals to retain their cultural agency and distinct identities when living in a new society with policies that may attempt to limit their autonomy (Griffiths, 2005). “Assimilation” and “Integration” are similar concepts but also different as they pertain to refugees preserving their cultural heritage and traditions in the new host society. Throughout this project there will be reoccurring theme of “community” which is directly connected with these two concepts.

Resilience is a popular topic among those involved in refugee camp fieldwork and those observing the actions of humanitarian groups. Ethnographic fieldwork in these camps exposes the concept of resilience humanitarianism employed by these organizations so refugees feel compelled to essentially use whatever resources available, so it lowers overall cost for the camps. (Munive, 2019) Evident in refugee camps is the political economy present as well as the inequality of access to healthcare, education, and employment. (Trapp, 2018; Feldman, 2017) Refugees continue to suffer under the rather deteriorating conditions of the refugee camps, leaving emotional and physical scars that will haunt them for the rest of their lives. (Ticktin, 2014) Social spaces and the interpretation of one's "home" is relevant to a refugee's ability to overcome the often-stressful environment of a camp by finding certain elements of their situation familiar with their past lives. (Arvantis, 2019) Resiliency humanitarianism is another strategy employed by political and state actors to switch responsibility onto refugees within camps. Neoliberal governments can use policies, agendas, and narratives to push responsibility onto refugees and asylum seekers, allowing them to "govern at a distance." Instead of enforcing their policies through typical means, governments are controlling the choices and opportunities for refugees by "mobilizing new forms of responsible subjects" (Ilcan 336, 2015). This statement by Suzan Ilcan is elaborating this shift of responsibility from state governments back onto refugees within refugee camp communities so they feel responsible for their actions and over time become autonomous within the framework set by the neoliberal governments.

Responsibility is at the core for the different concepts present in contemporary refugee discourse as it pertains to the role of resiliency in refugees. Resilience humanitarianism and social entrepreneurship are connected through the blatant enforcement of neoliberal policies which aim to put all the pressure on refugees and asylum seekers hoping to overcome the precarity surrounding these circumstances. Neoliberal governments want refugees and asylum seekers to hold responsibility for their situations and develop into autonomous “responsible subjects” within the framework they have set through different policies. This blatantly exposes the exploitative nature of neoliberal policies and how it pertains to the role of resilience being correlated to their unique adapted strategies. The emphasis on the resilience approach by neoliberal governments and humanitarian organizations is to produce “resilient subjects who are capable of self-transformation, becoming empowered and responsible for their own self-government and forming themselves into entrepreneurial communities” (Ilcan 338, 2015). This framework limits cultural agency of refugees and asylum seekers in host countries by identifying them as vulnerable individuals who need assistance from neoliberal governments or humanitarian organizations. The critiques of resiliency humanitarianism offer an insight into the major discussion points as it pertains to refugees and resilience. I wanted to emphasize the negative aspects of resiliency humanitarianism because they are prevalent to many other core issues for refugees in host society like social entrepreneurship and being held responsible for their actions. A positive evaluation of resiliency humanitarianism is how refugees are exposed to other adaptive strategies to become autonomous and support their families while being in

adverse situations. This allows further development of resilience as they continue their journey to rebuild their social network and find new opportunities to create a new life in a host society.

Project Inspiration

The inspiration for this project originated from my early days as a graduate student when I took a class on refugees that enhanced my understanding of their struggles and global standing across political spectrums. This being my first time exposed to the topic, I felt intrigued about the topic and wanted to learn more about the social, political, and cultural implications surrounding refugees. The final project for this course was interviewing a refugee and providing an ethnographic analysis of the conversation. This project generated excitement because I could not wait to speak with someone who could provide a different outlook on life but more importantly share details about their experiences to bring awareness to a variety of topics present in our global society. I arduously made several attempts to reach out to different refugees, but the common answer was they feared telling their story for my project might come back and prevent their ability to keep refugee status in the U.S. Other reasons for not wanting to participate included not wanting to relive the memories that were traumatic or otherwise negative in some way. These failed attempts to find a refugee due to these reasons opened my eyes to a plethora of different perceptions about life and the reality so many individuals are harboring these memories but continuing to press on regardless of the new challenges they encounter in the United States.

One final outreach attempt later, I was able to reconnect with an old teacher that was a Cuban refugee back in 1959 when Fidel Castro took over the island. Listening to her story

provided insight into the mind of a young child who witnessed the rise of communism and the internal panic it generated from a once stable situation in Cuba. I vividly remember her passionate re-telling of those events and the experiences she had living in the U.S. Observing the tone in her voice, the hand gestures, and occasional elevated voice during retelling of event that upset her culminated this overall unique experience. The emotion, passion, and mentality she demonstrated is something I will never forget, especially the different types of resilience she showed at such a young age. The reason I want to focus on resiliency in refugees is because I believe it allows the outsider to have a change in perception about a myriad of topics ranging from social, cultural, and political issues. Sometimes listening to others can help change the world, which is why I feel now more than ever we should listen to the words of these incredibly brave and resilient people so we can strive to make changes that benefit all. One of my main arguments concerns the origins of resilience; my interviews show that resiliency develops from experiences as a child and manifests when new challenges are encountered while living in a new society such as in the U.S. Manifestations for resilience need a foundation, so in this case it would be their early childhood of life in a refugee camp along with their migration journey. The re-telling of their story will illustrate a variety of issues present in global communities and the “root causes” associated with the events leading them to becoming refugees.

The migration journey for many refugees often causes what is known as a “liminality crisis”, an in-between situation that leaves many stateless and at the hands of state governments to determine the legality of their presence. Refugees face a liminality problem, implying they are neither legal nor illegal in the eyes of immigration policy found in

states across the globe (Groeninck, 2020). Citizenship in a certain country is used as a political tool to control who is allowed to stay in the country but is especially deployed as a weapon to prevent asylum seekers from gaining an extended stay (Genova, 2002; Paz, 2019). The liminality dilemma is correlated to maneuvers by state governments to limit refugee mobility, sometimes demonstrated by efforts to block easy travel routes or trapping large refugee groups in a country they intended to simply pass through (Kallius, 2016; Holmes, 2016) Refugee mobility is constantly being hindered through the influence of many sources, most notably state governments who create parameters that cause problems for refugees who choose to migrate to their country. Through the words of the refugees I interviewed, the liminality crisis or being in a state of “limbo” began in their own native country which established parameters for who could claim citizenship. Sometimes these situations aren’t caused strictly by political agendas, but rather are directly related to cultural tensions. Every refugee migration journey is going to be different, but it is apparent that barriers exist around the world mostly in part to political and cultural factors.

Beginning of the Project

I first began my outreach for this thesis project by connecting with some local contacts provided by one of my previous professors. These contacts were great to converse with and provided even more people who might be able to help. A snowball effect developed where each contact led to someone else or a new organization who

might be able to assist in finding refugees willing to be interviewed for my thesis project. After a few weeks of outreach and online group meetings, I was given the contact information for a college student named “Eve.” After sending the preliminary email to see if she was interested, a quick reply came later that day with an emphatic “Yes!” Our conversation took place over the computer so I could see what she looked like and the expressions on her face as she talked about a variety of topics from her experiences. Eve is an exceptional student in her early 20’s who had a big smile on her face when we talked about certain events of the past as well as very stern facial expressions when discussing the more intense parts of her experiences as a refugee.

Eve is of Burundi descent, which is a small country in East Africa near Rwanda and Tanzania. Her family fled Burundi before her birth due to the genocide and internal conflict seeking safety. Traveling by foot, the family made it to a refugee camp run by the UNHCR located in Tanzania. Eve was born in this refugee camp, making camp life the only thing she knew as a young child. When she was only eight years old the refugee camp shut down, forcing her family to decide about where to go next. With several different experiences to follow, primarily described as “sensory memories” by Eve, the family would travel across Kenya by different modes of transportation before reaching the airport that brought them to the United States. During the interview, Eve expressed many different situations she found herself in when living in the U.S. which culminate into many instances of demonstrating resilience in her own way. Eve is currently pursuing a master’s degree after recently finishing her undergraduate degree in psychology, with aspirations of pursuing a career working with refugees in some

capacity. This career choice comes from the childhood experience of receiving help from UNHCR volunteers at the refugee camp and wanting to fill a similar role for other refugees who may not have access to the same assistance with resettlement or lack a supporting environment.

The “snowball effect” I mentioned earlier brought me to my second interview with another college student of Burundi descent named “Abby.” Abby’s contact information was provided by the same source who connected me with Eve, who graciously accepted my request to interview her for my project. This interview was conducted over an online meeting room as well where we could each other face to face. The first thing I noticed was how she was a little nervous, which was obvious after I gave a very brief introduction to the purpose of my project so she could ask any questions or concerns. Her responses were often very fast with many words or phrases being used repetitively, but after a few minutes into our conversation she calmed down a little while giving her answers. Throughout our discussion, I was impressed by her attitude and mentality toward many of the difficult challenges she encountered at such a young age. As a researcher, I am always eager to learn from someone who has different experiences and perceptions on important topics such as the process of adjusting to life in the U.S. learning a completely new language. I came away impressed by Abby’s confidence in herself, the way she told her life story and explained the origins for her strong personal mindset when it came to the challenges of migrating to the U.S. and staying focused to accomplish her goal of obtaining a college degree with the best grades possible. Such maturity and intelligence at a young age after going through so much in a short amount of

time just left me excited to learn more about her and my other interviewees, as well as their thoughts about how to help refugees in the future. Returning to my introduction to Abby, she explained early on in our conversation that her parents had run away from the genocide in the region of their homeland of Burundi, eventually meeting each other for the first time in a refugee camp in Tanzania. They later got married in the refugee camp and started a family by giving birth to Abby and her siblings not long after. The refugee camp closed by the time Abby turned seven years old, leaving the family the choice of finding another camp or attempting to go back to Burundi.

Since the children were born in refugee camps and not in Burundi, they weren't legally allowed to come back to reside within the borders making them essentially "stateless". Many events followed with Abby landing in the United States a few months later. During our conversation, I saw Abby's face light up when she spoke about the chance to get an education and pursue her goals of taking care of her family. She was very adamant about education and how hard she works to get the best grades possible. The facial expressions and tone of voice displayed the passion and drive she possesses to be the best student possible not only for herself, but to make her parents proud beyond belief. Like the other individuals I spoke with, Abby described extremely tenuous experiences living in the U.S. predominantly coming from her time in school. Instances of bullying, teachers reluctant to help, and struggling to learn English all culminated into a very rough start to her education in American schools. While these were traumatic experiences, Abby didn't let them stop her from becoming an excellent English speaker and later top of her class in grades. This drive to achieve success fueled Abby from an

early age while continuing to inspire her to achieve the goal of landing a great job so her parents no longer need to work. This dream is something Abby is well on her way of accomplishing, as she will be the first person in her family to graduate college next year. At the end of our conversation, I congratulated Abby for being so close to finishing college and being one step closer to achieving the success she strives for in life.

