An Investigation of Strength:

Refugee Students' Success in Higher Education

BY

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THESIS

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גערוידמעט מלכה און משה מעלינען

און אַלע וואָס זוכן אַ מקום מיקלט פֿון רציחה, רדפֿות און מלחמה צו שאַפֿן אַ נײַ לעבן.

מיר וועלן זיי איבערלעבן!

Dedicated to Malka and Moishe Melin and to all people who leave behind violence, persecution, and war to start new lives. We will outlive them!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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SUMMARY

The world is facing an unprecedented refugee crisis (Butler, 2015; UNHCR Figures at a Glance, 2018), and refugee education, specifically higher education, is an understudied issue that has large individual and community implications. Refugee higher education is important economically and socially in both resettlement communities and during national rebuilding efforts (Dryden-Peterson, 2011a; Golden & Katz, 2009; Morlang & Stolte, 2008; Stevenson & Willott, 2007). Yet only 1% of refugee people of college age are in school, compared to 34% globally (UNHCR). The aim of this constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) study is to examine the experiences of refugee background undergraduate students using semi-structured interviews and explore refugee college students' perceptions and experiences of success, the supports and difficulties that have both facilitated and challenged their success in college, and the types of additional supports and resources that might be useful to them and others. Findings reflected three large thematic groupings that help provide insight into the refugee college experience: visibility, harnessing the power of the refugee experience, and reinterpreting success as balance. Within the theme of balance, six area emerged as necessary for students to achieve balance: traditional academic success, a safe and comfortable environment, community and human connection, health, obligation management, and identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (UNHCR Figures at a Glance, 2018), as of 2018 there were 25.4 million refugees worldwide, half of whom were under 18 years of age, and on average 44,400 people are forced to flee their homes every day. By the end of 2018 there were approximately 68.5 million displaced people across the globe, which is the highest number recorded to date (UNHCR Figures at a Glance, 2018). While we are experiencing a global refugee crisis, the political climate in the United States (US) is currently enacting less friendly refugee policy, including suspended admittance and increased vetting of refugees (Executive Order, 2017). Moreover, in 2018 and 2019 the US admitted the fewest numbers of refugees in over a decade (Refugee Admissions Report, 2019). These changes are troublesome for both refugees and people who care about them in the US. Since 1975, the US has admitted over 3 million people seeking safety (Cumulative Summary of Refugee Admissions, 2015). Individuals from a refugee background constitute a sizable minority in the US. Furthermore, as of the end June of 2018, over 657,000 people had a pending asylum case in the U.S., the highest rate in the world (UNHCR Mid Year Trends 2018, 2019). Therefore, the US is facing a unique situation where an unprecedented urgency to address the wants and needs of this population exists within the bounds of a less hospitable climate.

In the US and beyond, higher education[1] may offer refugees a route to economic advancement and improved quality of life in countries of resettlement. Higher education is often seen as a gateway to a better life, as it tends to improve job prospects (Boyd & Grieco, 1998), which can lead to more money, higher social class, and in turn better health over the course of

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[1] *There is a range of terminology (often differing by country) for higher education including college, university, post secondary education, tertiary education, etc. For ease and clarity in this document, I will be referring to this type of education as either higher education or college.*

one's lifetime (Stevenson & Willott, 2007). We have also witnessed much of our global economy move toward a focus on high-tech services, making decent jobs that do not require some higher education harder to find (Golden & Katz, 2009). Consequently, higher education currently has the largest economic returns in modern history, and the repercussions of this economic change are heightened among migrant groups (Golden & Katz, 2009).

An educated populace also benefits society in the long-term, as a lack of education has enormous community implications (Dryden-Peterson, 2011a). High quality education can enhance social developmental potential, because it is coupled with less poverty, greater social stability, and overall better quality of life in a community (Dryden-Peterson, 2011a). Education also helps rebuild lives both in resettlement communities and during post conflict reconstruction (Dryden-Peterson, 2011b). Research suggests that college educated refugees are some of the first to move back to their home countries during repatriation, proving themselves essential during the rebuilding process (Morlang & Stolte, 2008).

Despite the potential benefits that higher education may offer refugees and their communities, the Institute of International Education (IIE) estimates that only one percent of college-age refugees are engaged in college course work, which is in stark comparison to the worldwide average of 34 percent. Effectively documenting the number of refugees pursuing higher education in the US is also complicated because data on whether students are refugees is not regularly collected in educational settings (Stevenson & Willott, 2007). Moreover, among refugees in college, there is limited understanding of how they access and navigate the demands of higher education (Hirano, 2015).

Although research on refugees in higher education is limited, the existing literature on refugee and immigrant students across educational levels can inform our understanding of

possible influences to take into account when researching this topic of success among refugee students in higher education. This includes research on school context, linguistic and cultural differences, social support and belonging, familial influences, financial factors, mental health and help seeking, and prejudice and discrimination. Among the small minority of refugees who do enroll in and graduate from college, these areas of the literature may be useful in understanding the nature of their experiences and successes in institutions of higher education. I will dive deeper into this literature in later sections

The aim of the current study is to employ a constructivist grounded theory approach to examine the experiences of refugee students currently engaged in higher education, specifically undergraduate students in the Chicago area, using semi-structured interviews. Before exploring more study details, my position as a researcher, and the literature that has influenced this journey, I will present some background information on refugees in general and their history in the US.

II. BACKGROUND

In this background section, I will describe 1) Who are refugees? 2) What is the history of refugee communities in Chicago? 3) How are the experiences of refugees unique from other marginalized groups?, and 4) What do we know about refugees in higher education?

Who are Refugees?

In the current study, when I use the term refugee, it is intended to describe a person coming from a 'refugee background,' as this captures elements of identity and past experiences while making room for individuals with varying current legal statuses (Naidoo, 2015), including asylum seekers, along with current citizens or legal residents who used to have refugee status. These groups of migrants have overlapping but not identical experiences, strengths, and challenges. The term refugee is often used in a fluid and subjective way to describe both legal refugees and asylum seekers, and it can be difficult to disentangle who fits within the term 'refugee' (McBrien, 2005). I will use both of the terms 'refugee' and 'refugee background' interchangeably through the course of this study. This subsection provides a brief explanation of these definitions to invite a more detailed understanding of the shared experience and diversity within the 'refugee' label.

A refugee is defined as **"**a person who has fled his or her country of origin because of past persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution based upon race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or a membership in a particular social group" (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 1996, para #1). Since the US Refugee Act of 1980, refugees are heavily vetted and then relocated to the US. After relocation, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) coordinates refugee resettlement benefits with smaller organizations. Benefits include short-term cash and medical assistance, case management services, employment services, and classes for

English Language Learners (U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program – an Overview, 2015).

Generally within six months following arrival, refugees are expected to have found employment

and be able to support themselves and their families, as they are often no longer eligible for

financial assistance (Singer & Wilson, 2016; Sowa, 2009). Moreover, the US requires refugees

to pay for the transportation costs incurred for their flights to the US. They are responsible for

paying these costs over time, starting at 18 months post arrival (Mamgain & Collins, 2003).

Consequently, refugees often start their lives in the US already thousands of dollars in debt and

with limited additional support.

Refugees face many challenges upon resettlement in the US, including underemployment

or unemployment, inadequate housing, acculturative difficulties, discrimination, family loss or

separation, and language barriers (Birman, 2005). Moreover, many refugees have experienced

considerable trauma in their country of origin and/or during migration (Birman & Simon, 2014;

Lustig et al., 2004). For example, Amnesty International (2008) has documented the use of

torture in at least 81 countries, many of which are countries producing large numbers of

refugees. Despite numerous shared challenges, refugees are not a monolithic group; instead they

have extremely varied backgrounds, identities, and experiences.

