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Purpose and Resilience: The Experience of Burmese Refugees in U.S. Higher Education

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PURPOSE AND RESILIENCE: THE EXPERIENCE OF BURMESE REFUGEES
IN U.S. HIGHER EDUCATION

A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

by

Rebecca Tervo

May 2017

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**Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Rebecca Tervo

entitled

Purpose and Resilience: The Experience of Burmese Refugees
in U.S. Higher Education

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree
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Abstract

From 2005 to 2016, over 12,000 students from Burma have pursued higher education in the US, and the numbers have risen each year (Institute of International Education, 2016). Due to the ongoing civil war in Burma, many of these students come to the US as refugees. This qualitative phenomenological study examined the experiences of Burmese refugees in U.S. higher education to understand better their daily challenges and motivations. The participants in this study were six Burmese refugees enrolled in undergraduate programs at U.S. higher education institutions and one program director at a community organization that serves and empowers the local Burmese population. The researcher conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with participants to gather information.

Results of this study revealed four major motivations for participants to succeed in higher education: family, personal effort, educational opportunities, and faculty support. Additionally, results showed barriers to participants' success included language, cultural insecurities, and finances. Results also indicated two themes emphasized by participants as helpful in their college experiences: first-year college orientation programs and cultural curiosity.

Implications for practice include developing greater access to higher education for the Burmese population, practicing cultural curiosity, offering language support, and fostering inclusive first-year orientation programs. This research underscores for higher

education professionals the importance of creating spaces for cultural curiosity amongst students, faculty, and staff, and how first-year programs have greatly assisted participants during their transition. If higher education professionals consider the barriers to the success of Burmese refugees as well as the students' motivations, practitioners can better welcome, equip, challenge, and support these students.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

A Burmese proverb reads, “Ten thousand birds can perch on one good tree” (Kyi, 1996, p. 11). Imagine an array of birds taking refuge in the multiplying branches of a strong, healthy oak tree—sparrows, finches, hummingbirds, doves, eagles, robins, toucans, owls, and countless more. Higher education must imitate the oak tree, supporting a multitude of students from diverse backgrounds in an environment encouraging growth and development.

The campus environment described above is difficult to achieve because with diversity in student population comes a diversity of needs. An American student who grew up in an upper-middle-class family in the Chicago suburbs likely has different needs than a Middle Eastern student whose family fled their homeland in fear of persecution. When higher education professionals understand students’ stories—their cultures, backgrounds, and experiences—practitioners can better serve the diverse population of students at their institutions.

One such group of students within the diverse higher education “tree” are refugees. Due to what is known as the “world’s longest-running civil war” (Campbell, 2013, para. 1), citizens of Burma have fled their homeland in droves to take refuge in several countries of asylum. More than 18,000 refugees from Burma arrived in the US in 2015, making it the top refugee-origin country that year (Office of Refugee Resettlement,

2013b). Indianapolis, Indiana has one of the largest Burmese populations in the US with almost 14,000 in 2015 (Burmese American Community Institute [BACI], 2015a). To that extent, the Indianapolis area recently experienced a dramatic increase in the graduation and college acceptance rates among Burmese high school students. The data indicates only 43% of Burmese high school students pursued higher education in 2012, but that count grew to 83% by 2015 (BACI, 2015b). The number of Burmese students pursuing higher education in greater Indianapolis nearly doubled over just a three-year period. In contrast, the national rates for Burmese refugees and immigrants acquiring higher education are disproportionately low, with only 28% of the U.S. Burmese population attaining a college education or beyond (Trieu & Vang, 2015).

With Burmese refugees pursuing U.S. higher education in the midst of challenges, more must be done to care for this student population. First, however, it is critical to learn about these students: what is their college experience like? This study explored the experience of Burmese refugees in U.S. higher education.

Definitions

Before moving forward, it is important to understand a few terms pertaining to the research. This study focused on refugees from the country of Burma. Burma, also called Myanmar, is the largest of the mainland Southeast Asian countries with approximately 260,000 square miles or about the size of Texas (Steinberg, 2010). It borders China to the north, Thailand and Laos to the southeast, and India and Bangladesh to the west. Burma has a population of 53 million and over 100 ethnic groups (United Nations, 2015).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (1951) defined *refugee* 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” (p. 3). While the term *Burman* applies to members of the majority ethnic group in Burma, *Burmese* refers to all citizens of Burma, regardless of ethnic distinction (Steinberg, 2010). Thus, a Burmese refugee is a person of any ethnic group in Burma who has fled his or her country in fear of persecution.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the experience of Burmese refugees in U.S. higher education to understand better their daily challenges and motivations. The diversity of the current student population within higher education presents new challenges in the engagement of students from refugee backgrounds (Krause, Hardey, James, & McInnis, 2005). Research indicates that facilitating early engagement with students yields greater student satisfaction and improves retention rates. The challenge remains of how to provide engagement opportunities to students from refugee backgrounds for whom the U.S. university culture is often foreign.

According to Astin (1984), the more a student is involved in the academic, social, and extracurricular life of his or her college campus, the more the student thrives in his or her college experience. Given the distinctive cultural, socioeconomic, and historical backgrounds of each group, what motivates an American student to be involved on campus may look significantly different from what motivates a Burmese student to engage with the campus community. The results from this research can assist higher education administration, faculty, and student affairs professionals in the development and expansion of support services for refugee students, specifically those from Burma.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the research: What is the experience of Burmese refugees in U.S. higher education? In particular, what motivates them, and what unique challenges do they face?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

In order to understand better the experiences of Burmese refugees in higher education institutions in the US, the following review of the literature includes a history of refugees in the US; historical background of Burma; barriers to the success of refugees; and a theoretical framework to understand more fully the experience, transition, and acculturation process of refugees.

History of Refugees in the United States

The United States High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In the aftermath of World War II, the United Nations (UN) observed many Europeans displaced by the conflict. The UN responded with the formation of an agency designed specifically to aid refugees (UNHCR, 2015b). The UNHCR, founded in 1951, was “mandated by the United Nations to lead and coordinate international action for the worldwide protection of refugees and the resolution of refugee problems” (UNHCR, 2011, p. 3).

The Convention and Protocol. On July 28, 1951, the UNHCR developed the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, a legal document established to protect the right of international refugees and guide the work of the UNHCR (UNHCR, 2011). Since the Convention was developed in response to World War II, the document only protected "persons fleeing events occurring before January 1, 1951 and within

Europe" (p. 2). Therefore, a second document, the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, included refugees displaced by events other than World War II.

Key terms defined. In addition to outlining the rights of refugees and legal obligations of countries of asylum, the Convention and Protocol also define key terms. Two important terms are *refugee* and *non-refoulement*. As previously stated, a refugee is “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, 1951, p. 3). The principle of *non-refoulement*, directed toward countries of asylum and intended to protect refugees, states "no one shall expel or return a refugee against his or her will, in any manner whatsoever, to a territory where he or she fears threats to life or freedom" (p. 3).

Refugees current day. According to the latest United Nations statistics, there are over 19 million refugees in the world today (UNHCR, 2015a). Most receive aid in their country of asylum until they can safely return to their home country. However, a small population whose home country demonstrates the highest threat may be resettled in a new country. The UNHCR reported that less than one percent of refugees resettle in a new country, and the US admits more refugees than all other resettlement countries combined.

Historical Background of Burma

The geographical area known as Burma has been plagued for centuries by seemingly irreconcilable and irrepressible interethnic conflicts (Smith, 1999; Taylor, 2009; Trieu & Vang, 2014). The sections following examine Burma’s history of ethnic conflict, its period of military rule, internal armed conflict, and the need for Burmese citizens to flee the country and seek refuge.

History of ethnic conflict. According to Walton (2013), “Ethnicity is one of the primary lenses through which scholars view conflict in Burma/Myanmar” (p. 1). The majority of people in Burma identify as one of eight ethnic groups. These groups can be further divided into over 130 distinctive subgroups. The largest ethnic group is Burman or Bamar, representing approximately 68% of Burma’s population (Trieu & Vang, 2014). The remaining seven ethnic groups are Chin, Kachin, Karen (Kayin), Mon, Shan, Arakhan (Rakhine), and Karenni (Kayah) (Barron et al., 2007). In regards to religion, Burman, Mon, Shan, and Arakhan (Rakhine) are primarily Theravada Buddhist, while Chin, Kachin, Karen (Kayin), and Karenni (Kayah) are predominantly Christian (Trieu & Vang, 2014).

Ethnic conflict has inundated Burma for centuries, mostly due to a lack of ethnic diversity in the country’s leadership. Burmans, the dominant ethnic group, live primarily in the nation’s central region (Smith, 1999). The Burmans have also historically been in charge of the small country, ruling through the government and by military force.

