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MEDIA & COMMUNICATION STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Negotiating knowledges and expertise in refugee resettlement organizationsⁱ

Sarah Steimel^{1*}

Abstract: Interviews with both refugees and organizational staff in two nonprofit refugee resettlement organizations in the United States reveal the ways in which knowledge(s) and expertise are crafted, threatened, and understood in refugee organizations. Refugee-participants described the need for knowledgeable communication, barriers to the communication of knowledge, and processes of negotiating whose expertise is involved. Organizational staff participants described the duty of communicating expert knowledge, the limits of knowledge as expertise, and alternative communications of expertise. These tensions surrounding “knowing” in refugee resettlement organizations highlights the need for a more complex theoretical understanding of the processes of knowing present in refugee resettlement. These tensions also suggest areas in which refugee resettlement agencies and other nonprofit staff can make on-the-ground changes to better facilitate refugee resettlement processes.

Subjects: Communication Studies; Organizational Communication; Sociology and Social Policy

Keywords: knowledge; knowing; expertise; refugee resettlement; organizational communication



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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

In this study, I interviewed both refugees and organizational staff in two nonprofit refugee resettlement organizations to understand how both refugees and organizational staff members think and talk about “expertise” in their organizations. Through my interviews, refugees said they needed knowledgeable communication but that they experienced significant barriers to the communication of knowledge from staff members. Refugees also felt like their own ideas and knowledge were often ignored by organizational staff members. On the other hand, organizational staff members saw themselves as having a duty to communicate expert knowledge to their refugee clients. But they also recognized the limits of their own knowledge when sharing it with refugees. These tensions between different values on and understandings of “expertise” suggest areas in which refugee resettlement agencies and other nonprofit organizational staff can make on-the-ground changes to better manage refugee resettlement processes.

1. Introduction

The United Nations defines refugees as persons who have crossed national borders due to a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” (United Nations, 1951, Article 1). According to the UN High Commission for Refugees, 59.5 million people had been forcibly displaced from their homes by the end of 2014. Of that number, the United Nations estimates that 19.5 million people meet their definition of a refugee (UNHCR, 2015b).

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees seeks to aid refugees by supporting three durable solutions to their displacement—repatriation, integration, and resettlement. Repatriation efforts seek to return displaced individuals to their countries of origin through negotiations with local and regional leaders in areas of return. Integration efforts support naturalization of refugees or displaced persons in the communities to which they have fled. Finally, resettlement efforts help relocate refugees to third nations with formal resettlement programs that allow the refugee to become a naturalized member of that nation (UNHCR, 2015a).

This paper is particularly interested in the third category of resettlement, especially as refugees are resettled to the United States. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, in 2014, the United Nations officially supported refugee departures to 30 countries. Of these countries, the three major countries of resettlement were: the United States of America (48,911 persons), Canada (7,233 persons), and Australia (6,162 persons) (UNHCR, 2015a). According to the Migration Policy Institute, the United States settled 69,933 refugees in the fiscal year 2015. Moreover, the Obama administration proposed to significantly increase the number of refugees the United States accepts each year—from 70,000 in FY 2015 to 85,000 in FY 2016 and 100,000 in FY 2017 (Zong & Batalova, 2015).

As a result, hundreds of nonprofit voluntary organizations have developed throughout the United States to help refugees negotiate their resettlement transition (Huntoon, 2001). These organizations are critical to addressing refugee needs and ensuring a mutually beneficial resettlement process for refugees and their communities (Patrick, 2004).

Despite the significant role nonprofit organizations play in mediating refugee resettlement, research has yet to explore the communication content of that mediation. In other words, as organizations seek to teach refugees “what life is like” in the United States and refugees attempt to rebuild their lives in a new place, issues of what counts as knowledge and how “knowing” is created, shared, and (re)negotiated in these contexts are critical. Yet, research has not fully explored the boundary-spanning communication between nonprofit staff and their clients in organizations designed to help mediate life in the United States. Consequently, understanding the ways in which knowledge, knowing, and expertise emerge in the interactions between staff and clients in refugee resettlement organizations furthers our theoretical understanding of communication and knowing in nonprofit organizations and our practical understanding of how to make the resettlement transition for millions of refugees a more safe, meaningful and fulfilling experience.

2. Approaches to knowing

The word knowledge has, in broad terms, many meanings in the literature. For instance, Alvesson (2004) comments on the many uses of the word “knowledge”—including its use “to embrace information (the simple, fragmented kind of knowledge), knowing (how to do), explanation ... and understanding (knowledge referring to patterns, connections, providing the gestalt of a phenomenon)” (p. 42). In the knowledge management literature, knowledge is often seen as a thing in itself. Terms such as “transfer(able)” (McAdam & McCreedy, 1999; Narasimha, 2000) and “quantifiable” (Narasimha, 2000) are employed. Thus, “once discovered (created), knowledge either exists or doesn’t exist in the ‘real world’—separate from knowers” (Heaton & Taylor, 2002, p. 229). Under this framework, an expert is someone who possesses the tangible knowledge that others do not.