Following my interview with these two college students, I came across “Adam” who was a friend of a mutual contact I spoke with earlier in the summer. Adam is a young man in his late 20’s who shares Burundi descent but was the only one I spoke with actually born in Burundi before traveling to a refugee camp with his family before turning two years old. Being a young child in the refugee camp, Adam spoke about being recruited by local militias to become a “child soldier” for them and weekly occurrences within the camp of neighbors being robbed. The pitch from these soldiers were purely about “patriotism” as Adam mentions, something he didn’t really understand at the time. Being a young boy in a refugee camp, his experiences were slightly different from the two women I interviewed which helped bring insight into what really occurs within these camps. Adam’s family stayed in the refugee camp until the life of his father was threatened, so with wanting to keep the family safe his parents decided to abandon the camp and pursue resettlement to the United States with help from officials associated with the UNHCR. Adam was only around ten years old when they left the camp and came to the U.S. before being enrolled in a special school featuring only immigrant and refugee children.

My biggest takeaway from my conversation with Adam was the detail he provided for a variety of different topics present with his experiences as a child in a refugee camp and as a young student in the U.S. The details illuminate his perception on the individual challenges he encountered and exactly what he used to overcome adversity. Adam spoke highly about creating a platform for refugees like himself to have so they could come together and talk about their experiences together. This established a sense of “community” as well as social relationships allowing them to support one another during these difficult times in their lives as refugees living in the U.S. Adam spoke about the “typical cliches”, as he put it, of playing sports or joining clubs to forget about what was going on in his life. He emphatically expressed the importance of community and a platform to speak about past experiences being how he was able to overcome adversity and establish his own form of resiliency. Using the resources available at his university, Adam created a group for refugees so they could have a safe space and platform to openly discuss their experiences. “I actually had the opportunity to share my refugee experience in school, so it wasn’t something negative,” something he wanted to illustrate during our conversation since most refugee experiences are shrouded in negativity. Adam directly mentioned the effects of his traumatic experiences as a child in the refugee camp, with his attention solely focused on finding different ways to support trauma healing. One method of trauma healing mentioned by Adam was directly discussing those events and accepting them as reality instead of contextualizing those experiences as fiction. Eve briefly mentioned actively talking with a therapist about her negative experiences and sensory memories, so she could continue growing as a young

adult and improve her mental health. I wanted to include this brief mention of mental health and trauma healing because they are important elements to these individuals' agency and resilience.

At the conclusion of my fieldwork interviewing these three refugees, it became clear that the experiences of life in the refugee camps induced early stages of resiliency due to everything going on around them. These experiences, although traumatic, prepared them for anything they would encounter later when migrating the U.S. This idea came directly from my conversation with Abby, who described excessive bullying but carried on with her focus of being the best student possible and not letting their harsh words interfere although they constantly affected her emotionally. These early manifestations of resilience are paramount to the life story of these three individuals as I will detail in three chapters of this project, first being life in a refugee camp and the migration to the U.S. that followed.

Early Beginnings

I first spoke with "Eve", a very intelligent and bright young college student who discussed her time as a refugee and the range of experience she encountered as a child born in a refugee camp. "I was born in a refugee camp in Tanzania, a country in Africa...my family survived the genocide in Rwanda and Burundi..." When asked about what she remembered about her time in the refugee camp as a child, Eve articulated sensory memories related to certain smells, sounds, or taste from her experiences within the camp. "Sometimes triggered by smells or noise... or like the food I eat" she explained, "the not so good memories that I remember so vividly." These sensory

memories define how Eve remembers such a tumultuous time of her, with such vivid flashbacks of living in a refugee camp. I feel this allowed Eve to express how she perceived the situation with context for how she was able to overcome the adverse situations by demonstrating her own resilience. Sensory memories were an important part of this discussion with Eve, with more evidence relating to the closure of her refugee camp.

The closure of the refugee camp is something that could happen at a moment's notice, as was the situation for Eve and her family. I inquired more about the events of the refugee camp closing, more specifically what was going through her mind as the only life she'd ever known was being uprooted. The night of the camp closure, Eve paused during her reminiscence of that fateful night before calmly explaining about the mass confusion among the residents and many being packed onto buses or trucks before being transported somewhere else. As she finished her thought, she paused for a few more seconds before saying "All I remember is chaos and sand everywhere..." This "chaos" she explained occurred during the final moments of living in the camp with "a lot of people fighting and getting on the trucks..." as they were attempting to be escorted away. "I remember leaving Tanzania to Kenya for documentation stuff. We were transported by truck or bus but they would stop at the marketplace so we could get food and then... it was a long drive..." Following her account of the journey by bus, Eve recollects the origins of these sensory images. "That's where the smell comes from, the oil or exhaust, takes my memory back to the moment when we got off the bus, but it was still running..." Countless nights living in makeshift refugee camps were accompanied by a

variety of sensory memories, including the sound of “...babies crying on loop.” Sensory memories are unique because they are comprised of different aspects of one or more experiences tied to something so vivid it is hard to forget over time. These memories resemble the personal strength and resilience of a refugee because it culminates everything they’ve been through and overcame as they begin the next phase of their lives.

The memories connected to the smell and sounds of traveling across Africa encompass the experiences of a young Eve staying with her family in surrogate refugee camps as they journeyed to the next town. The sensory memories weren’t all bad necessarily, as they popped up during our conversation about the refugee camp she lived in from birth. The only life Eve knew as a child was living in a refugee camp run by the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), until her family embarked on the journey to come to the United States when she was only eight years old. I asked Eve about her encounters with the UNHCR staff and volunteers to gauge their role in her life and the other children residing in the camp. She got very excited during her description of the UNHCR staff, explaining “they were very loving and made you forget what was going on...” Eve addressed the reality of something always going on in the camp whether it be “food shortages or someone dying cause diseases”. The volunteers kept the children focused on the daily lessons to distract them from everything going on, something Eve appreciated during her recollection of this time in her life. The kindness expressed toward the refugee children stayed with Eve for a long time, as more sensory memories relating to the UNHCR staff came up. “I always remember the logo and their colors! Like when I went to college, like there was a UNICEF (United Nations

International Children's Emergency Fund) building on campus and my freshman year when I saw that it was like... like where have I seen this before?!" When she brought this up, Eve was all smiles before ending her sentence with a laugh. The way she smiled talking about this memory, it was almost as if this moment made her realize the people who were there during the dark times of living in a refugee camp were still there if she needed them.

The sensory memories described by Eve are something common among refugees who tie powerful and sometimes traumatic memories with certain smells or sounds as illustrated by her words. Memory is a powerful asset to refugees, with both positive and negative effects on their mental health. An ethnographic study worked with refugees to identify elements of their environment that reminded them of good memories of their homeland. Referred to as photo-voice, memory was used as a positive asset to refugees grasping on to their recollections of home, family, and happiness before the onslaught of trauma and persecution overwhelmed them (Karr, 2020; Gemignani, 2011; Norris, 2008). The role of sensory memories can have both positive and negative impacts in the lives of a refugee, although sensory memories usually apply to more negative memories like the moments in time Eve wishes to forget. Another perspective introduced during my interviews came from Adam who expressed how such memories can lead to trauma healing by accepting them as reality and not trying to forget they occurred at an earlier point in their lives. The trauma healing described by Adam included both individual and collective healing, something he went into detail about during the final portion of our interview. "I think healing begins from within I think there is an aspect of collective

healing that is helpful in acknowledging you are not alone... I think there is a significance in collective healing and if it weren't the space I could interact with my cultural heritage I think it would be different," a brief quote expressing this sentiment about unity and collective healing over shared experiences.

Eve consistently articulated her experiences as a young refugee through sensory memories as seen so far in this analysis but continued with this theme as she detailed her account of traveling across Africa. The family moved by bus or a large truck going from different camp or little town to stop for the night. Sometimes they stopped in a city with a marketplace to allow the families a chance to buy supplies, food, or anything else they might need for the trip. Some of the camps were worse than others due to the overcrowded tents or just the actual location being challenging. As Eve and the family embarked across the region, they finally ended up making it to their destination of the United States after months on the road living in surrogate camps not knowing what the next day would bring. Upon arriving in New York, Eve eventually migrated south toward Virginia with her family living in a community filled with other Burundi refugees they knew from the camp in Tanzania. Eve explained "...My mom found out there were other Burundi people in another nearby town that we lived with in the refugee camp, so she wanted to move near them..." Living in a community with fellow Burundi refugees created a sense of ease and belonging while bracing their families for life in a new society.

I wanted to delve deeper into her mindset throughout her migration journey because it correlates to this concept of early stages of resiliency manifestation. I inquired

about what was going through her mind during these nonstop trips not knowing when you were leaving or where you are going. There were two elements to her response, both of which I want to illustrate through direct quotes from Eve. She started off by saying there was almost a bit of anticipation or childlike excitement by expressing her thoughts as “Oh where are we going today??” Following this response, I asked if she ever felt scared or nervous travelling so much to which she expressed “honestly I know there is like a lot of people who think that in that moment we were scared...it just felt normal you know... that you don’t even remember the last time you were scared because I’ve lived through it so many times.” This answer represents an aspect of my argument about the early stages of resilience manifestation in refugees. This mindset came from the stern expressions on her parent’s face, so they set the example of staying resilient during this time with their children following without hesitation. The only time Eve felt nervous was when her parents finally showed fear of the situation; “once we saw our family being nervous that’s when we started being nervous or feeling scared.”

Eve mentioned how the things she went through during her migration journey “should have scared her” but since her family stayed strong together, they were able to overcome the challenges. These early experiences as a young refugee forged the resiliency Eve would later demonstrate when overcoming new challenges in the U.S. The points brought up about refugee life living in a camp were like the information mentioned by the other two individuals I spoke with ensuring commonalities in what lead to their own unique resilience manifestations in my analysis of their testimony. This concept continues to be prominent as I continued my interview process by speaking with Abby.

The conversation with Abby brought to light the more stressful aspects of refugee camp life, specifically the encounters with camp officials when seeking resettlement. Before touching on this component of her interview, let me give a brief introduction to her story. Prior to her birth in a refugee camp, her parents had to escape the genocide in the region by traveling alone with the hope their family members would make it to the refugee camp. Abby stayed in refugee camps until she was years old before a chance at a new life presented itself to the family. The first part of our conversation primarily revolved around the process to getting resettled through a humanitarian organization.

“The process was very long” she explained, “you didn’t even know where you were going...” An extensive line of questioning arose when seeking resettlement, a process Abby refers to as “interrogations.” Going with her detailed account of the situation, the questions were asking for specific information about the family since each member of her family was asked the same exact questions. These interrogations happened numerous times to see if the family would give the same answers every time. Abby was unsure of the purpose of this but expressed it was “really scary for me because I was only 9 and I was in the room by myself answering these questions that were really hard to answer and I didn’t know how to answer them...” The family thought Australia was the new destination for resettlement but plans quickly changed when they arrived at a new refugee camp after the original camp closed. Like what Eve described when her refugee camp shut down, Abby and her siblings were not allowed back to Burundi since they were born in the camp. Often refugees face challenges like this, something referred to as a liminality crisis, in which the individual is in limbo with legal status and has no

true homeland. The liminality dilemma left her parents with the option of sneaking their children back into Burundi until they could find another refugee camp. Abby described this time in her life as a game of “hide and seek” when she recounted “to even go see our family, we had to like hide and sneak through and go because we weren’t allowed to go...”