For example, not all people fleeing violence or persecution leave their countries with

refugee status. Refugees have legal approval to reside in their countries of resettlement and

established social service support during and after their migration. Other people enter the US

seeking asylum and lack legal documentation. These asylum seekers have also fled due to fear

for their personal safety and the safety of their families, but they are required to legally prove

that they would face serious and often deadly consequences if they returned to their country of

origin. Asylum seekers need to file an application within one year of arriving in the US, and they

need to wait 150 days following the submission of their application (or until they are granted asylum, which is rarely sooner) to apply for a legal work permit (USCIS Asylum, 2015; US: Catch-22 for Asylum Seekers, 2015). Consequently, asylum seekers are often relegated to poverty and/or undocumented and unregulated employment opportunities. Even when working legally, refugees often wait years to receive a court date while living in fear of deportation. Such uncertain legal status can have an impact on mental health; for example, receiving asylum has been related to fewer PTSD symptoms (Raghavan, Rasmussen, Rosenfeld, & Keller 2012).

Consequently, this brief description of refugees and the different legal, practical, and financial aspects of their resettlement helps provide a reminder of what participants in the current study may have experienced. Moreover, the above explanation frames one facet of the diversity underscoring the often-imprecise term 'refugee.' Yet, this varied group has a shared experience of forced displacement, which unites key aspects of their post migration experience.

What is the history of refugee communities in Chicago?

Migration to the US, and similarly to Chicago, to escape violence, persecution, and war is a well-worn narrative. World War II instigated the development of the Displaced Person's Act of 1948, providing for the admission of an additional 400,000 refugees from Europe, mainly Jews, on top of the 250,000 who migrated before the Act became official (History of the US Refugee Resettlement Program). Throughout the Cold War and the years immediately following, the US unsurprisingly primarily resettled people escaping from communist regimes, in places such as South East Asia, Cuba, and the former Soviet Union (History of the US Refugee Resettlement Program). An influx of Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese refugees came to use US in the mid-1970s, prompting congress to pass the aforementioned Refugee Act of 1980, which

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forms the foundation of our current refugee policy (History of the US Refugee Resettlement Program; Refugees, 2005).

Through the 1980's and 1990's new groups of refugees began coming to the US to flee repressive governments and civil war in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Refugees, 2005). In the past few years, the highest concentrations of refugees in the US came from Afghanistan, Bhutan, Burma, Iraq, and Syria (Refugee Admissions Report, 2019). Official refugee resettlement number vary every year with the highest numbers in the 1980s and the lowest in the first few years following the attacks on September 11th (History of the US Refugee Resettlement Program). Many thriving refugee communities have established themselves in Chicago, including Angolans, Assyrians, Argentineans, Bolivians, Bosnians, Cameroonians, Congolese, Croatians, Dominicans, Ethiopians, Eritreans, Guatemalans, Haitians, Iraqis, Lebanese, Liberians, Nicaraguans, Nigerians, Palestinians, Peruvians, Salvadorians, Sierra Leoneans, Somalis, (former) Soviets, Sudanese, Ugandans, Uruguayans, and Yugoslavians among others (Refugees, 2005). When considering refugees as all people who fled from persecution, Chicago is one of the largest resettlement sites in the country (Refugees, 2005). Unfortunately, new communities of forced migrants regularly make their way to Illinois. Since 2007, the primary communities resettled in Illinois (and consequently Chicago as it is the largest resettlement location in Illinois) are Bhutanese, Burmese, Congolese, Iraqis, and Syrians (Refugee Admissions Report, 2019).

Nevertheless, it is important to remember once again that many people come to the US without legal refugee status, often either seeking asylum or remaining undocumented. In particular it has been challenging for people migrating from Central and South America to qualify as refugees and gain this status in the US, which has been clear given the media coverage

of the crisis migrants are facing at our border with Mexico (Mathema, 2018). As Chicago has a large and thriving Latino, predominantly Mexican, community, it stands to reason that there is a growing Latino refugee community here as well.

How are the experiences of refugees unique from other marginalized groups?

The focus of this study is on refugees, whose experiences are overlapping yet distinct from those of immigrants and/or racial/ethnic minority groups living in the US. Like refugees, many immigrants and ethnic minorities face challenges associated with living in poverty, trauma, and linguistic and cultural adaptation. However, these issues are often significantly worse in people from refugee backgrounds (Stevenson & Willott, 2007). Refugees are less likely to be employed and when employed they are less likely to make a livable wage compared with other marginalized groups. Moreover, refugees are less likely to speak English, more likely to have experienced extreme violence, displacement, familial separation, and imprisonment, and if their legal status is uncertain they have much more to lose if deported back to their country of origin (Stevenson & Willott, 2007).

In addition, people tend to immigrate to join family and/or improve economic opportunities. In contrast, refugees are forced out of their country of origin as opposed to being drawn to another country (Doerschler, 2006). This distinction is often referred to in terms of push-pull factors (Doerschler, 2006). For example, economic prosperity and political stability may pull people to some countries (Borjas, 1990). Simultaneously, structural unemployment and political oppression may push people out of other countries (Cornelius, Martin, & Hollifield, 1994; Doerschler, 2006). Refugees' primary motivations are push factors, and immigrants' primary motivations tend to be pull factors. Moreover, immigrants generally have more control over their migration experience, whereas refugees often have to go where they will be legally

resettled, or wherever provides the easiest or safest escape. Immigrants can also choose to return to their country of origin in the future, which is often not possible for refugees.

Despite overlap with experiences of other marginalized groups, people from refugee backgrounds have a set of experiences, rooted in their background of forced migration, that make them distinct. They may experience poverty (as do other groups), migration (as do other groups), minority status (as do other groups), and trauma (as do other groups). Yet, the refugee experience is a multi-faceted one existing at a unique juncture of these shared experiences and their co-existing privilege. This multiple marginalization and enduring many, if not all, of these challenges contributes to making refugees distinctive.

Research exploring the unique experiences of refugees can be used to inform decisions about how to best provide support to this population. In research, the refugee experience is often unfairly absorbed within the immigrant experience and/or larger ethnic and racial minority categories (Birman, 2005, Boise et al., 2013, Sarr & Mosselson, 2010). Consequently, support systems for refugees are regularly subsumed within those for ethnic minorities, which may lead to insufficient resources (Stevenson & Willott, 2007). Refugees who are not considered ethnic or racial minorities in their resettlement country, such as White individuals from Kosovo resettling in the U.S., are regularly not identified as refugees in research. Refugees' unique contribution to data is often ignored (Birman, 2005). We cannot make useful decisions and influence policy without research targeting the refugee experience.

What do we know about refugees in higher education?

While little is known about where the US specifically stands with regard to refugee higher education, many different international human rights documents have promoted the right to widespread access. Article 2 of the First Protocol to the European Convention on Human

Rights from 1950, required all those who signed the protocol to guarantee the right to education (European Convention on Human Rights). Article 13 of the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966 states, that "higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education" (International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights**).** Moreover, the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) recognized higher education as a basic human right in its 2012–2016 Education Strategy document (UNHCR 2012). In 2016, the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants was adopted by 193 countries, which reaffirmed solidarity with forced migrants, acknowledged a shared responsibility to find a solution for issues surrounding forced migration, and upheld a 2015 commitment to explicitly address refugee educational needs (DAFI Annual Report 2017, 2018).

Additionally human rights organizations have made an international call to increase investment in the higher education of refugees fleeing war in the current conflicts in the Middle East (Butler, 2015). These organizations want to attend to the potential intellectual loss of a generation of great thinkers that may vanish without formal higher education. Education has been described as "the orphan of all these crises," as money and aid primarily go toward other more pressing needs (Butler, 2015, p.1). Only 1.5% of global humanitarian aid goes toward refugee education (IIE). Moreover, this aid is largely used on primary and secondary schooling, not higher education (Butler, 2015). Primary and secondary education is still lacking for refugees, as 50% and 22% of refugee children respectively have access compared to the global averages of 90% for primary and 84% for secondary education (UNHCR). Yet the gap is most conspicuous for higher education, as mentioned earlier, with only 1% of refugee people of college age in school, compared to 34% globally (UNHCR). Some initiatives are fighting to

change that statistic; since 1992 The Albert Einstein Refugee Initiative (the DAFI programme)[2] has provided scholarships for over 14,000 refugee youth to get their undergraduate degrees (DAFI Annual Report 2017, 2018). Nevertheless, given the size of the disparities in higher education, many more similar efforts are needed to truly move college toward a legitimate right for all people.