During World War II, Burmans and ethnic minority groups held split loyalties. While the Burmans sided with the Japanese, the ethnic minority groups took the side of Great Britain (Taylor, 2009). Nationalist leader Aung San attempted to unify all ethnic groups in Burma by signing the Panglong agreement in 1947, which formed the foundation for ethnic nationality participation in the Burmese government. Unfortunately, Aung San did not accomplish his goal before his assassination later that year (Naw, 2002). Aung San’s successor, U Nu, singlehandedly ushered the country into a civil war by refusing ethnic minority groups local autonomy, therefore completely disregarding the Panglong agreement (Taylor, 2009).

Military rule. Burma gained independence from the British Empire in 1948 under U Nu's leadership (Cady, 1958). In March of 1962, military commander Ne Win overthrew U Nu and seized power of the country through a military coup (Smith, 1994). Numerous protests and uprisings occurred during Ne Win's rule and were almost always violently suppressed. For decades, the state, ruled by the military, displayed its unyielding authority through violent attacks against groups that threatened its rule. The military's brutal assault on its people and the suppression of democratic protests fueled the politically repressive atmosphere of Burma during this time (Taylor, 2009).

1988 Uprising. The apex of the protest period in Burma came in the form of an uprising. "In 1987, the collapse of Burma's economy and the subsequent political and economic unrest led to massive protests against Win's government, culminating in the so-called '8888 Uprising' on August 8, 1988" (Arendshorst, 2009, p. 103). This uprising included "monks, workers, intellectuals, civil servants, and members of different ethnic groups. The military regime's suppression of the protests through violent measures resulted in the death of thousands and the arrest of key organizers" (Trieu & Vang, 2014, p. 10). Burma's military regime, known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), brutally cracked down on dissidents during this uprising, killing thousands.

Burma to Myanmar. In 1989, immediately following the 8888 Uprising, the SLORC officially changed the English name of the country from *Burma* to *Myanmar*. *Myanmar* is taken from the literary form of *Bamar*, the language of the majority ethnic group in Burma; *Burma* came from the language's spoken form (Dittmer, 2010). The United Nations and countries such as France and Japan recognized the name change, but the United States and the United Kingdom refused to adopt the new name. On this issue,

the United Kingdom's foreign office stated, "Burma's democracy movement prefers the form 'Burma' because they do not accept the legitimacy of the unelected military regime to change the official name of the country" (BBC, 2007, para. 5).

Oppression continues. The SLORC ruled the country by martial law until May 27, 1990, when they held parliamentary elections (Arendshorst, 2009). The National League for Democracy, a group that opposed military rule, won the election. However, the SLORC refused to acknowledge the results, imprisoning a number of dissidents in an attempt to show their continued power (Steinberg, 2010). In 1997, the SLORC changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), but its oppressive policies remained the same (Taylor, 2009).

Internal armed conflict. Internal armed conflict in Burma, as stated earlier, has been called the "world's longest running civil war," with on-and-off fighting for more than 60 years (Watson, 2015; Winn, 2012). Ethnic minorities have faced persecution at the hands of the Burman military in the form of forced labor, rape, forced conscriptions into the military, burning and looting of villages, mass killings, forced relocation of villages, and tight restrictions on press, religion, speech, and assembly (Gilhooly, 2015; Malseed, 2008; Milbrandt, 2012). The International Displacement Monitoring Centre (2008) estimated that over 3,100 villages in eastern Myanmar were destroyed, relocated, or abandoned between 1996 and 2007. Due to the ongoing civil war, many people of Burma have been forced to flee the country and take refuge elsewhere. The current refugee situation in Burma is a result of the historical and continued unrest in the nation.

Burmese refugees. Between 2008 and 2013 in the US, "Burma remained the largest country of origin among refugee arrivals" (Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR]

2013a, p. 1). During those five years, approximately 100,000 refugees fled Burma and resettled in the U.S. Burmese now living in the US are a relatively young population, with 63% under the age of 40. From 2008 to 2012, Texas received the most refugees from Burma of all 50 states, New York received the second largest influx, and Indiana received the third largest (Trieu & Vang, 2014).

Thai-Burma border. One of the largest populations of Burmese refugees is located in its bordering nation of Thailand. As of 2015, approximately 120,000 Burmese refugees live in Thailand, many residing in 9 temporary camps along the Thai-Burma border (UNHCR, 2015c). According the U. S. Department of State (2015), “Refugees have been residing in the Thai-Burma border camps for more than 25 years,” and, according to Thai law, “Undocumented Burmese found outside of the camps are subject to arrest and deportation and refugees have no legal right to employment” (para. 1).

Internally displaced persons. Presently, 514,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) live within Burma (UNHCR, 2015a). The United Nations General Assembly (1998) defines IDPs as

persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised State border. (p. 1)

Many IDPs in the Kachin and Rakhine States of Burma still live in displacement camps. In 2014, continued conflicts between Burma’s national army and non-government militia in the Kachin and northern Shan States led to more displacement and the need for

emergency response. With the Burmese military controlling these areas, it is difficult for the UNHCR to respond to emergent situations (UNHCR, 2015c).

Common Barriers

While the literature addresses barriers to the success of refugees in the US, little research discusses refugees in U.S. higher education. Many studies focusing on refugees in higher education took place in Australia, Canada, or the United Kingdom (Gateley, 2015; Morrice, 2013; Shakya et al., 2010; Sladek & King, 2016; Stevenson & Willott, 2007). Therefore, the following sections present literature addressing common barriers to the success of refugees in the US, as well as studies about refugees in higher education.

Refugees in the United States. For a variety of reasons, refugees often face challenges and disadvantages when immigrating to the US. While these barriers do not affect all refugees equally, the literature notes common issues refugees experience after settling in a new and unfamiliar place. The sections that follow explore four common barriers to the success of refugees in the US: psychosocial barriers, linguistic barriers, educational barriers, and discrimination.

Psychosocial barriers. Due to the life-altering transition of moving to a new culture and the trauma often experienced in their home countries, a number of refugees suffer from psychosocial issues such as stress disorders, depression, anxiety, adjustment disorders, and physical disorders (Hsu, Davies, & Hansen, 2004). Two common psychosocial barriers are acculturative stress and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Acculturative stress. Berry (2005) defined acculturative stress as “a stress reaction in response to life events that are rooted in the experience of acculturation” (p. 708). Acculturation is “the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes

place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (p. 698). According to Berry’s (1997, 2005) model of acculturative stress, stress reactions may lead to anxiety and depression, which influence the individual’s psychological and sociocultural adaptation. Factors that may influence this process are age, gender, religion, and educational level.

Furthermore, other factors such as social support could foster an individual’s adaptation to a new culture. In fact, multiple studies show the positive effects of social support on refugees, such as promoting acculturation and mental health while also reducing depression (Horgan, 2000; Renner, Laireiter, & Maier, 2012; Schweitzer, Melville, Steel, & Lachartz, 2006; Takeda, 2000), especially in individuals suffering from the loss of their social networks in their home countries (Fontaine, 1986).

Refugees are a distinct acculturation group in that many have limited options and resources to assist them during the assimilation process (Nwadiora & McAdoo, 1996). Berry, Kim, Minde, and Mok (1987) found that geographical, climatic, nutritional, and other psycho-cultural differences between a refugee’s home culture and his or her host country are all factors that may produce acculturative stress.

Several researchers cite evidence of an interaction between post-traumatic and acculturative stress. Refugees with a history of trauma, such as those fleeing from countries ravaged by war, likely have more difficulties in the acculturation process than those with no history of trauma (Fox, Cowell, & Montgomery, 1994; Renner et al., 2012; Silove, Manicavasagar, Coello, & Aroche, 2005; Spasojevic, Heffer, & Snyder, 2000).

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Due to the life-threatening conditions under which many flee their countries, Southeast Asian refugees (SEAR) often have

difficulties moving on from traumatic memories. Stein's (1980) study showed that, after five years, over 80% of SEAR were still concerned about separation from missing family members; nearly 70% held stressful memories of the war and their flight from their home country; and nearly 60% were still homesick and troubled by communication difficulties with friends and families still in Asia. As a result of these traumatic experiences, many SEAR are at high risk of developing PTSD. Kroll and colleagues (1989) found depression and PTSD were prevalent in the 404 refugee participants in their study, with nearly 75% of the group diagnosed as having major depression and 14% as having PTSD.

Linguistic barriers. According to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (2013a), the ability to speak English is the most significant factor in establishing self-sufficiency for a refugee. Adequate English skills are necessary for arriving refugees in almost every aspect of life in the US, including obtaining employment (Garrett, 2006, Mathews, 2012; Ott, 2011), acquiring sufficient healthcare (D'Avanzo, 1992; Downes & Graham, 2011), and maintaining a social life with American peers (Nicassio, 1983).

One aspect of English language-learning often overlooked in the refugee population is academic English. Cheng (1998) and Allen and Franklin (2002) stated that refugee children may be competent in colloquial English but significantly behind their classmates in academic English. Due to this discrepancy, refugees may be placed in low-level classes or even special education classes despite their competencies.