This situation wasn’t ideal, so the family embarked on a journey to another refugee camp to start the “process” over again with hopes of resettlement. This new camp created more stress for Abby and her family as well as every other camp resident. The organization running the camp implemented a process like a lottery, where the only people eligible for resettlement were chosen at random and their names put on the community board. People flocked to this community board every day to check if any of their names were put on the board for the day. A depressing reality emerged during our conversation when Abby mentioned how “there was people there for like 10 years. People that were born there and this is all they’ve known... People who have died there waiting for their name to be chosen.” I followed this statement with a question of how this situation affected her, specifically her perception of this lottery situation. “I was just like well these people have been here for 20 years, we’re about to stick here for another 20 years too. Like we’re not going anywhere, we’re going to be staying here for a while.” A sense of hopelessness emerged and fear of dying in this camp became a possible reality for Abby, along with the others who laid in waiting to see their names on the board.

I was curious about this lottery system Abby described, so I asked if it really was up to a random selection or if some people held priority. Her estimation about the lottery

concluded those who had small children, were orphans, or by themselves probably had better chances at being selected. This helped my understanding of this situation, especially when she continued with how one day her mother's name was on the board. Abby believed this occurred because her youngest sister was just an infant at the time, so the camp officials chose the entire family for resettlement. Following this unforeseen event, Abby elaborates on how they were forced to get numerous vaccinations and other shots before they were allowed to migrate and be resettled in a new country. A fear of doctors emerged as she expressed "getting shots all the time and it was like, I feel like that's why I'm so terrified of going to the doctors..." Like my other interviews, I asked about what was going through her mind after getting chosen as well as the reality of moving to a new society. Her first response to my question was "we were going to go to school now..." which is an excellent example of Abby's mentality toward life. Education is of the utmost importance to Abby, since she believes a strong education will open doors to new opportunities to one day allow her to accomplish the goals she has set for herself. As they boarded the plane to travel to the United States, Abby remembers thinking "this is going to take us to... freedom. This was a new beginning for me..."

The last refugee I spoke with was Adam who gave tremendous detail into his more traumatic experiences living in a refugee camp as a child. Unlike the previous two individuals, Adam was born in Burundi and traveled with his family to a refugee camp as a child. I believe being a young boy in a refugee camp gave him different experiences due to the details of our conversation. Adam was recruited by local extremist militia to be a child soldier so he could fight with them under the guise of patriotism as he described.

“I was recruited to be a child soldier and that was difficult for me and my family specifically because I had no idea of what was happening... as a child just being in a place where you are taught to hate and fight and just it wasn’t as advertised as being soldiers, it was more of being patriotic.” He went on to say this impacted his life “one way or another” along with the monthly occurrence of armed robbers threatening his family in the refugee camp. Adam mentioned the presence of security guards outside the camp, so I was intrigued as to why they would allow these robberies to continue so frequently. My curiosity was met answered when Adam exclaimed “we found out it was the police officers that were supposed to be guarding the refugee camps that were the ones robbing people’s homes. This had an impact on the safety of the refugee camp...” The frequency of the robberies impacted him mentally and emotionally over time, especially with a few situations where a gun was pointed to his head during an attack. The culmination of all these experiences living in fear due to the consistent robberies from those who were responsible for their safety impacted his ability to trust law enforcement, especially when he migrated over to the U.S. These experiences as a child have stayed with him shaping his opinion on police officers, something he brought up: “I came to the US immediately having that distress and disdain for police officers because of that as well as everything that happens here in the US.”

The threat of armed robbers along with the reality the safety of the village was in the hands of corrupt guards was matched when someone attempted to take the life of his father. “Actually, around this same time my family started receiving death threats like letters and things like that. My dad was poisoned but luckily recovered...” This

circumstance came with the reality no one was safe in this refugee camp, influencing the family's decision to seek safety through resettlement. Adam explained the process as being smooth with the family needing to "go through a series of orientations, learning about the US culture what we will need to do." The UNHCR was involved with his family's resettlement process, flying everyone to Kenya for another two weeks to attend even more orientations about life in the U.S. I asked about what was going through his mind, specifically how these orientations made him perceive life in the United States and a very different culture. Adam described his perception of the U.S. "From the movies we had seen for example like the Rambo movies with the Vietnam war and other then that it our knowledge was just from movies. So that's we, how I understood the US and so and it wasn't known as the US it was known as America to us and so we saw America as this beautiful place where everything was possible, looked much better then where we were living." His descriptions encompass this imagined reality of the U.S. inspired by popular media and what was spoke about on the news, primarily political reports describing various aspects of American international politics.

With an influx of orientations and plane rides, I asked Adam his mentality at the time regarding the sudden relocation to a brand-new society. He emphatically expressed a sense of anticipation rather than nervousness or fear, and adding it was a sense of relief:

"I guess it was more like anticipation I would say... but you know at the time for me it was more like enjoying the ride and going through whatever, we had to go through to get to America... I'll add a sense of relief in a way like I shared how

my dad was given poison, like seeing everyone celebrate that really sort of destroyed that sense of community and place, so it was a relief to leave...”

Witnessing a celebration over the possibility of his father’s death from his fellow camp residents left a lasting impact on Adam. He expressed the culture this set in the camp, where nobody cared about each other, and no one was there to support you. The description of refugee camp culture along with the consistent threat of personal safety were moments in his life that affected his perspective on the world, which is an element to one’s resiliency because strong experiences can be something that influence your decision making later in life. By this I mean to demonstrate how these early experiences forge resiliency, building up one’s inner strength and mindset as they continue to grow as an individual an encounter difficulty as they progress in life. The sense of community within the refugee camp was destroyed, leaving a lasting impact on Adam and his family. “Community” is such an important concept for the refugee discourse due to its relevancy regarding the unity and bond refugees can have over shared experiences or cultural background. The discussion in chapter two will identify the prominent theme of “community” as I mentioned and its connection to cultural awareness as it pertains to how refugees are viewed in society.

Conclusion

All three of the refugees I interviewed spent most of their childhood in a refugee camp, which at times proved to a challenge on its own. The development of refugee camps is a response to growing internal or external conflicts resulting in the loss of

homeland or the lives on a population being at risk. The primary response to these situations is to create refugee camps that rely on external funding from members of the United Nations if run by the UNHCR or in other cases monetarily funded by sovereign governments of local countries. The response to the growing refugee crisis is surrounded by a reluctance of different governments to step in and take control of the situation by providing financial and political support (Shacknove, 276). “Their hesitancy in assuming the burdens of material relief, asylum, and resettlement, and their concern that assisting refugees could adversely implicate other foreign policy objectives...” is a culmination of the different factors influencing states around the world to assist with the refugee crisis. This complicated relationship causes increased tension between the refugees and the government, thus further creating problems for those seeking asylum. Another prominent result of this tension is how the refugees are associated with a negative perception that isn’t attributable to their actions as individuals, but instead a consequence of governmental narrative associated with their temperament toward refugees.

This negative connotation surrounding refugees stems from this unnecessary bias political actors impose on society. This background information provides the detail to fully understand the historical and political context as to why refugees are discriminated or seen as a burden while they reside in refugee camps. As this chapter provided detailed accounts of life in a refugee camp, the connection with the underlying political factors can be made with the experiences provided with these interviews. One important element to these contextual pieces to refugee camp life is the camp culture derived from the social relationships of the members within the community. As described by Adam during our

interview, refugee camp culture can increasingly toxic where no one cares about each other or their well-being. This is certainly not the case in every refugee camp but is an internal threat to the community in this situation. Refugee camp structure can be incredibly complex regarding food supplies, social relationships, and economic development. An individual must prove they need assistance to qualify as a “refugee” with the UNHCR official statement dictating “physically, mentally or socially disadvantaged persons who may be unable to meet their basic needs and may therefore require specific assistance” (Trapp 2018). This definition seemingly ascribes the status of being vulnerable to refugees, while it is apparent they are demonstrating resilience to overcome their situation and make the best of the circumstances of refugee camp life. The complexities of refugee camps illustrate the politics within the community and establish a variety of circumstances where resilience can develop and manifest when new challenges arise.

CHAPTER TWO

Gaining the acceptance and embrace of those around you is an integral part to gaining self-confidence and developing strong social bonds with those who are supportive of your interests or life goals. Feeling as if you “belong” is associated positive interactions as opposed to being treated like an outsider with discriminatory words or actions as many refugees’ experience when they migrate to a new society. A sense of belonging may be defined as “the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so the persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment” (Doron, 185, 2005). The transition from life in a refugee camp to a new society creates unique challenges due to a variety of factors including learning a new language, adjusting to new social norms, and adapting to a completely new way of life. Similar ethnographic discussions identify these challenges as crossing new social and cultural boundaries. This crossover can cause overwhelming pressure for refugees to adapt to new social and cultural norms at an accelerated rate which in turn can cause severe adversity. The refugees I spoke with recounted several different challenges they encountered when first arriving in the United States, predominantly their time in the school system. Each individual discussed time in a program associated with the school so they could be taught English and become proficient in the language. Becoming adept at English took several months, with each individual learning in their own unique way. The prominent discussion within my interviews was the school bullies, lack of cultural

awareness, and feeling as if they weren't good enough due to the constant negative interactions with other students.

The prevailing theme in this chapter is the concept of “community” due to its relevance with assessing this crossover into new social and cultural boundaries. Along with this sense of belonging sought after by refugees, cultural awareness was brought up numerous times during my interviews. The feeling of being part of a social group was denied due to a lack of cultural awareness pertaining to the teachers and fellow students being oblivious to the potential traumatic history of these young refugees. The purpose of this chapter is to identify moments where cultural awareness could have aided these young refugees with adjusting to life in the U.S., thus promoting a sense of belonging instead of being treated like outsiders. Each interview contained moments where fellow students acted in a manner that neglected the opportunity for these young refugees to connect with those willing to accept them. The conversations surrounding these moments detail specific situations where cultural awareness was absent due to the education system in the U.S. neglecting to discuss the life of refugees, especially the prominence of trauma and negative life experiences they may have encountered. Instead, refugees must continue being resilient in these social predicaments to move forward past the negative interactions at school and find supportive outlets such as friend groups that can welcome them with positive words.

A sense of belonging or membership within a “community” is a vital aspect to the discourse associated with this project as it pertains to resilience development and manifestation. “Their capacity to adapt and grow during resettlement is increasingly

attributed to the protective strategies through which resilience is built at the community level...” (Mason 401, 2013). Association ties to others within the community can build social and cultural capital refugees can use to slowly integrate into the new society while preserving their own cultural agency. Refugees overtime can use the supportive outlets and social connections within a community to continually build on their own resilience by finding other resources that allow them to overcome adversity. Resettlement may offer protections against extreme violence but in return makes refugees vulnerable to further discrimination, racism, and other social propaganda that can impede integration into a host society. Aside from the heinous hate speech and racist language refugees are exposed too while living in a host society, other situations that commonly arise are economic disparity due to unemployment, denied access to medical resources, gender roles, and especially the language barrier (Mason 403, 2013). Roles within the family can change due to the children adapting quicker to the new culture and learning the language quicker, a situation discussed in the next chapter as Adam vividly describes the tension this can cause within a family. “Community” is directly tied to so many stages of resiliency development as previously discussed, but it goes in hand with the cultural agency refugees wish to hold onto as they adjust to their new life in a host society. Cultural awareness as it relates to why refugees may act or dress a certain way is an element to the role of community, since a feeling of acceptance can influence a refugee’s confidence as I will express in this chapter.