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[2] *Albert Einstein Deutsche Akademische Flüchtlingsinitiative*

III. CURRENT STUDY

In the current study, I use a constructivist grounded theory approach to better understand the experiences of refugee undergraduate students currently engaged in higher education in Chicago. Specifically, I aim to address:

1. How do refugee students perceive/discuss their college success?

2. What elements of their lives have facilitated and/or challenged their success in higher education?

3. What resources and supports could be useful in helping refugee youth continue to succeed and graduate from college?

IV. RESEARCHER POSITION

My researcher position is a reflection of both my personal and academic histories, and I provide this context for the study before diving deeper into the relevant sensitizing literature and study methodology. I believe that it is important for researchers to be transparent about their positions, so as to allow the reader to better place their work within society and the larger body of literature. This section will provide background to my motivations and values with regard to my study development, methods, and analysis. My academic researcher position is a combination of my *community psychology* background, valuing *collaborative research*, and a desire to approach this work with a *trauma informed* approach. These concepts are complementary and overlapping perspectives that strengthen the underpinnings of each other. In the following subsections, first I will discuss my personal connection to this line of study through my family history and past work and volunteer locations. Next, I will discuss the academic and intellectual traditions that have influenced my thinking alongside the development of this project.

Personal Position

I care about this topic in large part because I grew up with a refugee narrative on my mother's side of the family. My grandparents fled anti-Semitic discrimination and violence in Poland and Ukraine pre-World War II. Although the term "refugee" was never explicitly spoken, the reality of the oppression they faced in their countries of origin became clear to me as I got older. I was raised listening to a cassette tape of my grandfather jokingly describing how he had to jump out of a second story window to escape from a group of soldiers who wanted to steal his boots. I was not fortunate enough to know these grandparents, yet I was raised with their legacy of hard work and love for their family. Additionally, neither of my grandparents had the opportunity to attend college, however, they deeply valued education and worked very hard to

make college happen for their daughters. I developed an interest in pursuing this line of research as a way to honor them, their history, and their values.

I brought this personal history with me to the research and volunteering I pursued at two different programs for survivors of torture. I was a volunteer Research Assistant at the Bellevue/NYU Program for Survivors of Torture from 2010 to 2012. In addition I volunteered and was hired as an independent contractor at the Heartland Alliance Marjorie Kovler Center here in Chicago from 2013 through 2018. Moreover, Since January 2016 I have volunteered as a mentor for a child of Kovler Center clients. I have helped her apply to college, manage and organize her schoolwork, and juggle financial and health related struggles. We have become friends over the years, and she has served as both my inspiration and my consultant as I engaged in this work.

Academic Position

Community psychology. "Community psychology concerns the relationship of the individual to communities and society. Through collaborative research and action, community psychologists seek to understand and to enhance quality of life for individuals, communities, and society" (Dalton, Elias, & Wandersman, 2001). I identify as a community psychologist, and the values that accompany this identity (Prilleltensky, 2010) form the building blocks of my position as an academic researcher. In particular, I am motivated by five particular tenets of community psychology. I embrace 1) a constructivist outlook, 2) the ecological perspective, 3) valuing human diversity, 4) a strengths focus, and 5) social change.

Epistemological constructivists acknowledge that individuals' perceptions of the world are based on our particular positions within the world and no one has a purely objective view of reality (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). For me, this constructivism springs from taking an

ecological perspective (Kelly, 1966; Kelly, 1979; Trickett, Kelly, & Todd, 1972; Trickett, Kelly, & Vincent, 1985; Bronfenbrenner, 1977), meaning my personal and professional work values the relationship between individuals and the multiple social systems in which they are nested. Also, I believe that human diversity based on race, religion, culture, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, ability, class, and migration experience – among other characteristics – is linked to an appreciation of ecology and offers richness to life (Trickett, 1995). Human beings have the right to be different from each other, and to not to be compared to one white, straight, male, Christian standard (Prilleltensky, 2001).

Furthermore, instead of taking a deficits-based approach common in other medical and psychological disciplines, community psychology promotes a strengths-based approach, especially among marginalized groups (Dalton et al., 2001). Within research, such groups are regularly subject to an essentialized victim oriented view of their experiences, and I strive to reject that perspective. This strengths approach has motivated me to focus on the concept of refugee student success in the current study. Lastly, an important concern of community psychologists is the equitable distribution of resources (i.e. educational resources), and the creation of beneficial change for marginalized groups (i.e. refugees). I value action and social change as much as adding to the knowledge base through research (Prilleltensky, 1994). I aimed to acknowledge and uphold these community psychology values within this research study.

Collaborative research. My academic position is also grounded in collaborative research. My intellectual history was greatly influenced by collaborative research traditions, specifically participatory action research (PAR). Collaborative research, like PAR, is not simply a method to use in a research study, but rather a perspective that shapes the way I view the world. I value academic and community researcher collaboration within the context of the shared

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goals of mutual education, enhancing the knowledge base, and creating positive social, political, and economic change (Balcazar et al., 2004; Balcazar, Garcia-Iriarte, & Suárez-Balcazar, 2009; Brydon-Miller, 1997; Fals Borda 1979; Fals Borda, 1987; Israel, 1992; Minkler, 2000, Suárez-Balcazar et al., 2004; Suárez-Balcazar, Harper, & Lewis, 2005; Suárez-Balcazar, Martinez, & Casas-Byots, 2005). I am drawn to perspectives that aim to be emancipatory for work with oppressed groups, which is fitting for work with refugees (Brydon-Miller, 1997). Moreover, I want to position myself, as the academic researcher, in support of the community and therefore acknowledge that research is political in nature (Brydon-Miller, 1997; Fals Borda, 1987). This mirrors my relationship with refugee communities and policies, as I have clearly defined political views that align with promoting refugee welfare.

Collaborative relationships are dynamic, evolving, and can take many forms (Ritchie & Rigano, 2007). I did not conduct a PAR study, yet the elements of PAR have impacted my worldview. I incorporated this collaborative spirit into two parts of my study 1) the interpretation and discussion of my results, and 2) the planned dissemination and use of the information found in this study. I used member checking, to discuss my analysis of the results and to adapt the interpretation and discussion of the results to align with participants' views. I also collaborated with interested participants in co-creating a plan to disseminate the results and consequently make change. Moreover, two of my study participants were moved enough by participating in the study to join my research team as research assistants. They assisted me throughout the research process to ensure that my processes remained relevant to them and their experiences.

Trauma-informed perspective. Individuals from a refugee background may have experienced trauma and/or have family members who experienced trauma. As such, I approached this work from a trauma-informed perspective, which acknowledges a possible

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trauma history of all participants in my study (Elliott, Bjelajac, Fallot, Markoff, & Reed, 2005; Harris & Fallott, 2001a; 2001b). Although my project did not seek to treat or explore this trauma, discussions of trauma did emerge during data collection. Overall, I made efforts to create a research environment that was welcoming to individuals who have experienced trauma and constructed room for their potentially unique needs (Harris & Fallott, 2001a).