Educational barriers. A growing number of refugees, especially those from war-torn areas such as Southeast Asia, come with little or no educational background (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2013a). According to Ahlen (2006), "Refugee and host communities often fail to monitor the quality and safety of the education of their

children” (p. 2), so they often arrive in their country of resettlement with either no education or a poor one. However, the education of refugees is a growing priority within the international humanitarian community due to the crucial role it plays in preventing psychosocial, physical, and cognitive issues (Smith & Vaux, 2003; Zeus, 2011).

In contrast with research noted earlier by BACI (2015a), the numbers of Burmese Americans across the US obtaining higher education are disconcertingly low. While the Indianapolis area Burmese population is experiencing an increase in high school graduation rates and in students pursuing higher education, this trend is not echoed in national statistics.

Using weighted sample sizes from 2004 to 2014, Trieu and Vang (2015) found only 28% of the U.S. Burmese population has a college education or beyond. Additionally, among major Asian ethnic groups in the US, Burmese Americans have the highest high school dropout rate at 44%. The education of adolescent refugees is especially urgent; without access to further education, they can easily become targets for military recruiters, criminal gangs, or the sex industry (UNESCO, 2006). School dropout rates are high among immigrant and refugee students due to a combination of factors, including “self-perceptions of their academic ability (House, 2001), antisocial behavior and rejection by peers (French & Conrad, 2001), lack of psychological and academic preparation before entering U.S. schools (Rong & Preissle, 1998), and future goals (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001)” (as cited in McBrien, 2015b, pp. 344–345).

Discrimination. Upon arriving in the US, refugees likely experience some type of discrimination, and the U.S. education system is a common area in which refugees encounter discrimination (Barnes & Aguilar, 2007; Goldstein, 1988; Mthethwa-Sommers

& Kisiara, 2015; Noh, Beiser, Kaspar, Hou, & Rummens, 1999). Portes and Rumbaut (2001) found discrimination was the greatest barrier to adaptation for immigrant and refugee students in their study. Furthermore, discrimination can have long-term effects on refugees' self-perceptions, motivation, social connections, and achievement (McBrien, 2005b; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

Goldstein (1988) conducted a study on Hmong refugees attending two U.S. high schools. The results of this study revealed Hmong students were marginalized in their schools due to discriminatory policies. In both schools where the study took place, Hmong students were either placed in classes that segregated them from their American peers or placed solely in vocational classes. Similarly, McBrien (2005a), in a 2-year study on 18 female adolescent refugees from 8 countries, found participants experienced so much discrimination from their teachers and peers that they either "feigned illness to avoid school or threatened to drop out" (p. 351).

Studies show refugees encounter discrimination outside the realm of education as well. Noh and colleagues (1999) performed a study with 647 Asian refugee participants, and 26 % of participants reported experiencing racial discrimination. Barnes and Aguilar (2007) qualitatively studied the experiences of Cuban refugees in the US, and several participants also reported facing discrimination since resettlement.

Refugees in Higher Education

In addition to obstacles that come with being a refugee, refugees pursuing higher education face the pressures of being a student. A few key elements of refugees' higher education experience are community support, academic English, and access to resources.

According to BACI (2016), 94.5% of Burmese college students from central Indiana planned to return to college the next year. This number is higher than the most recent U.S. college persistence rate. According to the National Student Clearing House Research Center (2016), “Of all students who started college in fall 2014, 72.1 percent persisted at any U.S. institution in fall 2015, while 60.6 percent were retained at their starting institution” (para. 1).

Community support. Felix (2016) conducted a qualitative study on the essence of the experiences of six college students from refugee backgrounds. These participants relied on a variety of support systems to motivate them and encourage college persistence. These sources fell into two categories: support from family and friends outside of the higher education environment, and formal programming from special offices both on campus and at the government level:

A constant awareness of the reality of having a larger community of support contributed to [the participants’] sense that moving through college and achieving academic success was more than a priority for the student-individual; it was a point of pride for the entire family and community. (p. 195).

One of the greatest motivating factors to the participants in Felix’s study was the array of people rooting for their success in higher education. BACI (2016) echoed these results in a study on college persistence in which most students noted commitment to family as a motivating factor to staying in school. Other motivating factors included students’ goals for the future and the importance of education within Burmese culture.

Weldegebriel (2011) collected survey data from 160 refugee and immigrant students from 4 high schools in Tennessee to examine factors that may affect their

decisions to pursue higher education. The data showed the following factors influenced students' decisions to continue their education: cultural capital acquired from students' parents and families, cultural differences between the student and mainstream U.S. culture, the level of their parents' education, and their financial conditions.

Academic English. Attaining an academic level of English is no small task for many refugees. Trieu and Vang (2014) noted that language acquisition was a barrier to higher education for Burmese refugees. Some Burmese are illiterate in their own language when they immigrate to the US. As a result, the challenge of learning to read and write in a foreign language can seem insurmountable. Having learned British/Indian English in Burma, many refugees struggle to understand American English post-arrival in the US. For this reason, re-migration English knowledge plays a significant role in a refugee's access to U.S. higher education.

Kanno and Varghese (2010) argued that linguistic challenges of immigrant and refugee students reflect a deeper, systemic problem: “[T]hese challenges derive less from ESL students' lack of sufficient English proficiency per se than from their institutional, sociocultural, and material disadvantages” (p. 323). They also noted that being a second-language learner greatly hinders one's access to higher education.

Access to resources. While most refugees value higher education and aspire to attend college, poor access to resources and knowledge of the U.S. higher education system can hinder success. Trieu and Vang (2015) found Burmese refugees often lack “adequate preparation, knowledge of the higher education system, and access to resources (e.g., scholarships)” (p. 363). For these students, access to resources can mean the difference between earning a diploma and living paycheck to paycheck.

Theoretical Framework

Grit and resilience. Related to Dweck's (2006) theory of growth mindset, grit is the combination of passion and perseverance to overcome obstacles and achieve long-term goals (as cited in Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). Resilience, as defined by Walsh (2003), is "the ability to withstand and rebound from disruptive life challenges" (p. 1). Similarly, Gordon (1995) describes resilience as "the ability to thrive, mature, and increase confidence in the face of adverse circumstances" (p. 239).

Felix (2016) found grit and resilience were both evident in her participants, 6 college students from refugee backgrounds. Felix concluded resilience and grit "facilitated the ability to thrive in spite of forced migration," "enabled students to refine and understand their own identities within the academy," and "empowered participants to secure measures of academic success and establish an overall sense of belonging within higher education" (p. 193).

Schlossberg's Transition Theory. Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006) defined a transition as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 33) and identified three possible types of transitions: anticipated, unanticipated, and non-events. An anticipated transition occurs predictably, such as marriage, a first job, or retirement. An unanticipated transition is neither planned nor predictable, such as the death of a loved one or a divorce. A non-event is a transition that is expected, but does not occur, such as a pregnancy that ends in miscarriage. Goodman and colleagues also identified four factors, called the 4 S's, that influence a person's ability to cope with a transition. These four factors include situation, self, support, and strategies.

The period of time known as emerging adulthood is a transition stage following adolescence in which a young person prepares for adulthood through exploration and experimentation (Goodman et al., 2006). Walsh, Shulman, Feldman, and Maurer (2005) studied the experience of emerging adult immigrants, ages 18 to late 20s. The findings showed the goal of nonimmigrant emerging adults is to move toward autonomy, while the goal of immigrant emerging adults is to move toward closeness. Healthy development for immigrant emerging adults seems to be achieved within a context of close relationships. When compared to the transition of nonimmigrant emerging adults, there is less emphasis on independence from parents and more emphasis on close relationships with those around them.

Refugee Acculturation Process. With recent refugee crises, researchers have begun to study the process of acculturation in the lives of resettled refugees. Djuraskovic and Arthur (2009) noted a refugee's journey of shifting from home culture to host culture and discussed the process of identity transformation that occurs. Strang and Ager (2010) recognized the need for refugees and immigrants to develop social and cultural capital in their host culture. McPherson (2010) emphasized the importance of education in facilitating a refugee's sense of self actualization or "knowledge of the self" (p. 1).

Conclusion

This literature review outlined research pertaining to the history of refugees in the U.S., the history of Burma, barriers to the success of refugees, college students, and refugees in U.S. higher education, and three theories applicable to a refugee's experience. The combination of research on these topics provides a platform to answer the question, "What is the experience of Burmese refugees in U.S. higher education?"

Chapter 3

Methodology

This study examined the experience of Burmese refugees attending colleges and universities in the US. The purpose of this study was to determine the daily challenges and motivations of Burmese refugees in U.S. higher education. The results of this research can help higher education professionals better understand this group of individuals and also assist in the development of support services for refugee students.

Through a phenomenological qualitative design, this study set out to answer the following questions: What is the experience of Burmese refugees in U.S. higher education? What motivates them? What unique challenges do they face?