I begin this chapter with my conversation with Eve who emphatically mentioned “cultural awareness” as it pertains to explaining why students consistently displayed

aggressive racist language due to a lack of education about refugees. Examples of the racist language thrown toward all three of the refugees I interviewed were “go back to where you came from” or “call us mean names” as well as making monkey gestures at them due to their dark black skin. The prevalence of racism and discriminatory language toward these refugees represent systemic social issues in the U.S., but more relevant is the lack of awareness regarding the background of refugees. Such hostile actions and language thrown at refugees brings down their self-esteem and desire to communicate with others at school because they don’t know if everyone shares these feelings toward them. The concept of cultural awareness can be interpreted in several ways under these circumstances, so allow me to elaborate on how I will be applying it to the contents of this chapter. When discussing awareness in this chapter, I will be referencing two separate applications of this concept. The first being a lack of cultural awareness about potential experiences refugees of a certain background may have encountered or be relevant to how they dress as denoted with Eve due to her religious traditions wearing a hijab as I will illustrate in this chapter. The second application is how those given the responsibility to assist refugees, like those involved in a resettlement agency, may be uninterested in following through with their agreement. The lack of awareness of the situation for refugees by various agencies can be extremely detrimental to their potential success in a new society. A sense of “community” for a refugee can be paramount to developing social relationships outside the family, allowing them to continue adjusting to life in a new society with help from a supportive network of friends. These two concepts

are prevalent in all three conversations as they relate to the experiences of a young refugee living life in the U.S.

The two prevalent themes in this chapter are applicable to a high percentage of refugees who come to the United States. The ineptitude of the American school system to provide cultural awareness about those from different backgrounds creates a reoccurring problem for young refugees. The reality of the situation is most educators lack the experience with students from other backgrounds or are reluctant to engage in a way that assists learning at their own pace due to the language barriers. This essentially “obfuscates the way in which actors within their school are not empowered nor equipped to meet their overwhelming and unique needs” of young refugees (McWilliams 154, 2016). The case workers associated with refugee resettlement agencies often plant refugee families in heavy urban cities, thus causing a cultural overload by experiencing so many new things at once. Some of the educators or administrative members of the public-school systems do try to promote social mobility and independence through education by concomitantly learning English. This essentially is the state’s way of creating young refugees capable of becoming self-sufficient and not a continued financial burden. The young refugees do in part act as “cultural brokers” who bear the responsibility of assisting their parents in a variety of ways as they navigate this new society while harboring their past traumatic experiences. This creates a tension between the young refugees and their parents, often creating a space where communication is non-existent (McWilliams 155, 2016).

These topics are something Eve discussed as she stressed awareness and possible future education about refugees be something mandated for the American school system on all fronts about the past of a refugee. A perfect example came as I transitioned to questions regarding integration into American society and Eve immediately recounted one of her first days in school. Knowing little English, Eve gestured she needed to be escorted to the restroom, so one of the boys in her class took her straight to the men's bathroom. Eve elaborated on the context for this misunderstanding by saying, "He thought I was a boy when I first went to school...because our hair was short...". Eve wore common Burundi attire to school as well as a hijab due to her Muslim faith, confusing the student due to his lack of cultural awareness. This is an example of an individual challenge for Eve, who over time strove to learn English to be able to communicate with everyone to avoid any more misunderstandings. There is a belief within our society regarding foreigner's lack of proficiency in English being correlated to their lack of intelligence. A fallacy accepted by some; this was detailed by Eve during her account of her first few weeks in school being taken out of class to take special courses.

Eve expressed a variety of emotions describing the teacher's perception of her, explaining how they associated not knowing English with being dumb and "not possibly knowing how to do math..." Continuing with this occurred for a long stretch of time and adding

"They would dumb things down for us, especially like math so we were like in this program called ESL, the subjects were easier than normal..." I could tell Eve was offended by this gesture due to the way she described the teachers and how she was

treated during this time. Being taken away from classmates as well as feeling like she was incapable of learning in the normal classes, she expressed thoughts of being an outsider and not belonging. “It was hard to feel the same as everyone or share a connection with the other students in the school...” she explained, noting the lack of community or social support during this crucial part of her life. Eve exited the program after the fifth grade but being placed in those classes remained on her transcript, something she pointed out that bothered her because other schools may believe she wasn’t very smart when she applied to them later in life. One of her last comments in this segment of the interview was “I think it really got to our confidence...”, encapsulating this experience as feeling like an outcast.

Eve’s sentiment expresses how this feeling of being an outsider impacted her life to the point it affected her psychologically, devastating the confidence in herself. The reality of not having anyone else to relate to especially finding someone who didn’t alienate her from the social groups within the school created a serious challenge. Refugees are often viewed as outsiders with nothing that enables them to connect with the new people they encounter. The feeling of isolation with no one to turn too impacts one’s mental and emotional well-being as demonstrated by the heartfelt words Eve used during our conversation. A sense of belonging can take time to develop when trying to assimilate into a new society, but the friends made during this time of a refugee’s life may impact them more then they realize. During her first year of school in the U.S., Eve was able to make friends due to her progress with learning English. These are friends she still talks with daily as a young adult, but explained it “was difficult to meet nice kids

who were patient and supportive...” Not only was the school environment a challenge for a young Eve, but the physical space and plethora of people moving about was a cultural shock that presented itself as a personal challenge to overcome.

There was no formal “class setting” within the refugee camp, although they did conduct daily lessons by rounding up all the children and teaching various subjects. “When we did have “school” it was just a circle or UNICEF people giving short lessons, parents talking about life skills... it wasn’t school...” Coming from a sheltered life and being thrown straight into a large school building came as a shock, a word she frequently used when describing her school experiences. Navigating through the school was a challenge, with kids constantly in the hallways migrating to their next class. Eve went on a monologue to describe how every aspect of U.S. school life came as a surprise:

“The housing was shocking, the bathroom was shocking, seeing water like it sounds like how everyone views Africa as... not all of Africa like that, but everything was so shocking to me. The floors, water spitting out of the fountain, and you drink it?! Everything. We hadn’t seen a lot of umm colored people and when we did it was UNICEF volunteers, but coming to a place where wow there was many skin colors many everything, it was really, really shocking...”

The descriptions provided expose the reality many refugees come across when moving to a new society, specifically referencing how so many new things are encountered in a short span of time are considered “shocking.” The school building containing so many classrooms was vastly different than a small circle of children being taught lessons. Seeing bathroom stalls, water fountains for everyone to drink from, and the large melting

pot of cultural backgrounds comprising the students at her school is something she remembers so vividly. The repetitious usage of “shocking” to describe everything emphasizes Eve’s perception of her new life in the U.S. The cultural shock of school is one example of a challenge for young refugees, while they are bombarded with so many responsibilities as a student such as doing homework or taking tests in a foreign language. While repeatedly establishing how shocking all these experiences were at the time, Eve went on to adjust over time due to finding a network of friends and building the foundation for her own “community.” My use of “community” here to advocate for my argument about the importance of social relationships and close friends who can be supportive for those in a new setting struggling to adapt to a fast-moving environment such as a middle school in the U.S.

This concept is something immigrants and refugees alike experience, creating another hurdle to overcome as a student. Eve spoke about the bullies she encountered saying “at that time being an African was something to make fun of...”, suggesting racist remarks about her black skin coming from classmates. This is something that came as a surprise to Eve who explained when living in the refugee camps, none of the kids bullied each other because everyone was in the same situation, later saying “we know we were in the same boat, you know making someone feel little wasn’t a thing...” In her mind, everyone at the school was in the same situation as students actively trying their best in class and making friends. This idea is something relevant across all the interviews I conducted, mainly speaking refugees want the chance to be accepted and have the same opportunities as everyone else.

Refugees migrating as a family to a new society can create a sort of “tension” between parents and children, as mentioned by Eve toward the end of our conversation. “We did a lot better jumping into the culture than our parents...” due to the children being essentially thrown into U.S. society eventually overcoming this challenge and adapting to their new life. Eve promptly stated “we learned to like deal with it...” while her parents stayed in the refugee mindset of everyone being a potential threat to the safety of the family. Through the words of Eve, she expressed this fight or flight philosophy of her parents as them being stuck in “survival mode.” This created internal conflict in the family because the children were eager to embrace their new society and learn the new culture while the parents attempted to hold them back from going out with new friends. “I wanted to learn so much about people and culture everything, I was always involved with like everything at school, but they saw it as another thing...”, expressing the desire to experience life in the U.S. and learn about this new culture, something her parents were reluctant to accept. The “survival mode” referenced earlier in our conversation was given more detail by Eve who explained how the constant moving as a refugee in Africa imprinted on her parents that they needed to always be aware of where they were going and what could happen. Finishing this thought, Eve paused a few moments before reflecting on what her parent’s mentally thought about during the early days of living in the U.S.; “Because of the things they went through, it was so hard for them to be there for their kids...”

This tension between the children wanting to embrace the new culture and the parents being hesitant was a challenge on its own for Eve. Their experiences as refugees

travelling across a very dangerous region in Africa at the time and living in a refugee camp was something they needed to process on their own, which is something Eve fully supported. Communication is a skill many people struggle with due to its tie to our emotions and experiences but can work on as time progresses. This is the same sentiment felt from the words of Eve who explained

“that’s something that they they’re learning, but for a while you couldn’t talk to them about how you felt, you could not talk to them about anything. It was like you were seen as weak, or they would bring up things they been through to like basically tell you like we’ve been through all this why are you crying...”

The internal struggle with communication is enhanced by this notion that Eve’s experiences were overshadowed by what her parents went through, which is a fallacy and, in this case, caused a rift due to the lack of support. As Eve explained in this quote, it’s something they have worked on over time allowing a support channel to open for the entire family. Early on, this family support was nonexistent leading to Eve finding other ways to process her experiences and adapt to life in the U.S. The lack of communication opportunities with her parents is another side to Eve’s resiliency due to her ability to shoulder the weight of her own struggles so there wouldn’t be any more tension internally for the family. Positive and negative situations pertain to resiliency and the ability find other outlets or utilize different resources when the situation involves close social relationships, they have the possibility of being damaged.

The challenges of migrating to a new society are going to be unique for each individual but some commonalities will arise as I will detail throughout this chapter.

Abby went into detail to describe her experiences migrating to the U.S., going at great lengths to give detail about everything she encountered in the United States. Landing at numerous airports during her journey to the U.S., she was taken aback by the amount of different looking people she saw. Abby described them as “brand new types of people”, specifically the amount of white people walking about the airports, going on to say, “I was very scared cause I never seen different people before...” The refugee camp she lived in for so long only featured fellow Africans, so seeing a variety of people with different skin colors came as a shock while almost being a surreal moment at this stage of her journey. Being isolated in the refugee camp created this tunnel view of the world that was opened as she migrated through so many culturally different societies. Describing moments of fear during these encounters, Abby continually used the word “shocking” to explain these experiences as well as everything she saw during her first few days in the U.S.