However, given the growing dominance of the view that communication constitutes organizations, the cognitive—representational perspective seems particularly unhelpful (Kuhn & Porter, 2011). As a result, departing from views of individuals as “expert” knowledge repositories (Cook & Brown, 1999), newer approaches have particularly stressed the emergent properties of organizational knowledge as an interactive process rather than an outcome (Kalling & Styhre, 2003). Kuhn and Jackson (2008) take it further, arguing that in this perspective, “Knowledge, or that which is taken to be knowledge, is communicatively constructed” (p. 474). In this view, knowledge is socially negotiated and enacted. Thus, knowledge in organizations “cannot be regarded as a fixed, stable body of facts or information. Rather, it must be seen as situated, dynamic, constantly negotiated, and constantly shifting” (Schneider, 2001, p. 228).

Kuhn and Jackson (2008) argue that “the verb *knowing* suggests action as the active and ongoing accomplishment of problem solving, whereas the noun *knowledge* connotes stable objects, facts, and dispositions” [emphasis original] (p. 455; see also Cook & Brown, 1999). Foregrounding knowing demonstrates that knowledge “is a *capacity to act within a situation*, where this capacity should always be seen as intersubjectively negotiated in continually in flux” (Kuhn & Porter, 2011, p. 19). Ultimately, this view of knowing in organizations foregrounds the complex interactive processes used to access, create, and apply knowledge in organizational problem-solving.

Under the old model of knowledge as tangible/transactable information, expertise was a thing someone had. In other words, an expert objectively “possessed” information that others did not. However, a recognition of knowing as communicatively constructed positions expertise instead as emergent and contextually dependent, such that the possessing of expertise in any given circumstance must also be intersubjectively enacted in context. This study seeks to understand how both refugees and nonprofit refugee resettlement workers report that knowing and expertise are enacted in their refugee resettlement context.

3. Knowing in nonprofit refugee resettlement organizations

Because all refugees who enter the US are placed into one of ten Federally approved nonprofit programs to assist with their resettlement (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2009), and because nonprofit organizations have historically provided the vast majority of social services to refugees (e.g. Crampton, Dowell, & Woodward, 2001; Miller, 1999; Nawyn, 2006), for the purposes of this study, I am concerned with how refugees and nonprofit staff negotiate “knowing” and expertise in nonprofit refugee resettlement organizations.

Despite the growing body of scholarship that takes communicative processes of knowing in organizations seriously, scholars often render clients of voluntary organizations as passive, positioning them “as potential recipients of predefined services rather than as agents involved in interpreting their needs and shaping their life conditions” (Fraser, 1989, p. 174). In this sense, communication within organizations is emphasized, and clients are simply seen as recipients of internally produced missions-statements, policies, and goals. Refugees in particular are often framed as the recipients of top-down, bureaucratically distributed aid (Hyndman, 2000).

However, Trethewey (1997) argues that though marginalized, the client is rarely passive and submissive. Trethewey found that clients often accommodated relationships with social workers and reproduced the dominant discourse that positions clients as dependent and deficient. Yet, many clients simultaneously reinvented those relationships to fight for their rights as clients and to secure their own needs. Therefore, in this study, I seek to understand, from the perspectives both of the refugees who have resettled in the US and of the organizational staff who attempt to mediate that transition, how “knowing” and “knowledge” are understood, created, maintained, and shared in the context of refugee resettlement organizations. Additionally, given that processes of “knowing” have implications for what we consider to be “expertise,” I was interested in how expertise and its role in integrating refugees was negotiated among staff and refugees. This led me to formulate the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do refugee-participants in refugee resettlement organizations characterize the role(s) of knowing and expert knowledge in their interactions with refugee resettlement organizational staff?
- RQ2: How do organizational staff members in refugee resettlement organizations characterize the role(s) of knowing and expert knowledge in their interactions with refugee-clients?

4. Methods

This research is built on the premise that both resettlement staff members and refugees are experts on their own experiences (see Hynes, 2003) which led to an interpretive/qualitative frame for this study. Interpretive research is grounded in the belief that individuals each experience and interpret their reality in unique ways (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). As a result, interpretive researchers seek to examine specific experiences or contexts deeply in order to more fully understand the meaning that the participants hold about an issue (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In the current project, I adopt an interpretive framework because I seek to understand how volunteers and refugees construct and defend the roles of knowledge and knowing in their communication about their interactions with each other. Interpretive methodologies are common in refugee studies concerned with refugee voice and experience because “research strategies to reveal the subjective world of the actor’s experience are considered more appropriate for gaining knowledge about problems of refugee resettlement than the social mapping of numerical data and statistical methods” (Korac, 2003, p. 53). Participants for this study were drawn from two organizations: Catholic Social Services (CSS) and Community Action Partnership (CAP) in the capital city of a moderately sized Midwestern state (name withheld to protect the privacy of participants).

4.1. CSS of Midwest State

CSS of Midwest State is a branch of the larger Catholic Charities, USA network. The US Conference of Catholic Bishops founded the Migration and Refugee Services Division of Catholic Charities in 1975 and between 1975 and 2004, the national Catholic Charities network resettled nearly 900,000 refugees throughout the United States (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2010). As part of the larger Migration and Refugee Services project, CSS of Midwest State resettles approximately 100 refugee families a year into that state. In addition to physically bringing the families to the US, CSS provides a number of services, including aid in securing housing, cultural orientation, food, medical and dental services, and job placement.