My strengths oriented collaborative approach attends to issues of history, culture, oppression, identity, and strives for a shared empowering experience. These values are in line with a trauma-informed approach (Elliot et al. 2005). A trauma-informed perspective deeply values ethical best practices (Elliot et al., 2005), therefore, I also critically engage with ethical considerations throughout this process and not purely as part of IRB recommendations. For example, I acknowledge the ethical repercussions of my recruitment choices, and made the study goals and the centrality of refugee identity apparent from the start, giving participants the choice to contact me if they are interested. Moreover, as is ethically appropriate with all research, participants had the option to not answer any questions they did not wish to answer, and to end their participation at any time without negative consequences. Throughout I was attentive to any subtle signs of discomfort and regularly checked in with participants during the interviews.

In addition, I acknowledge that I am not a trained clinician, and I consulted with former and current clinical psychology graduate students who were employees of The Office of Applied Psychological Services (OAPS) (Alexander Jendrusina, and Corrina Salo) at UIC to discuss my interview guide, signs of psychological distress, a list of mental health resources, and an action plan to follow in crisis situations. I also have relationships with clinicians (Marianne Joyce and Mario Gonzalez) at Heartland Alliance's Marjorie Kovler Center, a program for survivors of torture in Chicago. These clinicians have years of experience with refugees who have

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experienced severe trauma and they have provided guidance throughout this process. Thankfully, no crises occurred throughout the course of this study. Nevertheless, it was reassuring to know I had these professionals available to me if any such needs arose.

V. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

My researcher position as a student of community psychology has helped to inform my conceptual framework. This academic background turns my attention to consider refugee-background college student experiences ecologically. I consider my participants' experiences as situated within a communal context and multileveled, as they are individuals nested in families, schools, communities, and societies. Their experiences are contextual and likely vary largely based on many personal and environmental differences: including age of arrival to the US, country of origin, resettlement neighborhood, immigration policy, familial characteristics (e.g. education, resources), race, ethnicity, and religion. Additionally, my conceptual framework positions refugee background student experiences as deeply influenced by time and personal history, and that many factors related to young peoples' migration stories can create ripple effects and long term legacies in the students' lives. My academic background also influences my belief that student experiences, and specifically their conceptualizations of success as a construct, are a dynamic process, as opposed to a static interpretation. Refugee student experiences do reflect a process shaped by culture, as experiences can vary over time along with their journey acculturating to host and heritage cultures.

Additionally, I do not see refugee students as a group that is always at risk or always excelling in a school context. The literature on immigrant risk versus immigrant resilience helps add more richness to my contextual view of refugee background students' college experiences. Refugees often struggle when they come to the US, as a result of poverty, poor employment prospects, familial separation, traumatic experiences, and linguistic and cultural differences. Such struggles may contribute to why so few refugee students attend and graduate from college. This perspective on the refugee experience supports the immigrant risk model, which posits that

children from immigrant families are at a disadvantage and tend to have academic difficulties (Crosnoe & Fuligni, 2012). In contrast, the 'immigrant paradox model,' explores how some immigrant groups facing multiple obstacles (e.g. less parental education, lower socioeconomic status, language difficulties) demonstrate greater academic success than their peers with US born parents (Crosnoe & Turley, 2011; Garcia-Coll & Marks, 2011). Different beneficial aspects of the migrant experience may explain the immigrant paradox, such as bilingualism, close family ties, and optimism about the future (Crosnoe & Turley, 2011). The paradox may also demonstrate how prolonged time in the US sociocultural environment can be detrimental to migrant groups (Crosnoe & Turley, 2011). Alternatively, the model may speak to the self-selecting nature of those who immigrate (Levels, Dronkers, & Kraaykamp, 2008). However, these different interpretations of the immigrant paradox would have dramatically different implications for refugees, who for example, do not self-select to come to the US.

Both the immigrant risk and the immigrant paradox models may be "true" for some migrants in some circumstances. In agreement with segmented assimilation theory (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), contextual differences in both sending and receiving communities may clarify why some migrant children thrive and others do not. Characteristics of a child's family, nation of origin, migration experience, and socioeconomic and ethnic position in his or her new communities can have a massive impact on a youth's adjustment, functioning, and later academic success (Crosnoe & Turley, 2011; Glick, Bates, & Yabiku, 2009; Levels, Dronkers, & Kraaykamp, 2008; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez- Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). It would be inaccurate to portray refugees as universally advantaged or disadvantaged, the reality of their experience is more nuanced, and it is important to broadly investigate their experiences. This contextual understanding forms the foundation of my conceptual framework.

The following section frames some of the sensitizing literature that helped shape the questions I

asked.

VI. SENSITIZING LITERATURE

Although taking a grounded theory approach dictates not entering a study with a priori themes or codes in mind (Charmaz, 2006), different bodies of literature shaped my thoughts as I began this work. I use the term sensitizing literature as an extension of the term 'sensitizing concepts.' Sensitizing concepts from existing literature reflect the ideas, values, and concepts that form the foundation of my thinking (Charmaz, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The current study touches on different aspects of refugee students' situations that could have impacted their educational journey. This section explores seven relevant issues and how they relate to refugees' educational experiences and successes – school context, linguistic and cultural differences, social support and belonging, familial influences, financial factors, mental health and help seeking, and prejudice and discrimination. The influences on refugee and immigrant students' educational experiences discussed in these subsections are well-known in the literature on education (to be detailed below) and psychosocial adjustment (e.g. Weine et al., 2013; Weine et al., 2014), yet while these are the most prominent, I recognize that they are only some of the many elements that can impact experiences in higher education.

Once again, many of these issues are also issues for students from other groups (e.g. immigrants, people living in poverty, ethnic minorities, survivors of trauma). Given the limited research on refugee students in higher education, this section also integrates research pertaining to marginalized groups; I extrapolate from this research to elaborate on ideas relevant to the refugee experience. Additionally, a large portion of the research investigating the refugee student experience describes student experiences at educational levels other than college (e.g. primary and secondary schooling) and explores issues related to access to higher education. This information is relevant as one's high school academic record is an extremely strong predictor of

enrollment and persistence in college (Daugherty & Lane, 1999; IES, 2012). Moreover, the following subsections are presented as distinct, yet I recognize that they are overlapping issues and can have a combined holistic influence on students' experiences.

Success in Higher Education

Success, or the perception of success, in educational contexts can be a complex, dynamic, and unpredictable construct (Oh & Kim, 2016). Yet, the traditional educational literature often defines success as a static outcome that a person either achieves or fails to achieve (York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015). It is one of the most widely used terms in the educational literature; still success is a notoriously challenging construct to operationalize (York et al. 2015). York and colleagues (2015) reviewed the literature on academic success and with that data created a model to help operationalize indicators of the construct, including academic achievement (e.g. grades and GPA), satisfaction, acquisition of skills and competencies, persistent (e.g. retention and graduation rates), attainment of learning outcomes (e.g. GRE or LSAT scores), and career success (e.g. salary, job attainment rates).

Interestingly, in this model academic achievement (e.g. grades and GPA) and satisfaction were included as proxy variables. Meaning that according to this model neither variable actually counted as success, but both were instead both only correlated with success. Grades and GPA were thought to be a surrogate for learning and competence, and satisfaction was not viewed as an outcome of success, but rather as a prerequisite or necessary precondition for success (York et al., 2015). This perspective is interesting, as GPA and grades are the most routinely used indicators of academic success across studies (Lemmons, du Plessis, & Maree., 2011; York et al., 2015). Moreover, satisfaction was considered an indicator of wellbeing, and was connected to students' motivation and perceptions of their educational climate (Beghetto, 2004; York et al.

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2015). Finding satisfaction in one's education experience was not enough to be considered success in and of itself.

Success as a concept is also socially constructed based on elements of parental and peer expectations interacting with perceptions of self-worth. Factors such as class, race, culture, and ethnicity can impact these perceptions and the meaning that students attribute to their success (Oh & Kims, 2016). For example, Oh & Kim (2016) investigated the concept of college success among students of both Korean and Mexican descent. They saw a striking cultural divide – strongly rooted in the educational cultures of the two countries – in their interpretations of success. Korean American students, along with their parents and co-ethnic peers, based their success on reaching the highest, most elite levels of academic achievement. However, Mexican American students based their success on attending a four-year university, graduating from this university, and in turn surpassing the educational achievements of their families and co-ethnic peers. Moreover, assisting others in achieving this educational milestone contributed to Mexican American students' perceptions of success. Overall, Korean American students saw themselves as less successful than their similarly achieving Mexican American peers.