“I guess like I never knew there were this many types of people and different cultures and different everything, places looking different. Different types of food and especially like, the thing that shocked me the most was packets of food like you know like ketchup and things like that. I thought there was blood in these packets. We were all just scared to even eat it, like what is this? Everything was just shocking.”

I wanted to include this long quote because through her own words it provides insight to what was going through her mind as she entered a new society as well as how she

perceived all these experiences. This quote illustrates the overwhelming nature of sensory overload as it pertains to experiencing so many different things at once.

The language expressed by Abby during this time may appear as if these experiences were only accompanied by fear, but that doesn't give the true story. While discussing this point in her life I could see a variety of emotions coming from her facial expressions with excitement being the dominant tone of voice. Reviewing my fieldnotes, I repeatedly wrote "excitement" as she described all these encounters with new food, seeing cars everywhere, meeting people from different backgrounds, as well as the mountains and trees so vividly described. "It was exciting but like WOAHH..." she exclaimed detailing all these experiences. A unique encounter specific to Abby's interview is the presence of journalists swarming her family as they got off the plane in New York. These reporters and journalists took photos of the family, requesting interviews with their father due to his ability to speak conversational English. This attempt to interview the family was extremely overwhelming, causing paranoia because in their minds they thought they did something wrong to warrant this much attention so suddenly. "Did we do something wrong? Like you know paranoia, you know all they wanted to do was talk to us and put us in the newspaper. Because we were refugees, immigrants to the US. My dad was like NO, we don't want that...it was shocking and scary..." The uncertainty surrounding why the reporters were there at the airport waiting for them made Abby feel scared, which is certainly understandable given this was their first footsteps off the plane.

Following this encounter, Abby's family continued to their new home set up by a resettlement agency in a community featuring people of the same cultural background. This created a sense of "community" as discussed in the previous chapter, allowing the family to have a supportive outlet while adjusting to life in the U.S. Although the resettlement agency helped them with the legal documentation to be refugees, they weren't always so eager to help with other tasks creating a unique set of challenges for Abby and her family. These included not knowing where to go to buy food or clothing, how to get to doctor appointments, as well as not knowing enough English to ask for help when they were at the stores. The resettlement agency assisted by going to the grocery store for them and making sure they arrived at the correct time for school. Abby's family are strict followers of Islam, so it is important to them no food items containing pork be purchased or stored in the house. The individuals associated with the agency were told about these dietary restrictions, but consistently purchased large quantities of food containing pork to the disbelief of the family. Abby expressed moments of anger discussing this, as it went directly against what they informed the agency to buy. "The people who were helping us weren't really here to help... Kind of like they did that *on purpose*...like they didn't want us here." This specific example is relevant to what refugees will sometimes encounter, the people they depend on the most for assistance don't necessarily pay attention to their needs. Going back to what Eve expressed about a lack of awareness among teachers, this same concept can be applied to this situation. Those assigned to assist Abby's family may just view it as a job and not realize the tremendous amount of responsibility they have in taking care of a refugee family

unaware of their surroundings. “Like what are we supposed to eat, we didn’t know how to go to the store or know where it was or know how to find things for ourselves...” she exclaimed, describing a sense of frustration for the circumstances present during the early days of life in the U.S.

The situation being described here is blatant discriminatory actions being taken due to their religious background, since Abby and her family are of the Islamic faith. Looking back at Abby’s words from this specific quote, saying these actions were done “on purpose” ties her experiences to the growing epidemic of discrimination against Muslims in the United States referred to as Islamophobia. Many attitudes and opinions toward those of different religious and cultural backgrounds in the U.S. are seemingly met with negativity and in the most extreme cases violence against them. In this case, Islamophobia is clearly present toward Abby’s family creating a situation where they weren’t getting the help they needed and putting more stress on the family to find other ways to take care of themselves. This is something referred to as “responsibilizing refugees” where being resilient is forced upon them because that’s the only option they are given, with the responsibility falling solely on them rather than neoliberal governments implementing policies that could help them. Abby’s experiences resonate with other migrants/refugees belonging to the Muslim faith, something denoted in a recent study about Islamophobia. My focus on school interactions correlates with this study, as the author mentions how “the microcosm of the U.S. public school, an environment that should be a place to encourage understanding across difference, is not

immune from the division and Islamophobic rancor that can be part of the larger society in which it exists” (Wheatley 301, 2019).

This situation got resolved through her father’s ability to understand enough English to figure out the ingredients for the food they wanted to buy as well as finding the right buildings for the various appointments they had set up for continuing with their legal documentation. Abby attributes their continued success during this time when they met other Burundi refugees living near the community. “Those people are the ones who actually helped us, the others didn’t do anything for us”, expressing how those within their refugee “community” were the reason they were able to adjust to life in the U.S. Abby’s parents returned the favor to these fellow Burundi refugees by assisting them with setting up the necessary legal documentation and helping schedule appointments with the correct offices. Abby noted this was “because the people supposed to help them didn’t, same experience as us...”, connecting their communal experiences with those they were relying on coming up short in ensuring they got the necessary help. These experiences detail numerous unique challenges for Abby and her family, embracing this concept of “community” as being vital to refugee success when faced with unique cultural challenges. The adversity continued as Abby and her siblings were enrolled in school a few months after their initial arrival. While feeling nervous, Abby expressed excitement over the opportunity of meeting new people at school but quickly realized she looked different the rest of the student body. Through her own words, “it was very hard for me...me and my sister were the only ones who were black in the whole school...” while she had hoped she could meet students who “looked like her.” This correlates to the

words of Eve who described this feeling of being an “outsider” due to differences in language or in this case skin color. As Abby continued her education in this brand-new environment, even more adverse situations arose.

The elementary school Abby found herself attending previously never had non-English speaking students, so a makeshift “program” was quickly assembled. Abby, her sister, and one Hispanic student were the only non-English speakers in the school, so they were individually taken to small rooms to be taught by a single teacher. This seemed confusing and “kind of fishy” due to the lessons being taught in essentially a janitor’s closet. A small closet like room with no windows and a single computer to use along with the specialized teacher, Abby describes her frustration with this abrupt special class she found herself in. I could sense the frustration during her recollection, as she went detailed how this situation may have held her back from learning English at a faster rate. “I feel like if we had other people in the class, you know maybe I would have been able to learn English faster and even got out of the program early...” At the conclusion of the school year, Abby moved to a new school featuring many immigrants and refugees who shared the struggle of learning English. Enrolled in a new program taken place in a large classroom with other non-English speakers, Abby quickly learned the language and tested out within a year. I could feel the confidence from her words, as she was enthusiastic to have learned the language so fast while also validating her thoughts about how she would’ve learned a year prior had the program at the previous school kept them all together. Along with a more comprehensive program, students from Burundi were in the class as well so they could help each other out if somebody didn’t understand part of the

lesson or didn't understand a word. "If we didn't know someone else could explain it to us. There were students who spoke my language who were able to say like "hey this is not it" like I knew some things and they would teach me what I didn't know..."

The language barrier takes time to overcome as learning a completely different language foreign to their native tongue can pose challenges not only in communication but with social relationships and network building. Becoming proficient in English became a "navigational resource" for all three of the refugees I spoke with, as each described their own strategy for learning and how becoming a good English speaker propelled them into friend groups as well as school activities. Showing "how they used language in dexterous and creative ways to negotiate human relationships, build identity and affiliation, exercise agency, and question the conditions of their life in the United States" culminates the role language plays with becoming part of a "community" and expressing one's cultural identity to those who may not fully understand (Park, 2017).

Learning English was a gradual process that affected Abby mentally and emotionally due to her failing to get the grades she wanted. Throughout our conversation, she adamantly expressed how important education is to her life goals of obtaining the best possible job and being able to solely take care of her family financially. Growing frustrated with lower grades on assignments, she expressed moments of sadness and ultimately divulged how at the time she felt inadequate. "It made me feel disappointed. Like I was stupid... I would tell myself when I learn English then I will never allow myself to get these kinds of grades ever again." Since gaining proficiency in English, Abby has never gotten a grade below a B even through college. Earning high grades is

extremely important for Abby's future goals, so her desire to obtain these grades fueled her various methods of learning English:

“When I was in elementary school my sister and I would sit in front of the tv and be watching Elmo and stuff like that, repeating the words and spelling them out. Like sitting in front of the tv that's how we learned, the more you watch stuff and repeating the words and writing them down. Me and my sister were very serious, I wanted to be able to speak to people at school and all my friends. Hard to sit there and not be able to talk to your friends... I literally took my time and learned, sitting front of the tv with my sister. If they said a word, I would go get the Burundi to English dictionary and try to like look up the word and see what it meant to add it to my vocabulary...”

I wanted to include this description to demonstrate her motivation and desire to actively learn English so she could quickly move forward to her goals. This sequence in her life was a huge building block as she progressed through school and continued meeting new friends so could have a supportive outlet. Aside from learning English, Abby went on to describe the other moments of her time in middle school. A point in her life she described as “the hardest time of my life,” Abby was victim to several bullies and teacher neglecting to do anything about it. The bullies used racist language towards all the students from different cultural backgrounds, but specifically made stereotypical jokes about Abby due to her black skin. “It hurt us you know, just saying things like that. Just to make us feel belittled like we didn't belong there...” Teachers witnessed these events in the hallways or during class at times, something that bothered Abby. They could have

put an end to the behavior or held them accountable through punishment like detention, but they were reluctant to step in.

“People would walk by me and bump me or hit me stuff like that. Even like a teacher that saw it would act like they didn’t see anything, which was even worse. It was horrible...” The saving grace to this adverse situation was the action taken by the principal, who kept an eye on the worsening situation with the bullies. Abby expressed the principal’s desire to help her may have been the primary reason she was able to make it through her time in the school. The precarious situation grew worse during time spent on the bus to and from school, where one specific event finally led to other student’s being held accountable for their actions. One afternoon on the way home from school, a fellow student was harassing Abby with racist words and attempted to get in a physical altercation. The response to this situation was to get away and move to another seat before Abby realized she left her backpack next to the student. Following this seat change, Abby discussed how the student took everything out of her backpack and threw it out the window while the bus was moving. Witnessing this dreadful act, Abby felt betrayed and was besides herself because she felt even this heinous act wouldn’t lead to punishment. Fortunately, the bus contained cameras in the back so the entire event could be recorded and showed to the principal as Abby recounted:

“But I couldn’t move back to get my backpack so the kids like opened it and threw everything out the window while the bus was moving including my book bag and then we got off the bus. I asked for my binder back and said I don’t want to have arguments or any issues... The principal had reported the fight and stuff

like that. They went over everything I went through, and I told them all the things that were going on to the principal and you know the girls got suspended and expelled...”

This recollection details the extreme circumstances the school felt obligated to act on, previously ignoring the other actions taken by other students against Abby. I want to connect this back to the “awareness” concept Eve brought up during interview when describing her experiences in school. Being aware of a situation and not acting is going to have detrimental effects, which Abby described by saying the constant bullying led to a decline in grades she cared so much about. The numerous experiences and personal challenges detailed throughout these interviews represent commonalities due to similar sources of conflict leading to the adversity as well as the uniqueness to these individual challenges.