4.2. CAP of Midwest Counties

President Johnson’s War on Poverty sought, in part, to establish a community action agency in each county in the country to coordinate all federal and state programs designed to help the poor in those cities (Miller Center, 2011). Today, there are 1,100 Community Action Agencies, which cover 96% of the nation’s counties (CAP, 2011). Founded as part of President Johnson’s program, CAP of Midwest Counties offers support services to low income individuals and families. CAP began a Center for Refugees and Immigrants in 2004, which provides a number of services to refugee-clients, including career counseling and training, housing assistance, ESL/naturalization support classes, and interpretation/translation services.

These two organizations were selected because they are the primary voluntary agencies working in refugee resettlement in the Midwestern city where data were collected, and during a previous pilot study, these were the agencies that refugees listed as most critical to their resettlement experiences.

4.3. Data collection

For this study, my method of data collection was through in-depth semi-structured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2004). My interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions designed to encourage both staff and refugee-clients to elaborate on their experiences related to their interactions in voluntary organizations. As Korac (2003) explains, “qualitative interviewing is an important way of

learning from refugees because it permits fuller expression of their experiences in their own terms” (p. 53). Using this protocol as a guide for discussion, the individual interviews were tape-recorded for later transcription.

Organizational staff members were defined as those individuals who represent the refugee resettlement organizations to clients. Organizational staff members were recruited through a snowball sampling method and did not receive any direct personal benefit for participation in the study. I conducted nine interviews with eight members of CSS (the refugee resettlement director was interviewed twice). I also conducted nine interviews with seven members of CAP (the refugee coordinator and his assistant were each interviewed twice). Six interviewees were male and nine were female.

Refugee-clients were allowed to self-identify as refugees and were gathered using a snowball sampling technique. Refugees were given an honorarium of \$20 for participation, which was funded by a grant from The Center for Great Plains Studies. For this study, I interviewed 11 refugees. The majority of participants were from African nations (including six from Sudan, one from Ethiopia, and one from Senegal), two refugees were from Iran and one was from Afghanistan. The refugees were given the choice of either being interviewed in English or in their native language (through a translator). All but one of the refugees selected to be interviewed in English. One Sudanese woman chose to be interviewed in her language of Nur, and she asked that her college-aged son serve as her translator. Six interviewees were male and five were female.

4.4. Data analysis

Each of my semi-structured interviews was transcribed near-verbatim (leaving out ums, uhs, and such). In total, this resulted in over 170 single-spaced pages of data to analyze. The data were then analyzed using data “reduction” and “interpretation” (Creswell, 2007; Lindlof, 1995; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). I did this by following the six-step thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, I engaged in a repeated close reading of the transcripts to gain a greater understanding of what they contain. Second, I identified themes in the data by reading through the data and jotting down categories which appear to be consistent across both interview transcripts. Third, I collated coded data into those identified categories or themes, broadening and narrowing the categories as necessary to get at the underlying meaning of the data. Fourth, I checked to ensure that all of the potential tensions or themes actually fit the data in the coded extracts. Fifth, I defined and named the themes, and finally, I selected vivid, compelling extracts from the data to represent each theme.

To support the interpretive validity, I asked two of my research participants to engage in member checks. Interpretive scholars establish validity through member checking (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Stake, 1995) in which parts of raw data or of analysis might be returned to participant(s) to determine whether they resonate with their experiences. After my interviewing process, I shared my initial findings with one refugee-respondent and with one organizational worker-respondent (the director of one of the organizations) to ensure that my results are reflective of participant experiences. Though those two individuals certainly cannot speak for all interviewees, this member checking process provides an additional safeguard that interpretive results resonate with participants in the study.

5. Results

5.1. Negotiating knowing: the refugee perspective

My first research question asked: How do refugee-participants in refugee resettlement organizations characterize the role(s) of knowing and expert knowledge in their interactions with refugee resettlement organizational staff? Based on my interviews with the refugee-participants in my study, three central themes emerged: (1) the need for knowledgeable communication; (2) barriers to the communication of knowledge; and (3) processes of negotiating knowing: whose expertise?

5.1.1. *Need for knowledgeable communication*

Initially, the refugee-participants I interviewed expressed that when they arrived in the United States, they often arrived with little in terms of either material belongings or knowledge of life in the United States. As such, the refugees described entering with a real need for practical information to be shared with them. For instance, Ali (Male, Iran)¹ explained, “When Iranians come here, like they have no idea what to bring, what to not to bring, how to find a house, how to buy a car, how to go, how to go to Wal-Mart”.²

Given this need for basic information, the refugee-participants I interviewed all began their accounts of communication with nonprofit staff members by expressing their appreciation for and their reliance on communication from organizational staff members to help them obtain knowledge about material goods and services immediately necessary for everyday life in the US. This sentiment was echoed by Sittina (Female, Sudan) who explained “When we first moved to [here], they [CAP] helped us to adjust. Helped us find clothes, things for our apartment. They were helpful when we arrived here They helped us find a house and they helped us to get food and things for the house.”