Approach and Design

Since this study analyzed the experiences of participants through their own words, it utilized a qualitative approach. Creswell (2008) wrote, “Qualitative research relies on the views of participants; asks broad, general questions; collects data consisting largely of words (or text) from participants; describes and analyze these words for themes; and conducts the inquiry in a subjective, biased manner” (p. 46). Open-ended questions encouraged participants to respond in detail, allowing the researcher to code for themes best representing the essence of the transcribed interviews.

This study utilized a phenomenological qualitative design. A phenomenological study “describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences

of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). True phenomenological research seeks to describe the essence of an experience rather than explain it. The researcher begins with a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions. The participants in this study were Burmese refugees currently enrolled in four higher education institutions in the Midwestern US, and the phenomenon was their experience at their universities.

Moustakas (1994) introduced the concept of transcendental phenomenology, which is “focused less on the interpretation of the researcher, and more on a description of the experiences of participants” (Creswell, 2013, p. 80). *Epoche* is a word of Greek origin that means abstention or suspension (Kaldis, 2013). Moustakas (1994) focused on Husserl’s (1970) concept of *epoche*, or bracketing, which is the researcher’s process of setting self and personal experiences aside so as to not influence the research. In this study, the researcher practiced *epoche* to remove herself and her own experiences with refugee students from the research.

Participants

Seven participants took part in this study: six Burmese refugees currently enrolled as full-time students at a higher education institution in the US and one Program Director of a non-profit organization that provides social services, educational, and vocational support to the local Burmese community. All student participants were 18 to 22 years of age. Because sensitive topics were covered during interviews, several safeguards were put in place to protect the wellbeing of the participants.

First, to protect participants’ identity, the researcher assigned each participant an alias to be used throughout the entire research process. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted in safe environments, so participants felt comfortable responding freely and

honestly. Because interview questions may cause participants to recall traumatic memories from fleeing their home countries, a connection to counseling services was arranged through a local non-profit organization. At the start of each interview, participants were made aware of counseling services available to them if needed. Participants were also reminded that they could opt out of an interview at any time.

Instrument

The researcher held one-on-one, semi-structured interviews to gather data (see Appendix A). Such interviews let the interviewer to ask reactionary questions based on participant responses and also allow more freedom in prompting narratives from participants about personal experiences. The researcher utilized open-ended questions, which encouraged participants to describe their feelings and experiences freely, while minimizing the influence or bias of the researcher or previous findings (Creswell, 2008).

Procedure

The first step in the research was to make initial contact with student participant groups. The researcher found participants by connecting with universities and refugee services in the community. Once contacts were established, participants were emailed to explain the study and set up interview times. This study utilized one-on-one interviews, a form of data collection commonly used in phenomenological research (Groenewald, 2004; Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). At the beginning of each interview, each participant was given a consent form that explained the purpose of the study, what the participant was asked to do, the risks and benefits, the confidentiality of their responses, and the voluntary nature of the study. After the participant fully understood the study and signed the consent form, a 20- to 40-minute semi-structured interview took place.

Analysis

In the data analysis stage, the researcher transcribed each interview and coded for themes. During the coding process, the interviews were examined, and quotes were grouped together based on commonalities. As explained earlier, the researcher practiced bracketing to remove personal experiences and bias from the data analysis process. This practice allowed the themes and essence to emerge from the data without the interpretation of the researcher influencing the analysis.

After examining the transcribed interviews and highlighting key information, the researcher practiced horizontalization. Moustakas (1994) introduced horizontalization as the second step in the data analysis process in which “the researcher lists every significant statement relevant to the topic and gives it equal value” (Creswell, 2013, p. 284). During this step, the following questions are addressed: “What are the participants saying?” and “What are relevant topics expressed by the research participants?”

Lastly, themes were assigned to the most significant groupings of statements from the data. Taking a bird’s-eye view of the themes, the researcher uncovered the essence or overall meaning of the phenomenon. The phenomenon’s essence tells the audience what the participants experienced and how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).

Summary

This qualitative phenomenological study sought to identify the essence of the experience of Burmese refugees in U.S. higher education. This study can assist higher education institutions in equipping this group of students for success—academically, socially, and culturally. By listening to Burmese students share their experiences, we can learn the importance of asking questions and considering the circumstances of others.

Chapter 4

Results

Below, Table 1 displays the themes and sub-themes that emerged from this research. The three major themes were motivations, barriers, and best practices.

Table 1

Summary of Themes

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Sub-themes</u>
Motivations	Family Personal Effort Educational Opportunities Faculty
Barriers	Language Cultural Insecurities Finances
Best Practices	First-Year College Orientation Programs Cultural Curiosity

Motivations

The first theme of *motivations* contains four catalysts that motivated participants to succeed in their higher education experience: family, personal effort, increased opportunity for education, and professors.

Family. All six student participants noted family as key in motivating them to succeed, both academically and emotionally. Two participants immigrated to the US with a sibling, while their parents still reside in Burma. One participant lives in a single-parent home with his mother, as his father passed away before his family moved to the US. The other three participants have parents and siblings living in the US.

Participant A described her family as playing a critical role in motivating her to succeed. “My family’s the one that’s always pushing me,” she said, “. . . not like those stereotypical Asian way of like, ‘You have to become a doctor!’ But just being there when I’m stressed or when I’m crying. They’re my rock.”

Another participant recalled her mother practicing the power of presence by staying up with her until she finished her homework. Even though, she said, her mother could not help her with her homework due to her poor reading skills, she would support her and her siblings simply by being present:

I can remember we have to study a lot for our exam and we have to like, memorize everything. And then, [my mom] will stay up, and sometimes we don’t wanna study, so she will sit by us. And then, even though she don’t know how to read much, she will stay by us. . . . She stayed by us and support us every time. I don’t think I would be able to go to college without her support.

Although Participant C’s parents are living in Burma, she still spoke of the impact

of her mother's words on her emotional well-being:

I remember that what my mom told me, like whenever I, I, whenever I feel bad or like things that like, seems dark or... so I read the Bible and that encourage me...

I will say that my mom [supports me emotionally], even though we are far away.

I still remember what she told me, her words.

Participant D noted that his family was a motivating factor in his success.

However, his reasons took on a different tone than that of the other participants:

I have the feeling that I have to support my family, in the future. And also my brother, my sister, they don't speak English as much as I could. So, I have the feeling that I'm the one who will support my family in the future.

Because his father passed away five years ago, this student may feel the responsibility to support his family in the future. Thus, his motivation to succeed in college may hold more weight, as his family's livelihood depends partly upon his success.

Personal effort. Four participants described personal effort as a motivation to succeed in their college journey. Some recalled times when they felt discouraged and explained how they overcame the discouragement by their own effort. For Participant C, remembering her goals helped her conquer those moments when she wanted to give up:

If I remind myself that my goals, like even though when I have a, like um . . . hard time in class. If I, like remind myself like, 'oh, I need to do this, this is my goal, and my major, and . . .' So if I always remind that of myself, then that's gonna help me to succeed at the end.

Similarly, Participant D spoke of often feeling physically exhausted and unmotivated to finish his homework. However, his positive self-talk and effort allowed him to rise above

his weariness and do what was necessary to succeed:

I will say effort, cause sometimes I just don't feel like doing any assignment.

Even last, even last night, I was like . . . physically dead. Because I played soccer, I was so tired, I didn't wanna do my homework at all. I just want to go to bed. But then, 'No, I have to do this. I have to finish this assignment.' So, I will say effort.

Another student showed effort in a different way, intentionally utilizing the resources available at her institution:

I took advantage of the opportunity. Because like, since I need a lot of help with English, I went to office hour, and I went to like . . . my advisor, and I went to the writing tutorial whenever I needed help. So I think I took advantage of it.

Her effort in taking initiative with her studies showed her ability to self-motivate and stay on task.

Educational opportunities. Half the participants attributed the shift in educational opportunities from Burma to the US as a motivating factor in their studies. Participant B stated, “. . . back in Burma we don't really have any opportunities if we wanna study. So, after coming here, it helped me a lot to take advantage of the opportunity I got.”

For another participant, his own past hardships, as well as the hardships of others, were crucial in developing his educational endurance:

Sometime like, I feel like, giving up on most of stuff. But, but when I think about all of like, hardship that I faced, difficulty, and, how like, it is like, difficult for many people in the world, like, to get education and stuff. Why will I be like, just

give up and do nothing, when I have a chance? So yeah, those kind of like different perspective keep pushing me, and make me, like, to be, like, person I am right now.

Not only have past hardships and increased opportunity motivated students toward success, but, for Participant C, these factors changed the course of her studies and vocation.