School Context

When engaged in schooling, with appropriate support, refugee teenagers and young adults are often the most successful students (Mosselson, 2007). High achieving immigrant youth have a greater likelihood of having flexible and supportive teachers and school environments (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). Yet, finding these supports or positive contexts can be challenging, and it is often difficult for refugee students to adjust to their new schools. The classroom norms, differences in educational systems, and (un)familiarity with how education works in different countries can impact a refugee student's success and hinder the desire for higher education

(Naidoo, 2015, Sarr & Mosselson, 2010, Stevenson & Willott, 2007). Norms vary in what behaviors are acceptable in the school context, which can foster frustration and confusion for immigrant and refugee youth and their teachers (Smith-Hefner, 1993). Moreover, formal high stakes educational testing can be culturally specific, putting immigrant and refugee students at a disadvantage (Adler, 1973; Fasfous et al., 2013; Hood, 2003; Menken, 2008). Satisfactory performance on standardized tests is often necessary for admission to traditional 4-year colleges in the U.S., which exacerbates this disadvantage (Evans, 1985).

Refugees may have difficulty in school as a result of their prior educational experiences. Refugee specific contexts, like transitional housing and refugee camps, often have low quality education with few resources, poorly trained teachers, and large class sizes (Dryden-Peterson, 2011a). Besides inadequate schooling, refugees often have a history of interrupted schooling, either due to war, displacement, or a simple lack of schools in refugee camps (e.g. Stevenson & Willott, 2007). A longitudinal study of immigrants age 9 through 14 that students with interrupted schooling and gaps in literacy were often the lowest achievers (Suárez Orozco et al., 2008). Students with interrupted schooling are less likely to be familiar with how school works, and are more likely to be over-aged for their grade level, which is associated with later dropout as they are already placed academically behind in their country of resettlement (Ripple & Luthar, 2000).

Immigrants and refugees are also more likely to be segregated into disadvantaged neighborhoods with problematic, underperforming school districts (Crosnoe &Turley, 2011). Such segregated schools are associated with negative school environments, more violence, fewer educational resources, and poorer outcomes, including higher dropout rates and little available information about attending college (Goldstein & Conoley, 1997; Noguera, 2003; Orfield & Lee,

2006). In particular, these middle and high schools are often not prepared to appropriately handle the greater-than-average needs of students new to the US, meaning that these students are regularly 'overlooked and underserved' (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2001).

Cultural and Linguistic Differences

Fluency in multiple languages is seen to have many academic benefits, and it may open refugee students up to wider array of community and institutional resources to assist in their education (Crosnoe & Turley, 2011; Golash-Boza, 2005; Yeung, Marsh, & Suliman, 2000). Yet, English language learners can face immense difficulty in school in the US (Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Suárez Orozco et al., 2008), as poor English language skills are seen as equally as problematic as a lack of finances in attending college (Stevenson & Willott, 2007; Wilkinson, 2002), making language proficiency like a gatekeeper for access to higher education (Naidoo, 2015; Evans, 1985). Moreover, some refugee communities do not have a written language (e.g. Somali Bantu people), literacy in their native language (Naidoo, 2015), and/or formal educational experiences (Stevenson & Willott, 2007). These differences can make it very difficult to integrate into the US educational system. Specifically, engaging in college course work requires specialized academic vocabulary, reading, and writing, which can take a long time to master (Kanno & Varghese, 2010)**.** Self-consciousness about language proficiency can hinder students, and inhibit speaking up, asking questions, and participating in class (Kanno & Varghese, 2010). Therefore, a lack of English proficiency can reduce classroom engagement and interfere with subsequent performance (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Steinberg, 1996)

Tangible cultural differences can make attending or graduating from college seem out of reach for refugee youth. In high school, acculturation and the cultural fit between students and their new schools and communities can impact academic engagement and success (Birman,

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Trickett, & Buchanan, 2005). Refugee students have reported concerns that they might feel isolated in a campus setting that would not align with their religious and cultural beliefs (Stevenson & Willott, 2007). Regardless of motivation and aspirations, those refugees who are white, middle class, with educated families often do best in school in Western countries (McBrien, 2005), which may occur in large part due to greater overall similarity (cultural, education, and racial) with mainstream culture (Wilkinson, et al., 2002). Subtle cultural differences can impact success on the pathway to college graduation. For example, student quietness or limited eye contact with adults can be an indicator of respect in some cultures, but this behavior may suggest a lack of engagement, concern, or knowledge in the US (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008).

Social Support and Belonging

Across populations, social support is a resource that can influence coping, emotional health, and help insulate people from stress (Caron, Latimer, & Tousignant, 2007; Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001; Thoits, 1995). At times it is posited to even be more impactful on mental health than the effects of poverty (Caron et al., 2007). In a large investigation of the connection between social support and mental health among college students, minority students, international students, and students coming from a low socioeconomic status had a higher risk of social isolation and negative mental health consequences that accompany a lack of social support (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009). Such research is troubling as refugee students could theoretically fit into all three of those categories.

Relational engagement, or the degree to which students feel as if they belong among, are connected to, and integrated with their teachers and peers (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008) at their institution of higher education is predictive of student retention, and graduation (Hausmann,

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Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Stebelton, Soria, Huesman, & Torres, 2014; Suárez-Orozco, Onaga, & Lardemelle, 2010; Tovar, Simon, & Lee, 2009). On the other hand, experiencing peer alienation in school can have drastic negative consequences, and it may have lead to dropout within a study of high school aged Somali refugees (Birman, Trickett, & Bacchus, 2001). Although little is known about how refugee college students specifically experience the climate of college campuses, research with immigrant students has found a poorer sense of belonging on campus at typical 4-year, undergraduate research institutions when compared to nonimmigrant students (Stebleton, Huesman, & Kuzhabekova, 2010). This poorer sense of belonging could be related to immigrant youths' tendency to have longer commutes, more familial obligations, and more time spent working outside jobs, which suggests that they may spend less time on college campus's socializing than US born students (Kanno & Varghese, 2010). Moreover, international students may have fewer social connections and experience more stress than local students (Lin, 2009).

Social support can also influence refugee students' specific college related aspirations and expectations, as support networks can either reinforce or undermine such goals (Naidoo, 2015; Perreira, Fuligni, & Potochnick, 2010). Culturally apt mentoring programs have demonstrated the ability to help with the adjustment and schooling of refugee and immigrant youth (Rotich, 2011; Suárez Orozco et al, 2008). However, refugee youth regularly experience a marked lack of encouragement from their secondary schools and institutions of higher education to pursue college (Stevenson & Willott, 2007). Culturally relevant role models who have graduated from college are not often present to combat these discouraging messages and offer support (Bohon, Macpherson, & Atiles, 2005). Moreover, additional schooling without active role models can make refugee students feel psychological distance from family and community,

as others may not be able to relate to their experience. At the same time, they may not feel

integrated with host country peers (McBrien, 2005) exacerbating feelings of isolation.

Familial Influence

Some immigrants and refugees do not have the time or resources for additional schooling,

as familial obligations are their principal concern (Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010). This obligation can

be monetary (as will be discussed in more depth in the next section), linguistic (e.g. translation),

or physical/temporal (e.g. errands and child/elder care) (Hardway & Fuligni, 2006; Orellana,

2001). In addition, refugee families may have faced trauma (student mental health will be

discussed in more depth in a another section). However, this trauma and the mental health of the

extended family can impact family dynamics, roles, and methods of communication (Weine et

al., 2004). Differences in acculturation within a family can also disrupt these family practices.