More than even goods and services, refugees described relying on cultural and social knowledge communicated by workers in nonprofit organizations about life in the United States. Omar, (Male, Sudan) explained, “We need complete social life orientation training.” This sentiment was confirmed by Anai (Male, Sudan), who said, “coming here is like totally different, like, you have to learn a lot of things over again, or things that you have never learned.” For instance, unlike many of the countries the refugees interviewed previously lived in, the Midwest frequently has very cold winters, with snow fall and negative wind chill temperatures. When asked about the primary difference she had to learn to manage between Sudan and the United States, Sara (Female, Sudan) exclaimed, “I remember the snow! Thinking it was hail.” This severe cold was often described as hard on refugees emotionally. Nyanath (Female, Sudan) explained:

Because this country is very, very hard for me. When I see the snow and the snow falls, it makes me very, very upset. I feel like the life is empty, no one there. I know I had that feeling when I first came here because three months and I have hard times.

She explained that she was so thankful when members of CSS explained to her where to buy garments “that you wear under your clothes, you know” to help keep warm. Snow may have been an unexpected part of the physical environment, but it was not the only element of life in the US that differed from the experiences of refugees in their home country. Sara (Female, Sudan) described the shock her family experienced at their first Fourth of July in the US:

And then I think during the 4th of July there were firecrackers, and we were in the house and my mom didn't know what it was. She thought it was gunfire. She was just like overwhelmed, and sad. She was like, “not here, not in this country too.” When you hear that back home, that means that there's trouble coming to the village and you probably want to leave there. So we stayed in the house for a lot of days.

It was not until a case worker from one of the nonprofit agencies came to Sara's house and explained, “that it was just firecrackers and that they do that for the 4th of July” that Sara's family felt comfortable leaving the house. Thus, information and education on life in the US from organizational workers was both needed and appreciated.

5.1.2. *Barriers to the communication of knowledge*

This communication of knowledge by organizational staff was not, however, always a smooth process. Refugee-participants described knowledge transmission as being impeded both by language barriers and by the workers' occasional lack of cultural competence.

First, multiple refugee respondents spoke of the problems caused by the lack of organizational workers who spoke the refugee's native language. For instance, Nyanath (Female, Sudan) explained:

They didn't give us a person who speak our language. So that's a problem. We have, I think, I don't know where he's [the CSS Case Worker] from but he speak English, but his English is very difficult for me to understand ... Just, I don't know how we communicate.

Beyond the complications of language, however, refugee-participants described that information communicated by organizational staff members was also occasionally impeded by a lack of cultural competence on the part of one of the organizational workers. For instance, while Muna (Female, Afghanistan) described her communication with her own case worker at CSS as "extremely positive," she also described a situation in which she was asked to interact with another staff member. In that situation:

I did not receive at respect for my father. And to this day I have not forgotten. But something, while he was talking and trying to explain what to do, the lady told me to tell him to stop. That's something that would never happen, in our culture. Of course he was talking to me so I could translate through me, and maybe it would take a little longer you know to [she cuts herself off].

Though to the hurried staff worker asking a woman to ask her aging father to stop talking may not seem to be a large affront, Muna described again and again throughout the interview how this moment really hurt her and her father and made her wary of communicating with the organizational staff in the future. As a result, when asked if she had advice for improving the communication of organizational staff with refugee-clients, Muna explained "Number one is culture appreciation ... there are some unwritten cultural standards that are in these different cultures that would be useful to know." Overall then, though knowledge transmission was deeply appreciated by refugee-participants, that transmission was often complicated by language and cultural barriers.

5.1.3. *Negotiating knowing: whose expertise?*

At the same time that refugees appreciated knowledge transmitted by organizational staff, refugees expressed that truly "knowing" required a more complex understanding of expertise. While US-based organizational staff members may be experts on life in the US, refugees expressed a sense that they also needed to be solicited for their expertise, particularly as they share how that knowledge fits their unique personal experiences and context. For instance, Sittina (Female, Sudan) explained that organizational workers would provide her with expert information about how to conduct a job search, but would not listen when she explained that having young children at home was keeping her from working the hours they thought she ought to. She said, "They need to listen. They need to understand that I can't find a job just because they say I should." This sense that organizational workers often positioned themselves as experts and "ordered" refugees to comply without regard for refugees' personal circumstances was frequently repeated across the interviews. In this way, the refugees themselves were articulating the conclusion drawn by Hynes (2003) that "refugees are the experts of their own experience" (p. 1) and that they should be considered primary social actors by resettlement agencies.

Because of this sense that the refugees themselves would bring unique expertise about how life in the United States affected them differently, several refugees described a desire for organizations to facilitate communication with other refugees. For instance, Amare (Male, Ethiopia) explained that he wished that CAP would start:

Group discussions with other people, similar kind of people, sharing experiences, how people manage to pass those challenging moments in their lives, etc. That would help I would say. Listening or learning from people who really experienced those challenges would be helpful.