Living in a poor country, and . . . don't have opportunity that much. And also like . . . when we sick, we couldn't go to the hospital if we don't have money. We don't have any insurance and healthcare, or any system like that. So, we don't have anything like that. So, that brought me to, like, want me to work in public health. And I saw a lot of like, poor, suffering, cancer, different disease, even my grandparents are like have disease. So, and, they couldn't go to the hospital or, um, yeah. So that experience brought me to want to become like work in public health. So, and with that, go back to Burma, and like, help other people who didn't know how to stay healthy.

Due to the lack of healthcare options she witnessed in Burma and how these challenges have negatively affected her loved ones, Participant C hopes to return to Burma with her degree in Public Health to make a positive difference in her country's healthcare system. Her past experiences motivated her not only to gain an education but also to use that education to help those less fortunate than herself.

Faculty. The relationship between faculty and students, as well as the availability of faculty, proved a motivating factor in the success of half of the participants.

Participant A stated, “. . . we can get any help from our professor whenever we like, if we

go to our office hour,” noting that she appreciates the availability of college professors in comparison to her high school, where office hours did not exist.

A different participant enjoyed the friendly relationship between faculty and students at her institution: “So far, like the faculty treat the students are like, I like it. ‘Cause like between faculty and the students are just like, friend. And they’re really welcome to us. And then they’re really willing to help us.”

Participant F appreciated not only the academic support she has received from professors, but also their emotional support, care, and flexibility.

All my professors are very supportive for my academic, and also my emotional...

It’s helpful that all my professors support for my academic, um, and their flexibility to support me, and to ask question to them, that they’re flexible. . . . and their care. It’s make me feel warm.

Through their openness to answer questions and willingness to be flexible, faculty helped guide this participant to success.

Behind every successful individual are motivations driving that individual to act. For the participants in this study, the motivations of family, personal effort, increased opportunity for education, and professors deeply influence their persistence and success in higher education.

Barriers

Although the participants were highly motivated in their studies, higher education does not come without its challenges. In this research, language, cultural insecurities, and finances emerged as barriers to their success.

Language. “I really, really, really need help English. I think English is my biggest enemy in life.” This quote from Participant B represents four of the six participants in their attitude toward the English language. Most of the participants came to the US between the ages of 10 and 18. While they all learned some English in primary school, it proved not nearly enough to keep up in the US public school system. Thus, the college environment, with a more complex vocabulary and a faster pace than high school, challenged many of them linguistically. One participant expounded on her experience:

Transition is not easy, especially for the student who speak English as a second language. So there’s something that you have to do your homework, and . . . your dorms, and your financial aid, things like that. So there’s too much things going on.

This participant described the challenges of tending to the details of the college process in a second language. Not only must homework be completed in English, but FAFSA forms, residence life applications, and class registration all require mastery of the English language.

Participant F spoke specifically about the challenges of communicating in a second language and how it affected her levels of confidence:

In my first semester, since my English is not good, and I didn’t have like confidence to communicate with others, and when I am with a group of people, umm . . . I didn’t talk. [Laughs] Yeah, that’s, it’s the most challengous . . . because, as this community, like um . . . support in communicating each other, and if I cannot communicate with others, that’s, that’s hard.

She mentioned her institution's emphasis on relationships and communication. Due to her inability to communicate easily with others, she had a difficult time feeling connected within her own college community.

Of the four participants who noted linguistic barriers to their success, three explicitly mentioned their difficulty in writing. One stated:

In my whole college, so far, my biggest challenge is um . . . like I said, being as a second language, we have to do a lot of words, big words. . . . So when there's like a big word, I'm so stressed and, yeah. So, and then writing, any paper. So that is the biggest challenge for me- to write a lot of paper.

Another participant compared his college writing experience to his high school experience. "Here at [name of college] like, I have to write essay, at least one essay per week. And, I will say that stress me enough. [Laughs] Yeah, because I didn't write much essay in my high school years." An increased homework load from high school to college caused this participant stress in writing college-level papers.

Cultural insecurities. Five of the six participants spoke of varying cultural insecurities acting as possible barriers to their success. These insecurities centered on their social lives, ranging from staying in comfortable social circles to fears of being misunderstood or judged by their American peers.

Comfortable social circles. While four participants mentioned spending much of their free time alone in their dorm rooms, three mentioned close friendships they have with other Asian or international students. These friendships can act as both a positive aspect of students' experience and a barrier to the students' success.

On the positive side, students may feel a sense of “home” in the midst of an uncomfortable and foreign environment. In general, international students relate to each other more naturally than to domestic students, because they are in similar situations and live far from their home cultures. Conversely, in spending all their time with Burmese peers, students may regress in their English skills or hinder themselves from more fully understanding the culture in which they are living. As one participant reflected:

. . . we, Asian and Chin, we understand each other . . . even if sometime we’re sad, even if we didn’t say we’re sad, they can know by our expression. And since we get more closer than others, I spend most of my time with Asian people.

A second participant stated,

Yeah, we feel the same things. Like, whenever I say my experience, she kind of like understand and she engage what I say. So, I think like, yeah, we are like Asians, and the foods that we like is very similar, because we eat like rice and thing like that. So, that’s brought us together.

Similarly, a third participant admitted he went home every weekend in the past month to spend time with his family, friends, and church, all of whom are Burmese. When asked how he spends his time at school, he said, “Most of my time I will stay in my dorm. . . . I don’t really hang out with my floor.”

Fears of misunderstanding or judgment. A second point of cultural insecurity three participants spoke of was the fear of being misunderstood or judged by others, specifically their American peers. Participant D explained his current preoccupations with being a leader in his class council:

As member of ICC, Inter-Class Council . . . I’m grateful to be a leader of

freshmen, but on the other hand, I'm kind of worried that I might not be able to lead, like, as much as I want to or I'm willing to lead them. Um, maybe, could be . . . due to language barrier or culturally. Because, I don't really know much about American culture. . . . Even though I lived here four years, I am, like, I belong to my Chin community, so, I don't really, I don't really do among American culture. So um, I feel like I have to learn more about American culture, um, so that, I may be able to lead, like, the right way. Even though I have an idea, like I don't know how to . . . say it? Or, I'm kinda like afraid of it, because, even though we have like, fun ideas, in my Chin community, American culture, activities may be different. So, sometimes I'm kind of afraid to say things, even though I have an idea. So, it's kind of like, hard for me.

Another participant echoing the fear of being misunderstood by others, said, “. . . sometimes . . . the culture challenges that I have in thinking that ‘oh they may misunderstand me,’ like that.”

Participant E explained that most of his friends were Americans, but he shared that he still faced difficulty when he was around them due to his accent.

I've adapted to the culture and stuff. But, at the same time, umm, yeah, I still face a lot of . . . I mean, I feel like the difficulty when I'm with Americans is because, they will . . . because they can tell by my accent and stuff, that I'm not American.

Finances. Five participants stated they rely on scholarships to pay their college tuition. These scholarships include ones given directly by the college or university, Indiana's 21st Century Scholars Program, the Act 6 Scholarship Program, and Indiana University's Groups Scholars Program.

Participant G is a leader who works closely with Burmese students and is knowledgeable about the barriers these students face in succeeding in higher education. Having emigrated from Burma at a young age, attended college in the US, and worked with Burmese students for the past six years, he has immense expertise in this area. When asked to name some barriers he thinks the students face, he identified finances as a major barrier to their success.

Identifying scholarships. As discussed earlier, most participants said they relied on scholarships to finance their education. How do they find these scholarships?

Participant G weighed in on the challenges of identifying financial assistance:

At a young age, without being able to identify the available resources, opportunities, scholarships, it's . . . challenging. You know, usually, the next step for those who doesn't know such information is just to, you know, doesn't attend college. Join work force or . . . in many cases, is not, you know, progressing. So it's just . . . halt. And their life, you know, just stuck there.

While scholarships are available for most students, knowing where to look and what is available to them is crucial. Two participants explicitly attributed their connections with scholarship programs to the help of local non-profits.

Maintaining scholarships. For need-based scholarships, Participant G discussed challenges of maintaining scholarships when parental income is often out of a student's control:

Many [scholarships] will be the need-based, so it depends on their parents' situations, if they are dependent. . . . Because many of their parents work at either

the factory or warehouse . . . hours can be in demand and, you know, it could increase in some case, which could affect the student's eligibility to financial aid. Although Participant G was the only participant to mention maintaining scholarships, the researcher included this sub-theme because of the participant's wealth of experience working with Burmese students and witnessing an array of barriers to their success.

Additional expenses. When students have scholarships, they often do not consider extra expenses that come with college beyond tuition. Participant G has observed students being ill-prepared for such additional costs:

I think the housings, many of the housings and additional costs that they doesn't consider at the early admission stage. . . . Many scholarships are for direct costs. And so these additional costs that are giving some of the students headache. 'Oh, I didn't expect this.'

A student participant described the challenge of paying for the costs of college life aside from tuition:

I got like, scholarship, they cover like tuition and stuff. But I have to pay like books, and like all like for my gas. . . . I have like car insurance bill and stuff, I have to pay with my own pocket and stuff.