Abby’s experiences resonate with the negative encounters other refugees come across as they try to navigate a new society that already has an unfair perception of them due to their race, religion, or ethnicity. Ifrah Magan discusses this matter with his fieldwork analyzing Somali refugees in the United States by incorporating the racial categorization present in society. Refugees are exposed to racial prejudices in the U.S. due to a “long standing history of racism, violence, and oppression toward people of color...” all while they begin navigating a new society filled with different cultural norms and a new language. (Magan 174, 2020). Magan’s main theoretical approach to these refugee experiences relating to their ethnic and cultural background is the concept of intersectionality. This concept identifies how an individual’s race, gender, religion, and

ethnicity “influence their migratory experience”, including their migration to the United States as it pertains to their treatment and the potential opportunities for autonomy that are limited by the negative perception associated with a refugees cultural or ethnic background (Magan 175, 2020). Negative perceptions about Muslims have become mainstream in the United States and Europe in the post 9/11 era due to the populist movements “who profess xenophobia as an appropriate nationalist response in the face of political and economic uncertainty” (Shirazi 207, 2020).

Xenophobic movements only proliferate islamophobia in the United States, causing far more problems for Muslim refugees and migrants as they begin adjusting to life in the host society. In my interviews with these three refugees, I focused on their experiences in the U.S. school system because this is the steppingstone into American culture that is filled with historical biases toward those of African American heritage as well as being part of the Muslim faith. Refugee youth are exposed to racial discrimination by their fellow students as well as the faculty, making them feel unwanted due to these exclusionary actions. The contemporary curriculum imposed in U.S. schools incorporates many of these negative perceptions and narratives about certain races and religions. “Research on immigration in the US and Europe documents how nationalist, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim discourses are readily expressed in the everyday discourses and practices of schools spaces” (Shirazi 211, 2020). It is evident the national view and perception of certain races, ethnicities, and religion are systemically rooted in the U.S. school system as well as being prominent narratives in society. Refugees are exposed to such racial biases and discrimination early in the assimilation period, it becomes a

difficult challenge to find those willing to accept and support them in an often-hostile environment. The discussion about all three of the refugees' experiences in the U.S. school system are similar to those of other refugees who face prejudice and discrimination for the same reasons; being labeled an "outsider" due to their race, religion, or cultural background.

The conversation about awareness and cultural challenges continued at length as I conducted my interview with Adam who discussed more about his moments of adversity during his time in school. Adam was immediately enrolled in an ESL program through the resettlement agency to begin a crash course for learning English. During this program, they were constantly tested to see their development with coursework and English proficiency. Adam quickly excelled in this program before testing out and being sent to a school set up specifically for non-English speakers, mainly comprised of immigrants and refugees. He emphasized how "it was like being in a community with everyone in the same situation with similar experiences", really embracing the school atmosphere as having a sense of "community" and being welcoming. This feeling only lasted during his time in this specific type of school, as he began attending a regular public school a year later. This is when the negative experiences with fellow students and school bullies became a constant situation. "I had to transfer to a more inclusive school with regular students, native born students. So that's when those other experiences happened." Adam quickly summarized his encounter with racist language spewed toward him and really spent more time about other challenges that impacted his life. I inquired more about the challenges he was referencing, so our conversation steered away from

school experiences and focused on the cultural challenges of growing up in a new society as a young refugee.

Through his own words Adam described what he calls living a “double life,” meaning he had to juggle speaking English with his new classmates while adapting to the new social and cultural environment before going home to a Burundi environment with his family. I asked if he could explain more about this feeling of living a double life, so he elaborated:

“Growing up it was difficult you know, as a young person compared to your parents you have a different view of how the life trajectory would look like...because you’re learning all these different things, grasping all these different ideas while your parents are not. So as you know almost all refugee or young refugees... I was living a double life. School and home... so just having to juggle predominantly English environment and a Kurundi (native language) environment at home...that was difficult.”

This description really encompasses the reality young refugees may find themselves in as well as the challenges that follow. Adam touched on those challenges, describing how his adept knowledge of English made him essentially the “head of the household” because he could interpret for all his family. Adam is the sixth child out of eleven siblings in his family, so the immense amount of responsibility to help came from this large family relying on him. Waking up early to go to school facing social and cultural challenges, to then go home and interact in a completely different environment put extensive stress on Adam. Over time this wore him down, due to the amount of information to memorize for

all his siblings which included how to spell their names, the Social Security Numbers, and their birthdays. When he spoke about this I was flabbergasted, just imaging myself in this situation. I hesitated during this conversation due to the overwhelming amount of information he eventually learned, so I inquired about his strategy for handling this challenge. Adam laughed at my reaction before sharing how this took several months before eventually realizing early on it would be easier for him to just have a list of all the numbers. Aside from this stressful challenge, Adam's parents relied on him to interpret for them at the store, doctor appointments, or even during interviews for potential jobs.

As I referenced earlier in this chapter, refugee children act as the “cultural brokers” to their parents to assist the family any way they can. Adam directly discussed this aspect of being a liaison for his family as well as the acting interpreter. A consequence of this immense pressure was a debilitating effect on his mental health living a “dual life” as he describes, where he was responsible for his own life as well as his large nuclear family. “They realize their parents’ hopes for the future are focused on them, and they feel determined to succeed (Pryor, 2001). The lack of cultural awareness causes more problems for both the refugee and those leading the classrooms, such as those abiding by their own religious or cultural beliefs behaving in a different way. Over time it becomes evident the young refugees aspire to adopt new social and cultural norms, causing tension within the family as the parents want them to stay true to their cultural heritage. Eve did not directly reference this situation, but she described wanting to experience as much of American life as possible with her friends. Some refugee parents believe their children will be “corrupted by the materialistic and individualistic

dominant culture, become alienated from their families, and fall prey to drugs and promiscuity (Pryor 2001). This switch in roles can cause a break in social relationships within the family as well as in the community since the power switch allows more autonomy. With the role of being the head of the house, it was referenced how “the young men felt more freedom and responsibility to protect their family” during a similar ethnographic study (Sundvall 2020). New cultural boundaries are crossed as this power dynamic becomes a reoccurring theme for young refugees growing up in a new society such as in the U.S.

The dominant theme in this chapter deriving from the interviews was a sense of community and the supportive channels that come along with finding those patient enough to be willing to help. A sense of belonging can come from social groups such a friend in the neighborhood or at school like mentioned in this chapter as well as from various agencies or church groups who distribute resources to allow refugee families to feel supported (Pryor 2001). A relevant church organization I interacted with during my outreach phase of this project is Lutheran Social Services, a prominent refugee resource for those in the D.C./Virginia community. The lack of English proficiency is a relevant factor pertaining to the discrimination and belief these individuals lack intelligence, as mentioned during this chapter. This can impact natural roles for parents who become reliant on their children, such as the case with Adam and his family. While he did not specifically say this created tension, often this reversal of roles negatively impacts the family relationships and promotes even less communication between parent and child. The overarching emphasis I implemented in this chapter is the role of “community” and

“cultural awareness” as it pertains to the social and cultural experiences of young refugees living in the United States.

With the focus of this chapter being on social relationships and supportive outlets creating a sense of “community, multiple different aspects of refugee life in the U.S. school system were prevalent during this discussion as it pertains to resiliency. The cultural background of the refugees I interviewed made them vulnerable and susceptible to discriminatory acts along with racist language in part to the actions being “accepted” by those in charge of the school due to their reluctance to step in by helping or holding the students accountable for their heinous behavior. Community is described both in an abstract and physical nature throughout this chapter as it pertains to the unique circumstances of the refugees I interviewed. Progressing with learning the host language of English certainly allowed these three to find opportunities within the school to make friends that were supportive and establish strong social relationships. The physical state of a “community” by having these friend groups or participating in after school activities gave them the confidence in themselves so they didn’t feel like an outsider. My intention with focusing on community for this chapter was to describe the different forms resilience can take when these individuals were faced with negative encounters and unique challenges. Resiliency is both being applied as an adaptive strategy and as a shield against the discrimination as they continued working toward becoming more independent by obtaining proficiency in English. Everyone is going to rely on different resources or strategies to persevere in these situations, which is the discussion prevalent throughout my final chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

The arduous life of a refugee migrating to a new society is going to pose several challenges due to this cross over into new social and cultural boundaries. As I have discussed so far through these interviews, every refugee is going to have their own unique challenges to overcome as well as experiencing similar social challenges like bullying or discrimination. The purpose of this chapter is going to be primarily focusing on how these refugees were able to overcome adversity and conquer the challenges they encountered. Every individual is going to rely on different resources or factors to promote their resilience, even if the challenges are very similar. This point is something I will emphasize as this chapter progresses, culminating the arguments made in previous chapters such as the manifestation of resilience being the foundation and the power of feeling part of a “community” being the determining factor in their ability to apply resilience to individual challenges. Each refugee I interviewed discussed different strategies, individuals, or supportive outlets that in essence promoted their resilience when face with stress life situations. All their strategies correlated to the common methods implemented by refugees, which are the ability to act autonomously, achieve academic success, receiving support from peers and participating in the new society (Sleijpen 2016).

The manifestation of resilience is going to enhance the ability to overcome adversity when these different strategies are invoked by refugees. “This gave some of them a sense of pride and confidence in their own abilities, and some sense of ‘being

resilient’ and of having personal control” (Sleijpen 2016). Possessing power over the situation is an extremely potent belief accomplished by demonstrating resilience using different strategies powered by personal goals. The information from my interviews found in this chapter illustrate this notion about autonomy and gaining control over their own personal situation while facing discrimination. Everyone adhered to their own perception of how to best handle the situation and achieve their goals, whether it be excelling in school or gaining the opportunity to pursue a desired career. Education is the beacon of “freedom” as mentioned by Abby but in general school offers the chance to learn the language, gain cultural experience, and over time successfully adjusting to a new society. Participating in classroom discussions offered a chance to gain the admiration of fellow students and in return be permitted entrance to their social group, creating a sense of belonging. School activities or clubs offered resources for the refugees to use as another strategy to overcome adversity. “Furthermore, it provided social contacts and helped them integrate into the new society” (Sleijpen 2016). The primary focus in this chapter is to evaluate the various resilience strategies and resources that allowed the refugees I interviewed to overcome adversity.

The last few questions I asked to each refugee were to pinpoint specifically what allowed them to overcome the bullying, discrimination, family tension as well as the variety of cultural challenges they faced on a daily occurrence. The purpose for this analysis was to incorporate all the experiences they relayed to me throughout the interview and connect how this influenced their perception of the challenges they faced while living in the U.S. Let me give a brief example from my conversation with Adam to

best represent the argument I am making in this chapter. The extremely stressful and occasional life-threatening experiences in the refugee camp as described by Adam trumped over any of the racist rhetoric thrown his way while living in the U.S. Adam made this point when saying, “I think just all those experiences trumped the racist acts or racism words or phrases people would throw at me because it was like you know just ignore it...” This further confirms my argument about the manifestation of resilience taking place early on in a refugee’s life because all those experiences “trump” racist rhetoric or slurs being thrown their way. Let’s not ignore the reality the discrimination and racist words mentally and emotionally affect refugees as discussed during all three interviews. Resilience develops over the course of life due to different experiences, but there are different ways to implement resiliency. I briefly mentioned the power of feeling part of a “community” being a factor promoting resilience, something prevalent across every interview. As I begin this chapter, I will touch on every method, individual, or resource that helped these refugees demonstrate their own resilience and overcome various challenges while living in the U.S.