This desire to learn from the experiences of refugees who had already experienced the challenges of resettling in the United States was echoed by Zhara (Female, Iran) who furthered that when she resettled in the United States, “We tried to find people here like as friends to hang out with. So that was maybe more helpful than, because you know it’s kind of hard to, yet I think that we mostly of learn things by just being around people, not really from the organization.” When asked why “expert” communication from other refugees was more valuable than “expert” communication from organizational staff, Amare (Male, Ethiopia) clarified:

Yeah, it’s different. Like if you are an expert, you’re telling me because you get paid for your job. And it’s your job. Maybe you are passionate about it and maybe you aren’t. But if you are a person like myself, you’re telling me your life. You have experienced it. You’ve gone through poverty. You’ve gone through health challenges. So there are some practical strategies that they designed through going through those challenges. As an expert, I have no way to experience those. I might have heard from other people, other clients, etc. etc. Got some theoretical back up from my education. You know, living is a different thing. So, [we refugees] just believe this better.

Amare’s statements reflect a growing strain of critical scholarship in refugee studies that has insisted “that refugees must be allowed to represent their own claims, interests and concerns and make more vigorous input into the configuration of aid structures” (Indra, 1989, p. 223). In this study, the refugee participants are frequently arguing that resettlement organizational staff members must take an ontological position that refugees’ knowledge, understandings, and experiences are meaningful (see Hynes, 2003, p. 13).

However, the tensions surrounding knowledge and knowing persist because while refugees want to be “expert” on their own lives, they simultaneously want and appreciate knowledge transmission from organizational staff about how to acquire goods and services and how to adjust to cultural life in the United States. Refugee-participants expressed a sense that the organizational staff persons’ positioning as the “expert” on life in the United States was both helpful and problematic. Furthermore, those knowledge transmissions are complicated by language differences and cultural incompetencies. Refugee-participants described a sense that they needed to be included in the process of negotiating “knowing” in their own lives and circumstances.

5.2. Negotiating knowing: the organizational staff perspective

My second research question asked: How do organizational staff members in refugee resettlement organizations characterize the role(s) of knowing and expert knowledge in their interactions with refugee-clients? Based on my interviews with the organizational staff participants in my study, three central themes emerged: (1) the duty of communicating expert knowledge; (2) the limits of knowledge as expertise; and (3) processes of negotiating knowing: alternative communications of expertise.

5.2.1. Communicating expert knowledge

First, virtually every organizational staff member interviewed immediately reported that one of their primary functions as either workers or volunteers was to provide information to refugees about how to access basic goods and services in the United States. Kim (CSS) began by explaining that when a new refugee enters the US, CSS seeks to ensure that the refugees “get a house and they get everything furnished, not well, but stuff and they get food supplies and they just get everything, medical care and all of that stuff.” In many ways, a great deal of what organizational staff members in these organizations do is provide expert information about how to obtain goods and access basic services for refugees which help them begin a new life in the United States.

This communication from organizational staff to refugees is often quite intensive because so many refugees enter the US without knowledge of many goods and services that seem “obvious” to longer term residents of the United States. James (CAP) explains:

You can ask, [all] the resettlement agencies will tell you, those first two months that somebody's here, there's a lot of hand holding. This is how the microwave works. This is how the refrigerator works. You have to put meat in the refrigerator. You've got to lock your door at night. This is how you buy a car. This is what to avoid if you buy a car. And those, I think, are so intensive.

Beyond providing such practical information, organizational workers described offering cultural knowledge about life in the United States as well. David (CAP) described that an important part of his job was organizing and conducting Cultural Orientation Classes for refugees who arrived in the United States. In these classes, David explained that he would cover a wide variety of topics, from “cultural expectations for parenting in the United States—for instance, here it is not appropriate to hit or beat your children—to expectations for dating and friendships between men and women and other important life information.” As he conducts these classes, David told me that he “explains the way things are here.” Of course, such an assertion relies on two important assumptions. First, such an assertion relies on the idea that “here” has a definitively identifiable cultural practice. For instance, to presume that there is a particular set of expectations for friendships between men and women in the US denies that there are multiple models of friendship in the United States. Second, such an assertion relies on the assumption that the speaker (in this case David) has reasonable expertise as to what those cultural practices are and can thus lecture on them.

Similarly, Melissa told me that she often taught refugees about cultural differences between their home nations and the US, saying:

I would say that ... in our culture, when you are 21 you live on your own without your family, by yourself ... whereas in their culture, you have a grandmother, you know you have the children, and you are all living in the same house.

Interestingly, throughout these interviews, it became clear that organizational staff members typically understood themselves as mere “conduits” for knowledge/expertise sharing. Essentially, they saw themselves as privy to information (whether information about access to services or US-based cultural knowledge) which was factual, fixed, and external to themselves. They then just “shared” that information with refugees. However, expectations that one should live “on their own” at 21 are not universally shared in the US (as many co-cultural groups value extended-family living arrangements). As a result, these organizational staff members actually function as mediators of cultural knowledge, selecting and interpreting what to present and how to present it to their refugee-clients.