Best Practices

The final theme that emerged from the research was best practices. Best practices are aspects of the college experience that were particularly helpful for participants and thoughts on how their experience could be improved. This theme contains two parts: first-year college orientation programs and cultural curiosity.

First-year college orientation programs. Participant G, the Program Director at

a non-profit organization, listed adaptation to the college environment as a possible barrier he has observed in his students' experiences: "Quick adaptation to the college environment and the class setting, and the time management," he stated. "It's different, you know, than high school." A high-quality college orientation program, in which students are thoroughly acquainted with the campus and resources available to them, could be a remedy to this problem.

More than half the participants spoke positively of their first-year college orientation programs. Participant A joked about her freshmen seminar being a place where students could completely relate with one another, in all their fear and anxiety:

They have this program for freshmen, it's called 'freshmen seminar.' Yeah, and that really helped me adjust to the whole college thing. It was like . . . a time where all the freshmen meet together and just panic. [Laughs] So . . . that really helped a lot.

For her, the chance to see other students in the same situation as she was and realize she was not alone was a comfort during a time of transition.

Another participant described the informational portion of orientation as helpful. It empowered her to familiarize herself with the layout of her campus and the resources available to her throughout her college experience:

In [my college], we have orientation and stuff. During those times like, we touring around our campus . . . talk over like the campus life, and all the things like, yeah. It really help me because . . . if we don't have those, I'll have a really hard time adapting to those environment. Also, I'll have a really hard time finding the resources that I need to use when I need help.

Similarly, Participant D shared about the helpfulness of his freshmen orientation class in equipping him with resources he may need throughout his college experience:

[Freshman orientation] class, because, we got to learn like, because, by the end of the class, [the professor], she will bring like . . . different faculty from different department so that, so they will tell us like, there's writing center or there's counseling center and there's academic advice. . . . Something like that. So they would talk to us what we need to know as a student here at Taylor. And, also in the [orientation] group, it helped me a lot. Specifically to get to know people, to make new friends. Yeah, so I would say the [orientation], it helped me a lot.

A fourth participant mentioned how the orientation week aided in her adjustment from high school to college:

Since like . . . we're like, jumping from high school to college like real fast, they help us how to adjust. And then they teach us the things that a college student need to know. And how to like, be safe on the campus, and everything, so, I think the orientation week help us a lot.

First-year orientation gave this participant the resources she needed to ease the abrupt transition from high school to college.

Cultural curiosity. Two of the six participants stressed a desire for others at their colleges to learn about their culture. Although this desire was mentioned by only a small percentage of participants, this theme was included due to the passionate words of the two students who addressed this topic. The first student spoke specifically about the role of student leaders on campus. She emphasized the importance of leaders observing the people they lead and learning about them in order to support them better:

I think, the leaders, like, some leaders, they can do better, like to, to see or to observe or to understand better for some peoples. They need to get to know more about their, who they're leading, and, support for them. So, so far I see, I think they can improve . . . they are very good, but they can improve like, to observe more and to learn more about people, and as a leader, support them, their emotionally and um . . . yeah, academically. Like encouraging... like that.

Because there's a lot of international students facing different kind of difficulties, and people have different backgrounds and situations. So, leaders not just do what their leader responsibility. It's important to support the people around them.

This student explained somewhat of a double-standard at her college. While students constantly go on international trips, study abroad, and are fascinated by the outside world, she said these activities and interests often come at the expense of experiencing the communities existing within the college. Colleges are comprised of people from radically different cultures and backgrounds, and Participant F believed her college does not take advantage of that opportunity:

This college, like they're very passionate to go like outside, like other country and ministry and things like that. I like that, but, at the same time, I think they also need to encourage, as I suggest now, people not only going outside the community, like, um . . . also aware the inside communities. Not only, I think this is not only this college, wherever we go, we don't see, we, sometimes we skip the, the inside and then we see far and outside, but skip the inside. We forgot to aware the inside . . . it's good to experience the outside the country, but don't forget to observe more the actual community at the same time we observe outside.

Similarly, Participant D felt that, if his peers and professors understood more about his culture, they could better understand his experience as a minority on his college campus:

I've been thinking that, um, maybe could be friends, or professors, um, if they know more about my culture, um, they will understand how we feel as a minority here at [name of college]. So, that's what I really wanna . . . I don't . . . I don't wanna tell them, but then, I want them to know, what... I mean, our background culture, like where we come from. So that, they will have like a better understanding how we feel here, being a minority at [name of college].

This participant stressed that he does not want to be the one to tell his professors and peers about his culture, but he wants them to know. One could infer that he would rather his friends and professors take the initiative to learn more about his culture through asking questions and inquiring about his life.

Conclusion

This study sought to answer the question, “What is the experience of Burmese refugees in U.S. higher education?” The themes of motivations, barriers, and best practices provide the overall essence of their experience. According to the results of this study, the essence of the experience of Burmese refugees in U.S. higher education is marked by purpose, resilience, and a desire to be known. All six participants had a sense of purpose behind their decision to persist in higher education. For some, their purpose was to support their family; others hoped to make the world better in some way; still others were motivated by gratitude, recognizing their responsibility to take advantage of opportunities available to them. Their experiences were marked not only by purpose but

also by resilience. When challenges and barriers arose, a deep-seated sense of purpose enabled them to rise above the challenges and see the bigger picture. This shift in perspective was evident in the practice of reminding themselves of their end goals, remembering the words of loved ones, and allowing past experiences and hardships to motivate them toward success.

While purpose and resilience are strengths of the participants in this study, the data suggests participants were not completely satisfied with their college experience. No one can understand the experience of Burmese students better than the students themselves. Listening to their stories and asking questions is key to determining how to champion them toward success. By inquiring about their experiences, higher education professionals can learn how to cultivate in Burmese students a sense of belonging on their campuses. In fact, simply engaging with students and asking them questions about their college experience may positively contribute to their sense of belonging and feeling known. Using the results of this research, how can higher education professionals make positive changes for Burmese refugees at their colleges and universities? The next chapter connects this study's findings to the existing literature and discusses, as well, implications for practice and further research.

Chapter 5

Discussion

As noted in the previous chapter, the essence of the experience of Burmese refugees in U.S. higher education is marked by purpose, resilience, and a desire to be known. Through interviews with participants, a sense of purpose was evident in their motivations of family, personal effort, opportunity for education, and professors. Furthermore, their resilience was evident in the face of barriers such as language, cultural insecurities, and finances. A desire to be known was seen in participants' longing to engage in conversations with others about their background and culture. In addition, their strong relationships with family and their Burmese communities show they value connection with those around them.

Relationship to Existing Literature

The underlying question guiding this research was, "What is the experience of Burmese refugees in U.S. higher education?" Furthermore, "What motivates them?" and "What unique challenges do they face?" In addition to the existing literature, the results of this research provide insight into how higher education institutions can cultivate an environment in which Burmese refugee students can flourish. The following discussion connects the results of this research with relevant literature.

Motivations. What motivates Burmese refugees to succeed in U.S. higher education? Based on analysis of the interviews, participants were motivated by family, personal effort, increased educational opportunities, and professors.

Family support. The existing literature has noted community as an important factor in the motivation of refugee students (BACI, 2016; Felix, 2016; Weldegebriel, 2011). With all six of the participants bearing witness to the crucial role of family in their success in higher education, this study parallels the literature in this area.

According to Renner and colleagues (2012), social support for refugees could foster an individual's adaptation to a new culture. In this study, participants' parents did a great deal to set them up for success. For example, Participant B's parents sent her to a boarding school in India for three years before she arrived in the US. They chose to send her away so she could improve her English and increase her chances of success in the U.S. school system. "At that time," she said, "I was twelve. It was really hard," crying herself to sleep every night for a month. However, she can now see her parents' reasoning behind those years in boarding school. "The purpose was to learn English, that's why they send me there," she stated. The experience also helped her become self-sufficient, which aided in her adjustment to U.S. college life.

According to Schlossberg's Transition Theory, four factors, called the "4 S's," can influence a person's ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies (Goodman et al., 2006). Since most of the participants in this study had no previous situations similar to the transition to college to help them cope, most relied on self, support from family and friends, and strategies to aid in their transition into higher education. When compared to the transition of nonimmigrant emerging adults, Walsh

and colleagues (2005) found less emphasis on independence from parents and more emphasis on close relationships with those around them. This proved true for the participants in this study as well, relying on close friendships and relationships with family members for support during their time in college.

Other participants relied on parents and siblings for emotional support when they felt like giving up. Participant A called her family her “rock” and said they support her by being present when she is stressed or crying. Another participant said of her mother, “I don’t think I would be able to go to college without her support.” She recalled times when her mother stayed up late with her while she finished her homework. In this case, her mother’s educational level did not negatively affect this participant’s decision to pursue higher education, as Weldegebriel’s (2011) study showed it often does. Despite the mother’s inability to help her daughter directly with her homework, her supportive presence was enough to motivate this participant to pursue further education.