As I conducted these interviews, I really pushed for specifics in what enabled them to overcome the stressful experiences of school and adjusting to a new cultural with so many foreign social norms. Eve emphatically referenced the friendships she made in school as being the primary resource she relied on to overcome so many tenuous circumstances. Along with other social relationships, the sense of “community” came from making so many friends and getting involved with so many school programs. I tentatively pushed for more details about what else she may have needed to overcome the

cultural challenges of living in the U.S. as a young refugee. A slight pause came as she thought about all the potential answers to my question before going on a monologue about the importance of her godmother as well as being involved at school:

“My godmother... programs at school. I was always involved so it made it easier to make friends and learn... kind of make me forget what happened or what we experienced like that was a memory to me. But my godmother, she had received us when we came to America and she basically helped me throughout the time we were here...lead us to better ways and opened up opportunities to us and also taught me and my siblings... everything we needed to know as kids.”

The family benefitted from having such a close family friend already residing in the U.S. and being able to assist them with adjusting to their new life. The godmother served the role as being their guide to life in this new society while also being an outlet for support. Her presence in the lives of Eve and her family created a sense of security and hope due to her knowledge about living in the United States, making their own “community” as they began life in a new society. This is an example of a resource used to bolster Eve’s resilience due to her godmother being there every day as the children experienced so many social and cultural challenges. Having such a strong foundation for support is impossible to measure in terms of value, but through the words of Eve she was monumental to their eventual adjustment to American society. The final remarks by Eve illustrate the influence her godmother had on her life; “She’s still in my life now, so if it wasn’t for her, I don’t know where I would be...”

The sense of “community” can be applicable in many situations, not necessarily just having numerous people being there to for support. In this specific case with Eve, the sense of “community” came from her godmother’s support which in return made her feel like she belonged. The sense of belonging enabled her to overcome the many challenges of school life and adjusting to new cultural norms. Feeling part of a community can empower an individual to accomplish any goals they may have as well as giving them the ability to believe in themselves. Eve drove this point about self-confidence as she correlated the personal challenge of self-trust and how her godmother’s support enabled her to regain confidence in her abilities. “Am I smart enough...” was something she mentally fought over with herself on a daily occurrence. “Like I’ve always seconded guessed myself like “am I doing this right?” A re-occurring thought playing over and over as she progressed through life as a young refugee in the U.S. The culmination of all her experiences with “the camp, the environment, my family” instilled memories featuring moments of stressful events and times where every day was a new challenge for survival. Family tension due to a lack of communication reduced the number of supportive channels for Eve, who adamantly expressed her ability to overcome all these challenges came from her friends, godmother, and fellow classmates from the various programs she got involved with. The “community” featured so many unique individuals who together were one isolated abstract space that allowed Eve to feel like she belonged. The negative connotation that can follow being labeled a refugee poses another challenge, something I inferred about to Eve to hear if she believed this played a role in the racial and discriminatory acts against her. The response she gave follows suit with

this discussion about potential resources to prevail through adversity except not only on an individual level but for future refugees coming to the United States.

Eve mentioned the role of education being involved with potential cultural awareness and understanding for refugees living in the U.S. The initial response was the teachers and students didn't necessarily know they were refugees, perhaps just assuming she was an immigrant from another country. Refugees come from many different cultural backgrounds, bringing with them potential traumatic experiences and memories affecting their perception of life. Being bombarded with racist rhetoric and alienating them is the primary challenge refugees are faced with in accordance with the testimony from the interviews I conducted as well as from data from other anthropological articles. I wanted to include Eve's opinion on the value of education, it's relation to being a valuable resource for future refugees to use when faced with adversity, and how it can be applied to the American school system.

Eve discussed these points very methodically during a brief monologue at the end of our interview:

“They just thought I moved from another country or state that wasn't America. I feel like that's where the not understanding what was going on internally. I believe that if the teacher had a better understanding what a refugee was/is at that time, they would've helped us better. Even if the students knew what a refugee was, they'll have a better understanding of what we went through, if that makes sense... I believe that with education and teaching about who refugees are and

what they go through, their experiences, it will take away that stigma away from refugees.”

These words came directly from a refugee who experienced many moments of adversity living in the U.S., so her opinion should hold weight for this discussion. Eve lived through so much as a young refugee before traveling to the U.S. and being treated with negative interactions simply for what she looked like due to being an outsider. The power of community and education can be correlated in the sense refugees can benefit from having the support outlet while education about refugees could open more channels for a feeling of belonging in American society.

Eve brought up several good points I could reference for the discussion in this final chapter about how refugees can overcome adversity. The last words she spoke about how she was able to push through the challenges of being a young refugee in the U.S. speak to the core for this concept of “community.” The friends she made along the way while being guided by her godmother were monumental to her growth as an individual. Through her own words she expressed this sentiment: “I feel like that’s where support should be in. Especially when people are coming from different parts of the world, having someone there to like support and help them assimilate into a new world...”

These words speak to the importance of supportive outlets, specifically within a “community” in a social space such as school through continued education for the students to understand the background for potential refugee classmates or on an individual level with one or more people being a resource someone can rely upon. While a sense of belonging to a group or community can be potent for refugees when

overcoming challenges, not all individuals are going to rely on others. Sometimes the personal mindset and goals of an individual can be the driving force for prevailing through the tough times, specifically growing up in American society as a young refugee. Abby demonstrated this by giving her opinion on the aspects of her own identity and personal mindset towards being the best possible student.

As Eve described through her recollection of going to school with reference to the power of friends and school groups, a sense of belonging can change the perception of the situation or more importantly how a refugee sees themselves. These factors played a pivotal role in allowing Eve to embrace her resiliency forged from the experiences in her life and persevering through so many different challenges. Abby's resilience is in a way the opposite of the other two refugees I interviewed, because her focus in life revolves around education and the opportunities that can follow from academic achievement. This obsession with education influenced Abby's ability to overcome the negative interactions at school, the tension at home, and the other difficult chapters of her life. Education was in essence tangible "freedom" to Abby, something she mentioned earlier in our conversation. Abby's goals in life are only possible through achieving the best possible grades, something she specifically references multiple times. The internal strength to persevere through precarious situation came from this focus on education, directly linked to how her resiliency took shape during this stage of her life. Over the course of this final segment of my interview with Abby, she consistently spoke of how much school means to her and the opportunities it can bring. I want to include as much of her words as

possible to demonstrate the deeper connections to resiliency and education through her perception as a young refugee growing up in the United States.

“The thing that made me feel strong, I knew the reason why we came here...” she exclaimed, setting the tone for the discussion to follow. Her inspiration to succeed in life came from the personal goal of obtaining the best grades possible to get into a great college to eventually find a job that allowed her to take care of the entire family. The inner strength as she mentions is something correlated to the dreams and aspirations she’s had since boarding the plane in Kenya. The resilience manifested early on from her experiences as a refugee and continued through this challenging phase of her life as a refugee adjusting to American society. “We came here to get a better future...” she emphasized, directly influencing her mindset about the importance of doing well in school and making the opportunities for going after her dreams a reality. I want to include more of her direct words about the strength to illustrate how much education means to her and why she felt the need to constantly be strong not only for herself but for her family:

“Get a better education...that was important to me. Be the best for my parents, to have the best grades, have a future, so I always endured this stuff for myself to stay strong. If I don’t stay strong, I might break and have my dreams not fulfilled, like going to college and getting a good education. Like these thoughts came into my head all the time. I want to be proud of myself and have the best grades. I want to have the best education, be able to, well first I figured you needed the best

grades to get into college. If I'm slacking and not focusing on school, then I won't get into college and get a job or be able to take care of my family..."

These words thoroughly demonstrate the emotional and mental resolve to continue focusing on one goal while constantly being put in precarious situations. Abby stayed strong for herself and the rest of the family so they wouldn't worry, since they were going through their own personal challenges. This created one less thing for the family to worry about as well as having a strong supportive outlet in Abby the others could rely on. Education is certainly a great foundation for establishing your ability to progress through challenging courses while demonstrating achievement with high grades and academic achievement awards. Abby's focus on education is an example of resiliency being applied to several different situations. The mental fortitude of staying focused on school, staying strong for the family while they went through their own difficulties, and ignoring the bullying are all examples of Abby's resilience being implemented to accomplish her goals

Abby's personal drive to have the best grades and being a stellar student are something to applaud, but I want to mention how this pressure to be successful is put on many refugees whether by American society or their family who rely on them. Not everyone is going to share the same mentality about being the best student or possess the capability of shouldering such immense pressure. Resiliency can be applied in this scenario as the ability to handle the expectations as well as the ability to find other ways to handle the monumental expectations by utilizing other outlets for help if the pressure is too much. Abby demonstrates the ability to persevere through a tenuous school life and

accomplish the feat of obtaining amazing grades, something illustrating her own resilience. As I briefly mentioned earlier, American society and the cultural norms place constraints on young adults and refugees because of the expectations placed upon them. Refugees have these expectations placed on them by society and their families in certain situations, which further complicates the reality many individuals find themselves in as they get older. Speaking from experience, I can attest to having high expectations placed on me at an early age by various people in my life as well as the cultural expectation to go to college and get the super high paying jobs. Abby placed these expectations on herself due to her strong sense of pride and the strong bond she shares with her parents who she holds tremendous amounts of respect. The experiences of living in the refugee camp, migrating, and being placed in a host society were interconnected in being part of the motivation she has to be the best student possible to have the opportunities for a career job become a future possibility.

The family connection is an integral piece of Abby's resiliency, something she alluded to as she continued explaining the deep connection with her family. She wanted to keep the attention away from her personal struggles so the parents could focus on other responsibilities such as finding better jobs to support the family. "I didn't want them to think I was complaining. I kept it to myself, I never showed emotions at home because I didn't want my parents to know or feel disappointed in me although I know that isn't true..." This in essence is like the struggle of communication many refugees have with their families and between each other. Abby described knowing her parents went through even worse experiences growing up in Burundi during the civil war, so she felt bringing

up the bullies or classroom struggles would be seen as a paltry complaint. The sacrifice her parents gave throughout their lives and especially moving to a brand-new country not speaking the language to give their children the best opportunity to live a successful life. This played over and over in Abby's head, fueling her desire to stay focused and persevere no matter what unique challenge presented itself. "I felt like I owe them my success, I need to be successful for them..." she adamantly expressed to me during our conversation. Success in her evaluation is measured through being the best student possible and obtaining the best grades to be top of her class. This motivation is a core element to her resilience and how she was able to overcome the difficulties of adjusting to a new culture, learning a new language, and going through so much on her own. Abby's desire to be successful in life comes from the previously mentioned reciprocation of everything her parents did for the family. "I want to do that for them because they did it for us..."