Youth tend to adapt and acculturate faster in new environments, creating 'acculturation gaps'

within families (Birman, Weinstein, Chan, & Beehler, 2007). This gap in values, abilities, and

responsibilities can cultivate familial discord and misunderstanding. Both familial mental health

and acculturative differences could place strain or additional obligations on the student. The need

to attend to pressing familial issues can negatively influence how much time and energy an

individual can give to education (Telzer & Fuligni, 2009). Yet, familial obligation is not

necessarily an obstacle, as immigrant and refugee children may also feel obligated to succeed in

school to repay their parents for their difficulties and sacrifices. This motivation can be

instrumental in their success (Witkow, Huynh, & Fuligni, 2015)**.**

Additionally, refugee and immigrant students are often fortunate to come from tightly

knit families, and are described as more connected than non-immigrant youth to their families

and older generations (Golash-Boza, 2005). Such connection could be beneficial when it comes

to success in higher education (Pejic, Hess, Miller, & Wille, 2016), and may indicate that they spend less time in problematic youth environments (Feliciano, 2005; Feliciano & Rumbaut, 2005; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Immigrant households are also more likely to be nontraditional, consisting of many adults, including multiple generations (Hernández, Denton, & Macartney, 2007; Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, & Louie, 2002). Such extended families may be better able to provide resources beneficial to academic outcomes, including childcare and supervision, financial assistance, and emotional support (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

Immigrant parents often have very high educational expectations for their children (Fuligni & Yoshikawa, 2004). Yet they may not have the experience, knowledge, or social capital to adequately engage with a new, complex school system (Gándara & Contreras, 2008; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008), and they may be unaware of new expectations regarding parental participation in their children's schooling (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). Immigrant families might even interpret the school environment as unwelcoming or disrespectful (Carreón, Drake, & Barton, 2005). Yet, parental involvement, including behaviors like attending parent–teacher conferences and assisting with homework, are correlated with student adaptation and engagement, dropout rates, and test scores (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Although immigrant and refugee families may engage less directly with students' academics, they may engage more than US-born parents in reinforcing critical ideals, such as responsibility and conscientiousness, which are beneficial in an academic environment (Crosnoe & Turley, 2011; Fuligni & Yoshikawa, 2004).

Moreover, different familial characteristics can play a role in immigrant or refugee student's school experience. Unsurprisingly, higher pre-migration parental education in immigrant populations is associated with better academic performance and outcomes among

their children (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008), perhaps because they are better able to navigate their children's schools and assist with the often elaborate journey to college (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). Additionally, parents who are gainfully employed are better able to provide for and support their children (Perreira, Harris, & Lee, 2006), underscoring parental employment as a strong marker of youth outcomes (Hauser & Warren, 1997; Hilton, Desrochers, & Devall, 2001; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008). Lastly, higher achieving youth are more likely to have intact families who did not suffer long periods of separation during migration or challenging reunifications (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008), which can negatively impact a student's wellbeing and affect academic performance (Sciarra, 1999; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008; Wilkes, 1992). Such findings have specific implications for refugee youth, as they are more likely to have experienced prolonged familial separation and to have parents with less education and poorer employment prospects (Stevenson & Willott, 2007).

Financial Factors

Immigrants and refugees are more likely to be from a lower socioeconomic background (Pong & Landale, 2012). Poverty is a huge obstacle to both access and completion of higher education **(**Kanno & Varghese, 2010**;** Morrice, 2009; Shadduck-Hernandez, 2006; Stevenson & Willott, 2007; Tseng, 2004; Wilkinson, 2002; Witkow et al., 2015**)**, and the short-term need to work and make money often overshadows the potential long-term benefits of college. Financial aid is one avenue for refugee and immigrant youth to obtain the resources to attend and complete college. However many immigrant groups actually underuse financial aid and apply for fewer loans than other populations (Zarate & Pachón, 2006), perhaps due to being undocumented or because of familial and community-wide lack of information or social capital to navigate the financial aid system (Auerbach, 2004; Crosnoe, Cavanagh, & Elder, 2003; Dounay, 2008;

Witkow et al., 2015).

Financial difficulties not only deter students from attending college, but they also can interfere with their academic performance and ability to persist while in college. Working more hours to fulfill financial needs is associated with less college persistence (U.S. Department of Education, 1998) and attending college part-time, which in and of itself is also associated with lower rates of persistence (Somers, 1995*)*. Furthermore, different physical aspects of one's living situation can impact school success. Qualitative interviews of refugee high school and college students in Australia indicated that crowded or poor quality living arrangements, common among people with financial struggles, could greatly impact the ability to focus on school work (Naidoo, 2015).

Mental Health and Help Seeking

Despite facing multiple challenges, many refugees want the benefits of higher education and demonstrate extremely high levels of optimism about the future and motivation to earn a degree (Stevenson & Willott, 2007, Suárez-Orozco, 1989). Refugee youth are survivors by definition, and tend to be determined and resilient, as they have already beaten the odds in achieving safety (Ahearn & Athey, 1991). Yet, among immigrants and refugees, many issues, such as language difficulties (e.g. Kanno & Varghese, 2010), acculturative stress (e.g. Birman et al., 2007), discrimination (e.g. Crosnoe & Turley, 2011), and lack of social support and belonging (e.g. Rotich, 2011) in the college context can make people feel sad or like failures. When this happens they may stop putting effort into school or even drop out (Evans, 1985). Students may experience a loss of college-going self-efficacy (Gibbons & Borders, 2010), described as confidence in one's ability to successful complete duties related to attending college. They are experiencing doubt and self-selecting out of applying to, attending, and/or

graduating from college (Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Suárez Orozco et al., 2010).

In addition, many refugees have experienced past trauma associated with atrocities including war, genocide, imprisonment, and torture (Lustig et al., 2004), which can manifest as mental illness, such as depression, anxiety, or post- traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In and of itself, experiencing severe symptoms of mental illness can negatively affect academic performance, regardless of immigrant or refugee status (Ripple & Luthar, 2000; Sarr & Mosselson, 2010). Furthermore, refugees often live in affordable yet economically depressed neighborhoods and deal with the fear of community violence on top of prior trauma (Sarr & Mosselson, 2010).

Research suggests that parents can be crucial supports with regard to migration related stressors and help to defend against psychiatric symptoms in their children (Alegría, Sribney, Woo, Torres, & Guarnaccia, 2007; Mendoza, Javier, & Burgos, 2007; Suárez- Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Nevertheless, some youth need more support than they can find in the home, and do not receive help in attending to their mental health needs. They regularly do not have access to mental health care, or are unfamiliar with navigating a new health care system. Also, some refugees actively avoid seeking assistance. The refugee experience can feel isolating and for some it may feel safer or less marginalizing to not bring attention to themselves and their experiences (Sarr & Mosselson, 2010), yet this can leave many mental health needs unchecked.

Prejudice and Discrimination

With a change in cultural context, refugees can encounter a change in how they are viewed by others, an experience that may challenge or facilitate college success. These changes can be positive if they are no longer perceived as stigmatized minorities (e.g. Jews or Roma from Europe not singled out in the US), but they can also be negative (e.g. African people

experiencing racism for the first time in the US). New stereotypes extend to the school environment, where immigrant groups that have been historically academically successful in the US (i.e. Asian immigrants) often benefit from school staff members who are more willing to invest in their schooling. While on the other hand, less historically successful groups (i.e. Latino immigrants) are hampered by academic stereotyping (Crosnoe &Turley, 2011; Kao, 1995).