Grit and resilience. Much like the college students in Felix’s (2016) study, the six participants in this study showed a great deal of grit and resilience before and during their college experiences. To review, the term *grit* is the ability to overcome challenges and persevere toward long-term goals (Duckworth et al., 2007), while *resilience* refers to a person’s ability to “withstand and rebound from disruptive life challenges” (Walsh, 2003, p. 1). While the two terms are similar, grit is more all-encompassing and focuses on overall character, while resilience focuses on the act of coping and bouncing back from challenges. In short, resilience is part of what it means to have grit.

Participants in this study demonstrated grit in their ability to overcome academic and emotional discouragement. Grit “is about having what some researchers call an

‘ultimate concern’—a goal you care about so much that it organizes and gives meaning to almost everything you do,” Duckworth (2017, para. 5) said. “And grit is holding steadfast to that goal . . . even when progress toward that goal is halting or slow” (para. 5). One participant in this study said she reminded herself of her goals whenever she felt like giving up. “If I always remind that of myself,” she said, “then that’s gonna help me to succeed at the end.” She held steadfast to her goal of succeeding in college, even when progress seemed slow in that moment.

Another participant spoke of feeling physically exhausted at times, as though he could never finish his homework. However, his gritty attitude showed in his ability to talk himself into doing his work. “No, I have to do this,” he encouraged himself. “I have to finish this assignment.” He held steadfast to his “ultimate concern” of succeeding in college.

Resilience was evident in the participants who allowed their past hardships to motivate them to succeed. For example, one participant spoke about how he and others in his country faced adversity, especially in acquiring an education. “Why will I be like, just give up and do nothing, when I have a chance?” he said. His past struggles gave him a greater perspective and a resilient attitude.

Participant C displayed resiliency in her desire to return to Burma and make a positive difference, despite the struggles she experienced growing up there. She described the lack of opportunities she had back in her country: “When we sick, we couldn’t go to the hospital if we don’t have money,” she said. “We don’t have any insurance and healthcare, or any system like that.” She shared about watching her grandparents struggle with illness and having no access to a hospital. Even though this

participant is now in the US and could choose a much safer route for her future, she is studying Public Health so she can one day go back to her country and improve the health system. This situation shows her ability to “withstand and rebound from disruptive life challenges” (Walsh, 2003, p. 1), or practice resilience.

Barriers. What unique challenges do Burmese refugees face in U.S. higher education? Based on analysis of the interviews, barriers to their success include language, cultural insecurities, and finances.

Psychosocial barriers. The participants in this study were highly motivated students with strong family support. Due to the reality that they are enrolled in a higher education institution, they already surpassed some common barriers refugees face after arriving in their host country. The psychosocial barriers discussed in the literature review, such as acculturative stress or PTSD, were not overtly evident in the participants. While the lack of obvious psychosocial barriers in participants does not mean they were absent, the participants likely had certain advantages that limited the presence of these issues. Most participants in this study had lived in the US for at least four years before attending college. Experiencing a few years in a U.S. high school may aid in students’ adjustment to the culture and allow them to utilize available resources such as counseling or cultural adjustment classes. Therefore, the participants in this study may not experience psychosocial barriers the same way a newly arrived refugee would.

Linguistic barriers. The Office of Refugee Resettlement (2013a) Annual Report for the year 2013 listed the ability to speak English as the most significant factor in establishing self-sufficiency for a refugee. English skills are necessary for arriving refugees in many aspects of life in the US: obtaining employment (Garrett, 2006,

Mathews, 2012; Ott, 2011); acquiring sufficient healthcare (D'Avanzo, 1992; Downes & Graham, 2011); maintaining a social life with American peers (Nicassio, 1983); functioning at an academic level in English (Kong et al., 2016). Cheng (1998) and Allen and Franklin (2002) found refugee children may be competent in colloquial English but significantly behind their classmates in academic English. Being a subsequent-language learner not only affects college students inside the classroom but also greatly hinders their access to higher education.

All six participants in this study were enrolled in college, so they already conquered the barrier of access. However, four of the participants noted linguistic barriers in their higher education journey thus far. One participant mentioned that not only was doing homework challenging as a subsequent-language-learner, but other tasks such as figuring out housing and financial aid also proved difficult. Another participant spoke about her struggles to communicate confidently with others at her college. She noted her college community particularly valued communication and supporting one another, and she recalled difficulty in communicating with her peers and professors due to language difficulties.

Colloquial and academic English are not necessarily synonymous, and refugee students may struggle more when it comes to academic English (Allen & Franklin, 2002; Cheng, 1998; Kong et al., 2016). Three participants indicated academic writing as a point of contention for them. One participant noted that his biggest challenge in college so far has been writing papers. Another compared his experiences to his high school years, saying he did not write nearly as many papers in high school and was ill prepared for college-level writing.

Implications for Practice

As stated previously, this study can assist higher education institutions in equipping Burmese refugee students for success—academically, socially, and culturally. The six participants in this study shared their unique experiences in the U.S. higher education system, from their greatest challenges to their greatest successes. Higher education professionals can significantly benefit from listening to their voices. As a result of this research, several implications emerged that can assist higher educational professionals in providing a campus environment where Burmese students can flourish.

Develop greater access. In order to welcome and embrace Burmese refugees as students in our colleges and universities, we must first tackle the barrier of access. Due to their unique background and situation, Burmese refugee students need a different type of assistance than their American peers, especially during the college application process. Finishing high school with a strong grade point average, applying for financial aid, finding available scholarships, and preparing for college-level classes are all areas in which these students may struggle. The Burmese American Community Institute, located in Indianapolis, Indiana, runs the Upward College Program, which breaks down access barriers for Burmese students pursuing higher education. This program serves as a model for U.S. high schools and higher education institutions alike for how to improve access to higher education for Burmese students.

The goals of the Upward College Program are to “increase performance in school, prepare students for college, increase high school graduation, increase college enrollment, and increase scholarship opportunities” (Trieu & Vang, 2014, p. 28). These goals are achieved through a variety of student services: “tutoring, providing life skills,

leadership training, tips on college, college preparatory class, one-on-one assistance, offering extracurricular opportunities, and implementing an ‘expedition learning project’” (p. 28). This program has achieved remarkable success. For the 2011-2012 academic year, all thirty students enrolled in the program are currently enrolled in college, and half of those students received scholarships to attend.

If more colleges developed programs like the Upward College Program, offering pre-and post-acceptance services to refugee students, the refugee population would gain greater access to higher education. Greater access would lead to an increased number of college-educated refugees, which, in turn, would foster more significant opportunities and economic stability for the population. Higher education professionals, from the admissions office to faculty members, must work to create pathways to success for refugee students. If colleges and universities recognized the immense value and potential refugee students bring to their communities, they would do everything in their power to break down barriers preventing them access to higher education.

Cultural curiosity. For Burmese students to feel truly known on their campuses, they need opportunities to share about their own experiences and cultural backgrounds. With increasing ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity on many campuses, one would think cross-cultural conversations would be commonplace. Some participants in this study felt their colleges did not take advantage of the diverse populations within their institutions.

Study abroad experiences are gaining popularity among college students. During the 2009-10 school year, about 270,000 U.S. undergraduate students studied abroad (Institute of International Education, 2012). Five years later, that number increased to about 313,000 students—a 13% increase in five years (Institute of International

Education, 2016). Additionally, these numbers do not factor in shorter humanitarian or cultural trips abroad, in which many students also participate.

While study abroad and humanitarian trips abroad can be incredible learning experiences for students and should continue to be encouraged, an equal push toward cultural curiosity on college campuses would enrich the lives of all students involved. Cultural curiosity involves inquiring about the cultural backgrounds of those with whom one daily interacts. On a college campus, these people include peers, faculty, and staff at an institution. Cultural curiosity can happen in two ways: organically and organized.

Organic cultural curiosity occurs in a natural conversation with a friend or groups of friends. It requires Student A to admit humbly his or her lack of knowledge about Student B's culture and, with a learner's spirit, ask Student B to teach him or her about it. Often, students are too timid to inquire about the cultural backgrounds of their peers due to a fear of offending them. In this case, organized cultural curiosity may help to give students tools to use in everyday conversations.

Organized cultural curiosity requires higher education professionals, staff, or students to cultivate opportunities for cultural conversations to occur. These organized opportunities may include special events, classroom activities, visiting speakers, or movie showings paired with discussion. With an end goal of cultivating organic cultural curiosity among students, organized opportunities can begin a dialogue about culture and bring students of different backgrounds together.