This appreciation is something Abby hopes to repay through obtaining a job in the field of her choice and rewarding the parents for all their sacrifices. Opening up about her dream career field, Abby explained working with refugees is something she hopes to do in the future. "My dream job right now is to be, work for organizations that work with refugees. I just want to give back, be able to help people." Abby is one step closer to accomplishing this goal since she will be finishing her undergraduate degree in May of 2022. Graduating from college next spring is something she got very excited talking about when I asked about these potential dream jobs. It is only natural she displayed pure joy and happiness discussing this topic with me since it was a culmination of all her hard

work and pushing through the many stressful challenges of being a refugee living in a new society. The overall discussion as it pertains to Abby's ability to overcome adversity and demonstrate her own resilience is abstract due to both these concepts being influenced by her personal perception of the situation and what she felt gave her the best opportunity to accomplish the goals associated with personal success being the importance of education. The freedom associated with education came from Abby's perception of life, especially finding a route to ensure she accomplished the goals she contrived at a young age living in a refugee camp. My final analysis of Abby's resilience is comprised of everything previously mentioned, but most importantly articulating how a personal mindset can be correlated to inner strength and mental fortitude allowing every individual a different path to combat the negative experiences of life.

My conversation with Adam expanded on the various resources available for refugees to enable their ability to overcome the challenges they faced daily. His words would echo the same sentiment expressed by Eve, specifically about the importance of "community" but instead going even further in the analysis. Discussing other resources such as sport clubs, multicultural groups to create a speaking platform about their experiences and listening to music in his native language to give some examples from our discussion. These resources compartmentalized his resilience into different abstract levels he would later embrace as the social and cultural challenges become apparent while living in the U.S. Adam is a very well-spoken individual who was able to have a deeper discussion about his experiences and the impact of the resources helping him persevere through the tough times. The early portion of our conversation began with a leap right

into the negative experiences and what allowed him to “cope” with everything going on. Adam first laid out his thoughts on the U.S., saying the discrimination and racism shocked him to a degree because the country isn’t just one group of people but rather a melting pot of culture and language. What surprised him the most was the black Americans were the ones who spewed the racial bile at him consistently, telling him to go back where he came from to his surprise. Adam seemed confused as to why the people who looked like him were the most aggressive and mean towards him, something he didn’t fully understand. The culmination of all the discrimination from those “who looked like him” as well as the other people making him feel unwelcomed drove this desire to find a space with those he could connect with. Thus, allowing Adam to expound upon the different resources he used to prevail through the precarious times as a young refugee.

“I ended up connecting with multicultural groups, I tended to associate more with other kids who were from other countries with refugee backgrounds and some other immigrants obviously because of our commonalities and shared experiences... that helped to better integrate or assimilate into American culture.” This is an example of the sense of “community” mentioned earlier in the previous chapter, reinforced through Adam’s words, correlated to other aspects within the social space associated with a community. Interactions with those who perceived him as lesser or as “other” influenced his desire to cope with this challenge his own unique way. An example would be his ability to learn English efficiently came from reading in the library so he didn’t have to interact with the “nay-sayers” as he called them, creating this space he could thrive in and

continue to learn how to adjust to American society. Elaborating on the “nay-sayers” ridiculing his presence with negative opinions, he revealed these experiences allowed him to begin healing from the trauma and working toward inner peace through self-reflection of the negative encounters in the U.S. as well as in the refugee camp. This is a very important sidestep into the deeper conversation about resources tied to individual resiliency because Adam was able to take the negative experiences in the U.S. make it something positive for himself.

The self-reflection discussion really opened several routes this conversation could unravel, especially regarding how own ability to overcome not only the cultural challenges and discrimination but the emotional toll living as a refugee. “I had to come to a place where I could accept those as traumatic events that affected me and that took a while because a refugee’s immediate response to trauma is to shut it out and deny that it exists...” The strength to combat the effects of these traumatic experiences was on full display from these reflective words. The self-reflection influenced Adam’s desire to find an outlet or space he could feel welcomed and truly begin the healing process. The resources available were to join volunteer groups who worked directly with organizations associated with refugees as well as being a member of community projects focused on helping those in need. This allowed Adam to give back to those in similar situations and be a beacon of light for the people desperately in need of assistance. I include this prolonged conversation about the self-reflection from Adam because it directly correlates to this mental and emotional maturity linked to his own resiliency. By this I am implying this reflective nature of the human mind can allow future growth by taking the negative

experiences and turning into something positive to build on. This is absolutely an example of an personal resource to inspire one's perception and mentality when faced with new social and cultural challenges. The words of Adam can best represent this point as it pertains to this discussion; "being more focused on reflecting on those past experiences but also thinking the way forward so I went through several trauma healing sessions, you know I had to be faced with my demons as they say..." Facing the demons of his past allowed him to grow as a young man by accepting them as reality and moving towards other outlets for support.

The community resources proved to be vital for Adam's continued growth as he overcame so many personal and cultural challenges that allowed him to confront past experiences. The reflective nature of trauma healing as denoted by Adam during our conversation is an incredible method to demonstrate resilience in a way that is impactful towards the adversity of being a refugee living in the United States. Beginning during his time as a college student, Adam embraced his own community resources for healing from past experiences and created an organization that provided other refugees a platform to speak about their own past to begin their own healing process. Hearing the amount of effort and passion Adam put into this platform to benefit others was incredible, since in return many other refugees from different cultural backgrounds could speak in a comfortable atmosphere where they felt part of a "community." Adam talked at length about the development of this platform for refugees, so I wanted to include his words to illustrate the purpose of this platform from his perspective:

“While I was in college I began to create a space or more of a platform for other refugees and my people from Burundi, who are in the US to be able to talk about the issues they are facing in their communities and to be intentional in unpacking the different experiences that we bring with us that are continuously affecting us, that also helped me to be able to... get in touch with that part of me and reflect on what is the way, what does the way forward look like.”

The last part of this quote, “what does the way forward look like,” resonating with me as it culminated the various aspects of resilience and how applying this concept can be resourceful in assisting refugees in the future with growing as individuals. The power of belonging within a community while having a platform to speak about past experiences is the perfect formula for refugees to build on together as they face the challenges of a new life in the U.S. As I preference early in this chapter, the resources refugees implement to overcome adversity and cope with the emotional strain of difficult challenges is paramount for future discussions. Every individual is going to rely on different resources, both tangible and intangible, to provide clarity and comfort to different situations they may find themselves in. “The way forward” is a combination of the usage of these different resources as well as the continued development and manifestation of one’s resilience.

Even with such an important platform for refugees, Adam described the more “cliché” ways to cope with the challenges of life in the U.S. as a young refugee. During his time in middle school then high school as he got older, Adam described being active in sports to take his mind away from the negative interactions he faced on a daily

occurrence. Especially joining any pickup soccer game after school, one of his personal favorite sports to play after a stressful day of school. Other school related activities mentioned as a resource included joining the choir clubs in high school as well as college. Music is something many individuals use to process their emotions while relating to the artist's words in direct correlation with situations they have gone through in their own lives. Specifically, Burundi cultural music as well as hearing his native language were relaxing to the mind to unwind from the stresses of his own life. "To just listen to music in my own language or speak to other people in my language..." were great resources for supporting his ability to feel at peace and retain his cultural heritage. Adam discussed this link to music and heritage by discussing the importance of the Burundi drum, a unique design with a sound that let everyone know something special was about to unfold. "Burundian drums are very significant to our culture and history because they are sacred...originally they were played for the king, for special occasions the king hosted or for when he woke up, about to announce something special...so we began to play those drums as a way to remember our heritage and where we're from..." The resources used to overcome adversity all have a contextual background and influence as seen by this description from Adam. The first chapter of this project discusses the premise of early experiences allowing for resilience to develop and manifest over time as different stressful situations came into play. This quote best exemplifies this concept by providing empirical information directly from a refugee who makes the connection contextual influence is relevant to what resources an individual may rely on to process stressful situations.

Project Conclusion and Final Remarks

The purpose of this project as detailed periodically throughout this discussion was to identify the nature of resilience among refugees, the experiences leading the way for resilience to develop, and the various resources implemented to “respond” to adverse circumstances. These interviewees shared very personal experiences throughout their time as refugees, and they elaborated on so many prevalent issues many refugees encounter while living in a host society, in this case the United States. I could continue talking about the passionate responses to my questions or the experiences dictated to me through our conversations, but I want to express some final points mixed in with my personal prerogative on the path forward to helping refugees as they continue migrating to the U.S. Something specifically brought up a few times during my interviews was cultural education promoting awareness among U.S. students and faculty about the background of refugees. I passionately agree with the idea the U.S. education curriculum should include background information on refugees so awareness about the global refugee crisis is present in the mind of the student body as well as having information about other cultures foreign to our own. Something I touched on briefly was the presence of negative perceptions and narratives about those belonging to certain races, religions, or cultural backgrounds being taught in U.S. schools. One way to shift the negative perception to something positive is implementing courses that demonstrate those of different races or religions have cultural agency and are individuals we should embrace rather than portray as outcasts as the refugees I interviewed all expressed was the common experience.

One method I believe could create this attitude change toward refugees is by providing them a platform so their voices can resonate about important social and cultural issues. Any social space or platform could give refugees the potential for being heard and influence others within society to stand up for a change. Refugees have the personal experience and perspective on so many modern issues affecting the global refugee population as well as other migrants coming to the United States. My intention with focusing on resiliency in refugees was to articulate their cultural agency and associate resilience in a more positive light as compared to the negativity surrounding it due to systemic values present in the United States as well as accepted populist narratives portraying refugees of certain backgrounds as “dangerous.” With resilience being defined through context, I incorporated moments from my dialogue with the three refugees I spoke with to demonstrate the foundational experiences that lead to the development of their resilience. Resilience development with refugees is something described in the other anthropological field studies I reference early on in this project. While some moments of resiliency are certainly forced upon refugees, their ability to overcome adverse situations and implement various adaptive strategies should not be forgotten. Every individual is certainly going to experience different things, but these individual’s ability to demonstrate resilience reinforces their cultural identity and agency under precarious circumstances.

My conversations with these three individuals provided insight into the daily experiences of refugee life originating back to time spent in a refugee camp, migrating through different countries before ultimately coming to the United States. Their resiliency

began when they were young children living in the refugee camp, while it slowly developed over time due to the different experiences they had during these different stages of their life. Through all the negative experiences, discrimination, and other circumstances they encountered daily while living in the United States, they continued growing as young adults with personal interests and goals. All the adversity and precarious circumstances they encountered helped shape the individual they are today, while they implemented their own adaptive strategies to overcome these situations. Everyone I spoke with discussed the resilient promoting factors they used when faced with adversity such as Eve's godmother, Abby's personal mindset of being successful in school, and Adam's platform for refugees to speak about their experiences. The historical context provides the background for the contemporary issues put on refugees who are seemingly being forced to be resilient due to neoliberal policies. Refugee resiliency is interconnected with so many social and cultural issues around the world, so my focus for this project was to project resilience in a positive way that establishes refugees as individuals with agency. All three of the individuals I spoke with are now college graduates or very close to finishing their degree, all personal milestones for them as they continue to grow and develop in a constantly changing U.S. society.

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BIOGRAPHY

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