Students of color frequently do not do as well academically because they encounter institutional racism and an assimilation-centered school environment (Crosnoe & Fuligni, 2012, Davies & Guppy, 1998; Dei, 1998; Yon 1991). Latino immigrants also face additional anti-immigrant sentiments that target them specifically (Crosnoe & Turley et al., 2011). Moreover, in our current global climate Muslim refugees are regularly associated with terrorism and oppression, which has led to a problematic school reception in many parts of the world, including the U.S. (McBrien, 2005, Verkuyten, Thijs, & Stevens, 2012). Refugees also have to face their 'refugee-ness,' meaning they may be seen as victims, reduced to one experience, instead of as whole people (Sarr & Mosselson, 2010). Some refugee students do not want to be noted as refugees, as they would like avoid stigma or simply because they aim to put such experiences behind them (Hannah, 1999).

Prejudice and discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion, and/or immigrant or refugee status is not merely an unpleasant experience. Individuals who experience discrimination from peers and adults in high school are at higher risk for poor motivation and achievement (Huynh & Fuligni, 2010; McBrien, 2009). This lack of motivation and lower achievement can influence high school dropout and college enrollment rates. For the students who do make it to college, discriminatory experiences in high school are associated with less college persistence, perhaps as a result of their earlier poor academic performance (Witkow et al., 2015). Similarly,

perceptions of discrimination during college are linked to worse academic performance and less

persistence (Nora, 2004; Nora & Cabrera, 1996).

VII. METHODS

Methodological Approach

I conducted a constructivist grounded theory interview study (Charmaz, 2006). This paradigm best fit my personal worldview, conceptual framework, research aim, and research goals. As opposed to using an a priori coding scheme, I set forth to generate a theory about refugee student experiences in higher education based directly on the information refugee students provided. As Charmaz (2008) recommends, the aim of the theory development in this study was to answer 'how' and 'what' questions about the area of interest. This form of grounded theory is more flexible than traditional grounded theory, which relies on strict methods above and beyond individual experience (Creswell, 2007; Glaser, & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Different forms of grounded theory are very similar to each other in their method yet diverge primarily when it comes to their foundational assumptions, points of view, and agendas (Charmaz, 2006). Traditional grounded theory is described as more positivist, which suggests that there is one existing reality that researchers can uncover when using the correct methods and tools, and that the aim of such studies is to discover a predictive theory that can be disentangled from the precise context of the study (Charmaz, 2008). However, a constructivist approach acknowledges that all realities are socially constructed and contextual, and that any ensuing theory is an interpretive co-creation instead of a strict rendering. Constructivist grounded theory acknowledges diverse and complex realities, experiences, attitudes, and worldviews. Its proponents also use this method to unearth systems of power and oppression both inside and outside of the research process (Charmaz, 2006).

The values and beliefs of my participants are privileged within this research paradigm,

and yet the academic researcher is recognized as an integral and unavoidable part of the theory building process. Throughout this process I have reflected on my position relative to my participants. Moreover my own values and perspective clearly influenced my desire to pursue this line of work with this methodology, yet I have tried to be transparent about this perspective and not to impose theory based in my outlook and the sensitizing literature I discussed earlier.

Sampling

Inclusion criteria. To fulfill the study inclusion criteria, participants needed to have been born outside of the US, and fled their country of origin due to fear for their safety and/or the safety of their family because of war, violence, or persecution. However, they did not need to have current legal refugee status in the US. Students needed to be at least 18 years of age at the time of the interview, but could have arrived in the US at any age and come from any part of the world. Fluency in speaking and reading English was also a requirement, though this ability was expected of participants, as such fluency is necessary for college attendance in the US.

Recruitment strategy. Recruitment of refugee background students followed a three-part plan. Initial recruitment was carried out using the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) mass mail email system and flier distribution to relevant locations and offices at UIC. These offices included support units and cultural centers on campus, such as the African American Academic Network (AAAN), The African American Cultural Center, The Arab American Cultural Center, The Asian American Resource and Cultural Center, Latin American Recruitment and Educational Services Program (LARES), and The Rafael Cintron Ortiz Latino Cultural Center. A mass email about the proposed study was sent out to all UIC students providing my contact information. Students who saw the posted or emailed recruitment materials then chose to reach out to me if they were interested in participating. The second part of the recruitment strategy

involved asking participants for referrals through snowball sampling. Following a completed interview, participants were asked if they knew any other refugee college students who may also want to participate, and regardless of their reply they were be provided with a flyer describing the study. I did not accept any contact information regarding additional potential participants. The snowball sampling only involved participants potentially passing along flyers to others who might have wanted to contact me on their own. The third part of the recruitment strategy involved reaching out via phone and email to relevant refugee serving and educational organizations in the Chicago area to inquire about any potential refugee students who might have wanted to participate.

The three parts of the recruitment strategy took place in stages. I began with the UIC focused mass mail email and flyer based recruitment. I planned that if I acquired the desired number of participant inquiries through this part alone, then I would not continue on to use other parts of my recruitment plan. However, I got a steady but slow initial response to my email and flyers. Therefore, I did not wait long to also incorporate the snowball sampling and asked participants to make referrals. Interestingly, snowball sampling proved ineffective, as no participants seemed confident that they knew anyone else who would qualify for the study, and I did not recruit any participants this way. It appeared as if refugee background status was not often shared with peers, and many of the participants' co-ethnic peers, who had a higher chance of also being refugees, were not in college.

Moreover, approximately three months into recruitment UIC changed their mass email policies without warning and no longer allowed for research advertising via that medium. Recruitment slowed down dramatically at this point and became much more challenging. I moved on to contact local refugee serving organizations via existing contacts and cold

calls/emails. I contacted the following organizations: Apna Ghar, Catholic Charities, Chicago Health Outreach, Ethiopian Community Association, Exodus World Services, Iraqi Mutual Aid Society, Jesuit Refugee Service, Pan African Association, Refugee One, The Heartland Alliance Marjorie Kovler Center, The Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, United African Organization, and World Relief Chicago.

I also contacted additional educational institutions in Chicago via established contacts and cold calls/emails including: DePaul University, Loyola University, Northeastern Illinois University, St. Augustine College, and The City Colleges of Chicago. Among the organizations/institutions of higher education who were receptive to assisting with recruitment, some agreed to post my flyers or mention my study, and others allowed me to come in person, talk to staff, and post my study flyers. In addition, I also gave brief presentations on my study in undergraduate classes where I had an existing relationship with the instructor. Overall, I was able to recruit rather easily the first nine participants who were UIC students. The following six students took more than twice as long to recruit through different sources: three of those were recruited via recruitment efforts at additional institutions of higher education, and another three were recruited via recruitment efforts at refugee serving organizations.

Sample. In the current study, 15 refugee-background individuals in college in Chicago were recruited from July 2017 through May 2018 to participate in this study. In total, I communicated with 23 potential participants. Two individuals were ineligible based on the study inclusion criteria. Six people were eligible or potentially eligible but did not follow through with either answering inclusion criteria questions or scheduling an interview, despite several attempts to reestablish contact. Consequently, 15 participants completed the study. I aimed to recruit between 15 and 25 students. However, a specific sample size had not been preset, as is common

in qualitative research studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). I was instead guided by the concept of theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006). Such sampling does not concern increasing surface demographic representation, or a notion of generalizability. Instead, theoretical sampling involves only increasing one's theoretical or conceptual understanding (Charmaz, 2006). Therefore, to try to reach theoretically varied participants, I aimed to recruit students with a range of experiences, meaning students from varied countries of origin, more or less equal numbers of men and women, people who have been in this country for different periods of time, and people who were at different stages of their education. These were not inclusion criteria but rather these aims spoke to my desire to interview a range of different people as per the recommendations of a theoretical sampling strategy (Charmaz, 2006), and I was successful in achieving theoretically relevant variation within my sample in these areas.

Additional factors arose as theoretically relevant for sampling as I begin recruiting for the study and conducting the interviews. Therefore I continued recruiting until I achieved variability in these areas. These additional theoretically relevant characteristics were family separation experiences, torture experiences, and transferring between colleges/attending multiple colleges. Ideally such theoretical sampling will aim for maximum variation, meaning looking for people with the most varied ideas and experiences. Recruitment was considered complete when saturation was established during data analysis, meaning that the collection of new data no longer created novel theoretical insights about the topic, or uncovered new elements of the key emerging themes. Saturation was felt with the ongoing analysis after the 13th interview, but two more participants were still recruited and interviewed to confirm this impression and to meet recruitment expectations.