5.2.2. *Limits of knowledge as expertise*

While the position of “expert” was described by organizational staff as a frequently enjoyable one, there were times that organizational staff members saw their position as an expert on life in the US as problematic. Specifically, the workers found that once they were positioned as experts in the minds of refugees, many refugees expected them to be experts on everything about life in the US. Since such comprehensive understanding is rare if not impossible, the workers then inevitably disappointed their clients which led both parties to be frustrated. For instance, Lisa reports that in her role as an employee of CAP, she occasionally teaches the Cultural Orientation classes. In those classes, the refugees “ask me questions, so I feel like I should know a lot about the community and should be able to answer those questions.” However, Lisa continues that “whenever people want to know things about the community and stuff, like, I'm not from [here] and so it is kind of hard.” Additionally, John (CAP) recalls a specific instance in which he was asked a question outside of what his organization does:

There've been questions that I don't know how to answer. Like on last Saturday, one person in my English class came over ... and he went to the doctor and he got a bill and he didn't know what to do. So, I thought, maybe he can be on Medicaid, and I said, maybe ... I don't know what I'm supposed to do.

Because CAP does not provide medical insurance or provide Medicaid directly, in this instance, John was unsure as to how the refugee might go about paying his medical bill.

When refugees sought expertise that the organizational staff workers were unable to provide, frustration was provoked on both sides. After recounting a particular instance in which a woman wanted Lisa (CAP) to set up several medical appointments for her, even though Lisa was unsure how to do that, Lisa said, “She seemed really frustrated and I felt really bad. There have been a few times like that and that’s really hard.” Lisa continued, “I feel kind of frustrated when people ask for my help and I don’t know what to do. I will like try to figure it out, but I’ll, sometimes they’ll ask me then and then I’ll never see them again, so it is hard.” Thus, while both sides are frustrated, this breakdown in the organizational staff member’s expert positioning can be particularly problematic for refugees who might as a result opt out of participation in a continued communicative relationship with someone who violated their expectations by not being able to provide needed knowledge.

5.2.3. *Negotiating knowing: alternative communication of expertise*

Finally, the refugees I interviewed spoke of their desire for their own expertise and ideas to be more fully acknowledged by organizational staff members and asked that they be given more opportunities to share experiential expertise with other refugees who may have resettled in the United States. Jennifer (CSS) supported this idea by arguing that nonprofit organizational staff have to be careful not to present themselves as the sole experts on life in the United States, saying instead that refugees can teach us as well. She explains, “Don’t degrade them in any way, don’t, because, they don’t know anything about American culture, don’t act like you know everything. And treat them as if they can teach you.” Michelle (CSS) extends this sentiment when she explains that for services and goods to be effectively provided, “I think that get to know them is very important. Know their culture, to know the people they are. And how do they look at things.” Essentially, nonprofit workers must understand the clients they are serving at an individual level for that service to be effective.

Stephanie (CAP) describes one way that this refugee experience can be enacted as expert communication when she talked excitedly about the value of emergent parental groups among refugee families in CAP’s educational programs. She explained:

I think it starts within their similar group and then it expands out, and you know, in ever growing or widening circles ... they can at least offer support and celebration for each other. I don’t know that they necessarily be best friends forever, but they certainly look forward to interacting and knowing that there are others facing similar kinds of challenges.

It appears, therefore, that there is some agency support for this type of experiential expertise to be communicated by and among the refugees themselves. However, John (CAP) cautions that these types of community support groups can be problematic:

It is kind of ironic in a sense. But, when I have two [refugees] in the same background, the temptation is strong for those two to become kind of a dyad, because those two communicate between each other and they understand each other better, and that becomes almost a barrier to the rest ... I would almost prefer to have only one person from any given culture at any given time so that it almost forces them to maybe open up a bit more, to immerse a bit more in the culture as well as the language or become more able to cope with it.

In this, John expresses his fear that if refugees are able to form community groups with other refugees with the same national, religious, or linguistic background, they may be able to use those groups to avoid integrating themselves more broadly into life in the United States. What is revealed in John’s statements is the ultimate goal of this expertise sharing from the perspective of these organizations. To both agencies, communicating about life in the United States is done in the ultimate hope that refugees will integrate (by which they largely mean assimilate) into US culture. This language is common in refugee resettlement, with the ultimate goal of resettlement being often

characterized as assimilation, where contact with the new culture is high and maintenance of the refugee's previous culture is low. In these cases, the refugee moves toward eventual incorporation into the host society (Rutter, Cooley, Reynolds, & Sheldon, 2007). Other models of cultural adaptation like integration (where both new host culture and the refugee's original culture are maintained) were actively discouraged by the refugee resettlement organizational staff in my study for fear that they would lead to a cultural approach called separation (where the new host culture is not adopted and the refugee maintains his/her original culture) (see definitions in Rutter et al., 2007).

For instance, James (CAP) argued:

So if I'm a refugee from Burma that comes in, I'll hear from the agency that resettles me but it also my fellow Burmese and the community so of those folks are working or those folks are involved in a church, so that's how I'm going to learn. It's really, the hard part is that you are really at the whim of the cultures in those community groups.

James obviously did not want the refugees he worked with to be "at the whim of the cultures" of their local community groups. Rather, he wanted refugees to listen to and to follow his agency's ideas about integration/assimilation. Therefore, while self-sufficiency is the explicitly stated goal of these agencies, being self-sufficient or involved in a refugee-specific cultural community was not seen as success. Refugees were expected to assimilate to the [simplistically defined] US culture more broadly. This simplistic and top-down definition demonstrates clearly the need to more systematically examine how refugees themselves define successful integration (Korac, 2003).