Language support. Language was consistently noted as a barrier by participants in this study as well as in the literature. Specifically, academic aspects of language such as writing and classroom content were a source of stress for participants. To better

support the linguistic needs of the Burmese refugee student population, colleges must provide and make students aware of available resources. Examples of helpful resources all institutions should offer include language tutoring, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, an ESL library or resource center, and access to a writing center. These resources should be available to English-language-learning students free of charge in order to “equal the playing field” between American and international students.

When a higher education institution has a program for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), language tutoring can be a mutually beneficial opportunity for both ESL and TESOL students. TESOL students gain experience in their field through tutoring ESL students, and ESL students gain personalized one-on-one language support. Moreover, both students benefit from sharing in a cross-cultural friendship. Since many refugee students begin their college journey linguistically behind their American classmates, higher education professionals must do everything in their power to close the achievement gap and champion them on to success.

First-year orientation programs. Over half of this study’s participants spoke positively of first-year college orientation programs. Camaraderie with first-year students, information on available campus resources, and help adapting to a new environment were a few benefits participants noted in the orientation programs.

Due to the positive impact of first-year college orientation programs on the participants in this study, higher education professionals must continue to assess orientation programs with hopes for improvement. They also must take into consideration specific needs of refugee students, such as language support and cultural orientation.

A few participants specifically appreciated the sense of connectedness among first-year students at the college orientations. For this reason, colleges must work to accommodate all students—domestic, international, and refugee—in these programs. By including all students, they will feel a greater sense of connectedness in their college journey and have an opportunity to meet students from diverse backgrounds.

Implications for Further Research

In light of the recent refugee crisis, this topic must be researched and discussed now more than ever. With the numbers of refugees admitted to the US rising over the past five years (Refugee Processing Center, 2016), the number of refugees pursuing higher education is rising as well. This study brought to light the depth of information still left to discover.

Firstly, Burma is comprised of eight major ethnic groups. In the process of gathering participants for this study, the researcher encountered a Burmese community made up of Karen Muslims. This group seemed to have less access to higher education and community resources than the group of Chin Christians who also participated in this study. To learn more about the variance in access to higher education or students' higher education experiences among ethnic groups, a comparison study would be effective.

In addition to studying the experiences of students from different ethnic groups, a study of Burmese students living in different parts of the U.S. would also be significant. This study would consider such elements as the ease of transition to the US, area resources available, and education systems in a student's city and determine whether these factors helped or hindered his or her success.

Future studies should also increase the number of research participants. With more participants, the researcher could more clearly see trends in participant experiences. Researchers could also isolate more factors to find trends within a certain subgroup, such as students from a specific ethnic group, gender identification, or family situation.

A fourth intriguing outcome of this study was the amount of grit and resilience in participants. An in-depth study on grit and resilience in refugee students could help to answer the questions, “How did Burmese refugee students acquire so much grit?” and “What factors contributed to their sense of resilience?”

Lastly, a longitudinal study is suggested to track Burmese students from when they first arrive in the US to 5 or 10 years after college graduation. This study would enable researchers to determine how higher education affects students’ lives beyond college. A longitudinal study would also provide the opportunity to see what careers students chose to pursue with their degrees.

Limitations

This study only included seven participants, one of whom was not a student. The student participants all lived and attended college in the Midwestern US, with the exception of one, who attended college in the Southern US. All participants belonged to the Chin ethnic group, and, as is common within this ethnic group, they all held Christian beliefs. The participants were all within the age group of a traditional college student, between 18 and 22 years old. In addition, the majority of participants in this study were connected with a local non-profit organization that provided significant aid to them throughout high school and during the transition to college. Therefore, they had access to valuable information and resources that other students may not have.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the experience of Burmese refugees at higher education institutions in the United States to understand better their daily challenges and motivations. Because this study was phenomenological, an essence of the participants' experience was revealed. The essence of the experience of Burmese refugees in U.S. higher education is marked by purpose, resilience, and a desire to be known. Their ability to overcome hardship and recall their purpose in times of defeat helped them get to this point in their higher education journey and will undoubtedly help them achieve their diploma in the near future.

While the participants in this study faced many barriers—language, cultural insecurities, and finances—they relied greatly on the motivations of family, personal effort, opportunity for education, and professors. Participants showed thoughtfulness in sharing about positive and negative aspects of their college life thus far. Most participants praised their first-year college orientation programs, but some saw a need for more cultural curiosity on their campuses. From this research, higher education professionals can take away the importance of creating spaces for cultural curiosity amongst students, faculty, and staff. They can also be encouraged that first-year college orientation programs have greatly assisted this group of students during their time of transition. If higher education professionals consider the barriers to the success of Burmese refugees in college as well as their motivations, they can better welcome, equip, challenge, and support these students. As the Burmese proverb reads, “Ten thousand birds can perch on one good tree” (Kyi, 1996, p. 11). An institution provides a nest for these students, so that, by graduation, they are ready to fly.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Student Questions

Introduction

Tell me about your family.

Do you currently live with your family?

Do you have family nearby?

Who supports you...

Emotionally?

Academically?

Financially?

College Life

What college do you currently attend?

How long have you attended this school?

Describe your involvement on your college campus.

Tell me about your social life in college.

Who do you spend the majority of your time with?

What challenges have you encountered in college?

What has been your greatest challenge?

What have you enjoyed about college?

What has helped you succeed in college?

What have you personally done to succeed?

What have others done to help you succeed?

Do you think your culture has affected your college life? If so, how?

Do you think your past experiences have affected your college life? If so, how?

In your opinion, what has your college done well in helping you adjust to campus life?

What has your college done poorly?

How could they have better equipped you?

Program Director Questions

How did you end up at [name of organization]?

What do you enjoy about your job? Not enjoy?

What is the role of [this organization] in preparing students for college?

What has worked well?

If resources were not an issue, what could [this organization] do better?

What barriers have you noticed standing in the way of Burmese students succeeding in college?

From your experience and observation, does a student's refugee status set them apart from other students in any way? If so, how?

In your experience, what are the most common issues students deal with outside of school?

Appendix B
Pre-Interview Questionnaire

Alias: _____

1. Age: _____

2. Gender:

- Male
- Female
- Other _____

3. Ethnicity:

- Chin
- Karen
- Karenni (Kayah)
- Kachin
- Arakanese
- Burman
- Mon
- Shan
- Other _____

4. College Major:

5. How long have you lived in the U.S.?

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

1. Project Title
The Experience of Burmese Refugees in U.S. Higher Education
2. Introduction of Researcher
Rebecca Tervo is a graduate student earning her Masters of Higher Education and Student Development at Taylor University. Her assistantship is in the Institute of English Language Studies (IELS). She teaches a class for incoming students in the IELS program and helps with the development of student services within the program.
3. Purpose of Research
The purpose of this study is to examine the experience of Burmese refugees at colleges and universities in the United States to better comprehend the daily challenges and motivations of these students. The results from this research will assist higher education administration, faculty, and student affairs professionals in the development and expansion of support services for refugee students, specifically Burmese refugees.
4. Explanation of Procedures
If you choose to participate in this study, you will be completing a face-to-face interview that will take approximately 40 minutes. You will be one of 6-10 participants in this study. After all interviews are complete, the researcher will transcribe the interviews and code for themes.
5. Risks and Benefits
Risks:
Because of the background of some refugees, there is a possibility that interview questions about families, culture, or transition may prompt traumatic memories. For this reason, the researcher has contacted counseling services at your institution to make them aware of the study. If any part of this interview causes you distress, you are encouraged to utilize the counseling services at your institution.
Benefits:
This study will benefit you by giving you a platform to verbalize your experience in the United States higher education system thus far. This research will also assist university student services to better support Burmese students, by providing them data about common challenges, cultural barriers, and values of this student group. Furthermore, it will

provide opportunities for future researchers to expand on my research and conduct a more in-depth study.

6. Safeguards of Data

I will not identify you during my thesis defense or in my research paper. Your name will be changed to protect your identity. Data will be published and your information will be shared with my authorities, but I will not use your real name in the final thesis/presentation when I defend. The data will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

7. Freedom to withdraw from the study

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to withdraw from the study, the information gathered at that point will be destroyed.

8. Third Party Referral

Should you have any questions regarding this project at any time, please contact Rebecca Tervo.

- Email: rebecca_tervo@taylor.edu
- Phone: 973-229-3654

My faculty sponsor's name is Scott Gaier. Please contact him at scgaier@tayloru.edu.

9. If you have any questions regarding this research, your interview, your rights as a subject, or any other aspect of the search as it relates to your participation as a subject, it can be directed to Taylor University's Institutional Review Board at IRB@taylor.edu or the Chair of the IRB, Susan Gavin at 765-998-0518 or ssgavin@taylor.edu

SUBJECT'S CONSENT

In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study. I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records. I agree to take part in this study.

Subject's Printed Name: _____

Subject's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Date: _____

If the study involves children who will be providing their assent on this consent document, rather than on an assent document, use the following signatures:

Printed Name of Parent: _____

Signature of Parent: _____

Date: _____