Thus, while organizational staff frequently communicate important knowledge to refugee-clients about goods, services, and cultural life in the United States, their rhetorical positioning as "experts" on all things US can cause disappointment and frustration when those expectations are unmet. Further, they express complicated feelings toward including refugees in the processes of "knowing" by both acknowledging that experiential expertise communicated by refugees to one another can serve as a valuable educational tool, but simultaneously fearing that such processes might discourage some refugees from integrating more fully into nonrefugee communities in the United States.

6. Discussion

The persistent tensions surrounding the communication of knowledge and the rhetorical construction of "knowing" experienced both by refugees and by the organizational staff who sought to serve them highlight the dominance of the conduit understanding of knowledge communication in refugee resettlement organizations and the theoretical and practical need for these organizations to intentionally adopt alternative frames. Putnam and Boys (2006) define a conduit as "a channel through which something is conveyed, such as a tube or cylinder" (p. 545). As Rasmussen (1991) indicates, the conduit metaphor of communication then represents communication "as a simple process of sending meaning, conveyed in words and gestures, from one person to another" (p. 364). Under this frame, meaning is assumed to be easily transferable if the sender correctly encodes the communication by selecting the correct medium and message to send to the receiver (Rasmussen, 1991). Further, this orientation "leads to the valorization of efficiency and accuracy in knowledge transfer, reducing the role of communication to that which transmits the object of interest" (Kuhn & Porter, 2011, p. 18). These assumptions of transferring thoughts from sender to receiver are dominant in the descriptions of interaction between refugees and organizational staff provided by both sides. This is problematic, in part, because it "sees knowledge as an entity ontologically separate from action (and context), reinforcing a dualism against which many in communication studies argue" (Kuhn & Porter, 2011, p. 17).

On face, such a construction makes sense given the context. As Harrell-Bond (2002) argues, refugee resettlement organizations are asymmetrical and power laden by nature. Under the traditional resettlement model, refugee resettlement organizations "focus on refugees as their object of knowledge, assistance, and management" (Malkki, 1996, p. 377). If workers are perceived to have knowl-

edge and refugees are not, then how and why would co-construction of meaning possibly occur? However, a conduit metaphor can promote complacency and overconfidence among organizational communicators regarding their self-perceived efficacy (Axley, 1984). This construction of communicator as expert is problematic if and when the sender is not in fact an expert (as most organizational staff could not possibly be expert on all things about the United States).

Further, the conduit metaphor assumes that “When Person X ‘communicates’ with Person Y, basically what is happening is that X is transferring meanings from his/her mind to the mind of Y” (Axley, 1984, p. 435). Putnam and Boys (2006) elaborate, explaining that the conduit metaphor adopts a sender bias and presumes that communication sent parallels communication received. Moreover, this logic dangerously assumes a monolithic “refugee experience” rather than recognizing that “there are a thousand multifarious refugee experiences and a thousand refugee figures whose meanings and identities are negotiated in the process of displacement in time and place” (Soguk, 1999, p. 4). What this means is that the ability of receivers (in this case refugees) to interpret or appropriate that information given their own personal frames and experiences is entirely ignored. This is problematic particularly because research has found that clients in social service agencies generally and in refugee resettlement contexts specifically do interpret, resist, and repurpose organizational messages in the light of their own lives (Sigona, 2014; Trethewey, 1997). Additional theoretical work must continue to explore how policy interventions can recognize refugees as social actors with differentiated needs and goals, rather than ascribing them a simplistic “refugee” identity without recognition of differences within refugee populations (Hynes, 2003).

Given the desired function of these refugee resettlement organizations is to mediate the transition of refugees into their new community’s cultural, economic, and civic life, moving beyond a conduit metaphor is essential. If foregrounding knowing demonstrates that knowledge “is a *capacity to act within a situation*” (Kuhn & Porter, 2011, p. 19), then a “knowing” approach in resettlement organizations would take seriously the perspectives of refugees as they affect the ability of refugees to understand, use, appropriate or change the knowledge being “shared” with them by resettlement organizational staff. Borkman (1976) explains that experiential expertise is “truth learned from personal experience with a phenomenon rather than truth gained by discursive reasoning, observation or reflection on information provided by others” (p. 446). Refugees can and should be considered primary social actors with their own knowledge, voices, and goals in resettlement (Hynes, 2003; Korac, 2003; Rajaram, 2002). Thus, while staff in refugee resettlement organizations may have expertise about refugee resettlement gained from reading about resettlement, observing the refugees they resettle, and talking to refugees themselves, only the refugees themselves have actually experienced the process of resettlement as a refugee in the United States.

In theoretical terms, expert knowledge has traditionally been defined as “more general and objective and therefore more accurate than the subjective knowledge of lay persons” (Caron-Flinterman, Broerse, & Bunders, 2005, p, p. 2576). Refugee resettlement organizations, at least as evidenced in this study, appear to have implicit rules that position organizational staff as experts on life in the United States and refugees as information-deficient and simple receptacles of expert information. However, this study challenges the practicality and productivity of such assumptions by arguing that truly productive resettlement communication can only happen when refugee-clients are also seen as a legitimate source of expertise about their own lives and experiences. Rather than seeing knowledge as something organizational experts *have*, they argue, “*processes of knowing see[s] these processes as always embodied, embedded in particular socio-historical settings and communities, and intimately connected to the material forces through which they emerge [emphasis original]*” (Kuhn & Porter, 2011, p. 18). By recognizing and embracing the tensions surrounding expertise and knowledge, refugee resettlement research could expand understandings of “knowing” in important ways.

However, it is important to recognize that really “listening” to refugee voices is a theoretically complex issue for at least two significant reasons. First, refugee experiences have been collected and used by refugee resettlement agencies as another way to objectify the refugee experience. For

example, Rajaram (2002) highlights how a “listening” campaign by Oxfam designed to hear refugee voices was then used to present a generalized and de-historicized picture of refugees as victims in Oxfam brochures through “poignant” quotations (p. 252). So, we must problematize listening to include thoughtful deliberation of how refugee voices will be used and to whose ends.

A second and potentially even more problematic concern surrounding recognizing refugees as authors of their own stories is that these stories are inevitably being experienced, sought, and narrated in a particular social context. In other words, recounting one’s personal experiences is not a straightforward process, since narratives are “produced in relation to socially available and hegemonic discourses and practices” (Anthias, 2002, p. 511). A variety of research on the relationship between refugees and refugee resettlement organizations has demonstrated that refugee resettlement organizations are structured such that they often have insufficient resources to meet needs while simultaneously holding the power to decide how those resources are allocated (Harrell-Bond, 2002; Hyndman, 2000). As a result, when resettlement organizations seek refugee voices/input, refugees are often guided into using pre-defined scripts. For instance, “speaking” in these contexts often is operationalized as outlining material needs to contribute to the efficiency and relevancy of aid delivery (Rajaram, 2002). If refugees need aid and their stories are constructed as the way to “earn” that aid, the stories will inevitably take on the expectations of the listener who can award that aid. This led Hyndman to conclude that this contextualization of refugee voices is a form of bureaucratization of refugee experience; the co-option of narration into pre-conceived “categories familiar to the knower but not necessarily to the ‘known’” (Hyndman, 2000, p. 74). Therefore, as we move forward, we must continue to explore what “a more critically engaged and theoretically informed understanding of the ‘refugee voice’” might be (Sigona, 2014, p. 378) given that their very voices are potentially bound up in genres available in the humanitarian aid structures present in refugee resettlement organizations.

7. Conclusion

In the end, interviews with refugees who had resettled in the United States and staff in the resettlement organizations designed to help that process revealed interesting tensions surrounding the constructions of knowledge and expertise. Refugee participants revealed that while they want and appreciate knowledge transmission from organizational staff about how to acquire goods and services and how to adjust to cultural life in the United States, those knowledge transmissions are complicated by language differences and cultural incompetencies. Moreover, refugee-participants expressed a sense that the organizational staff persons’ positioning as the sole “expert” on life in the United States was problematic. Refugee-participants described a sense that they also needed to be listened to as experts on their own lives and circumstances.

Simultaneously, interviews with refugee resettlement staff members found that while organizational staff frequently communicate important knowledge to refugee-clients about goods, services, and cultural life in the United States, they felt that their rhetorical positioning as “experts” on all things American can cause disappointment and frustration from refugees when those expectations are unmet. Additionally, while some staff members recognized that experiential expertise communicated by refugees to one another can serve as a valuable educational tool, some feared that it might simultaneously discourage some refugees from integrating more fully into nonrefugee American communities.

Despite the richness of their stories and the difficulty in recruiting refugee participants having made 11 refugee interviewees an acceptable number for this study, this sample certainly cannot and should not represent the experiences of all refugees who migrate to the United States. Indeed, geographic, religious, ethnic, and cultural contexts vary even in the United States, and communicative experiences in refugee resettlement organizations across the country may differ significantly. Future research must consider interviewing both refugees and refugee resettlement organizational staff about how they understand and interpret their interactions with each other.

Nevertheless, these tensions surrounding “knowing” in refugee resettlement organizations highlights the current dominance of the conduit metaphor in these organizations and the need for a more complex understanding of the processes of knowing present in organizations generally and refugee resettlement organizations in particular. While this research certainly acknowledges that “refugee voices” may be colonized by structural discourses and must be problematized by scholars, this study shows that by presenting both staff and refugees as co-experts and as co-producers of resettlement knowledge, organizational staff and refugees can communicate to one another and about resettlement in more useful ways.

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Notes

- i. A previous version of this paper was submitted to the National Communication Association’s 2012 annual convention. It was accepted and presented on the “Top Four papers in Organizational Communication” panel in November of 2012.
1. Participant names have been changed to protect their privacy.
2. Participant quotations may, at times, adopt irregular English styles or be grammatically incorrect. In order to present the voices of participants in their own terms, I have not rewritten their statements, nor will I place [*sic*] after each one. Please recognize that as nonnative English speakers, refugees should be given a great deal of latitude to express themselves in nonconventional ways.

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