Procedure

Prior to the beginning of formal study procedures, my goal was to have a conversation and develop report with participants. Depending on the context, the pre-interview time sometimes involved eating a meal or drinking coffee or tea together. Additionally, I would explain my study goals and its relationship with my family background and desire to honor my grandparents. Then, I moved on to discuss the consent form, and invited the participants to sign it if they were comfortable with the study. Following the informed consent procedure, I asked participants to fill out a brief demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A.1) prior to the start of the interview. An interview guide containing open-ended questions and supplementary probes (see Appendix A.2 for interview guide) guided the discussion.

Interviews took place at locations of the participant's choosing, including office space at UIC, coffee shops, and participants' homes. All participants consented to being recorded, and a digital audio recorder was used to record the interviews for later transcription and analysis. All participants were compensated $25 for their time and participation, although two participants were reluctant to accept the payment. I encouraged these participants to donate the money if they were not comfortable keeping it for themselves. Following each interview, I continued my conversation with each participant for a few minutes to engage in a short debriefing session. The purpose of this debriefing was to give each participant a chance to ask additional questions and add other remarks about the questions asked and their impressions of the research process. Participants gave excellent feedback about different avenues of questioning that played a roll in changes I made with future interviews.

I also inquired about participants desire to participate as study research assistants and/or be contacted in the future for member checking and the co-creation and dissemination of the

results. I made it clear that this was optional, that they could change their mind with no consequences, and that it different than participating in the interview as a research participant. Three participants expressed the desire to be research assistants on the project, and two followed through with official participation. Like my other research assistants recruited through different means, the participant research assistants were offered the option of class credit, and they completed online research personnel training. To protect participant anonymity, the research assistants never met as a group, and they were unaware of each other's identities. Moreover, the fact that some of my research assistants were former participants was never discussed with the other research assistants. Each research assistant was asked to assist with transcribing whole or partial interviews (never their own interview, if they were formally a participant) and/or posting study fliers in relevant locations. When engaging in member checking, which is separate from the previously described research personnel activities, former participants were asked at a later date to provide feedback on the validity of study results and ideas for future dissemination of those results. If only engaging in member checking, former participants did not have access to any study data.

In addition, I wrote memos following each interview. As soon as possible following each interview, I sat for at least 20 minutes and typed up all of my thoughts and feelings about the discussion. Specifically, I recorded my responses to the following questions related to the interview: 1) What were my general impressions of the conversation? 2) What was most unique about this interview? 3) Did this interview change how I felt about my interview guide? If so how? 4) How did this interview relate to/ contribute to emerging codes and themes in the data? The memos offered me a chance to record my interpretations and observations, and it provided an iterative space to acknowledge aspects of the interview process that were more or less

successful and adapt my interview guide accordingly (Charmaz, 2006). Memos also helped me to record subtle or non-verbal communication, which also influenced my theoretical thinking. This memoing process was very helpful as it helped to hone my perception of each interview individually and the group of interviews as a whole. It also helped me to keep my emerging codes and themes in mind and connect each participant's experiences to the theory I was building.

Data Collection

      Demographic questionnaire. Following the introductory conversations, and before the beginning of the interview, I gave the participants a demographic questionnaire. Depending on the dynamic I had with the student, either her or she filled it out himself or herself, or I asked them the questions and filled in their answers for them. This component of data collection was not audio recorded. The demographic questionnaire included five questions that used an open ended format to ask students to report their age, racial and/or ethnic identification, self-identified gender, birth location, and any languages spoken besides English (See Appendix A.1).

      Semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide consisted of 75 questions and probes based on collecting more descriptive information and the sensitizing research discussed above (See Appendix A.2). The aims of the questions were to understand the students' general history and experiences at all stages of schooling, impressions from college, interpretations of success, and aspects of their experiences that influenced their successes. However, the questions were not all used or relevant for each individual. It was up to my discretion to recognize the variation in my participants and allow for that range of interviews. The interviews were intentionally semi-structured, meaning they were flexible in nature and allowed room for new and unexpected ideas to be explored. The questions were open-ended and framed to try to

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capture a wide range of experiences and not dictate participant responses. When appropriate, I

would follow up participant responses with probes to achieve more detail, and clarify their

points. Before recruitment began, the guide was piloted with one individual from a refugee

background (not a future participant) to test the interview timing along with the relevance and

clarity of questions and probes. Interview length ranged from 60 to 150 minutes. Most interviews

lasted between 105 and 135 minutes.

Data Storage

A number of steps were taken to ensure appropriate data storage. First, all data collected

was assigned the participant's ID code at the time of data collection. Additionally, I made an

effort to not use the participants' names during the interviews and to not transcribe names (or

remove them from transcriptions where necessary). Second, all paper data and recruitment

materials (consent forms and demographic questionnaires) were stored at the University of

Illinois at Chicago Department of Psychology in a locked file cabinet in a locked office. The list

that links participant names with their ID numbers was also kept in the locked cabinet in the UIC

Department of Psychology. Locating information (ie., including name and contact information)

and linking documents (linking personal identifying information with identification numbers)

were only kept in paper form and were also kept in the lockbox. This information was only

accessible to me throughout the research process.

All digital data (i.e., audio recordings) and transcriptions were stored on a password-

protected computer and a password protected UIC box account to allow necessary data sharing.

All files were labeled with the participant ID. All digital files were moved from the recording

devices (digital recorder) within 1 day of the interview; at that time files were labeled and stored

on the password-protected computer and permanently removed from the original recording

devices. Fourth, participants were informed that no identifying information was shared outside of the research team; findings will be reported in publications or reports as group data and will not contain any information that could be used to identify any individual. When creating the table of abridged participant profiles presented in the results (Appendix B.2), I made sure not to include too much information so as to make participants identifiable. Fifth, research team members (research assistants and the second coder) were the only additional people with access to any data; and that access was solely for the purpose of data transcription or analysis.

Data Analysis

Verbatim interview transcription occurred as soon as possible following each interview. Transcription was split between myself, research assistants, and GMR Transcription Services Inc[3]. Interview transcripts were then imported into ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software. Analysis via coding occurred continually throughout the data collection process. Continuous coding provided space to make any necessary revisions to the interview guide and plan further recruitment. The interview guide was revised twice throughout this process. This is described as the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006), and is useful for finding and filling gaps in understanding or identifying inconsistencies. This method allowed for continuous challenges of the developing narrative and coding scheme. My memos also provided insight throughout this iterative process.

Coding. Coding involved categorizing segments of the transcribed text from the interviews and labeling them with a descriptive name relevant to what is happening in the text segment (Charmaz, 2006). Codes help to summarize, select, and sort qualitative data. As is inherent in grounded theory, I did not have any pre-existing codes or categories before the start

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[3] *GMR Transcription Services Inc was recommended by other researchers in the Psychology Department at UIC and approved by the IRB.*

of my data analysis. My coding process aligned with Charmaz's (2006) methods and I employed initial, focused, and theoretical coding.

Initial coding involved coding the data line by line. I categorized, or named, each segment or line of data (segments ranged from a few words to paragraphs) using gerunds. The aim in initial coding was to closely describe the data and avoid making any abstractions or prematurely developing themes. For example, I might have coded a quotation describing a positive interaction with a faculty member as *connecting with instructor*. This process facilitated my ability to identify emerging ideas in the data, and I ended up creating almost 200 codes during the initial coding process.

The second round of coding, focused coding, was more selective. In this phase, I identified the most recurrent or meaningful codes and tried to synthesize them into larger more integrated ideas, or categories (Charmaz, 2006). To accomplish this goal, I reread transcripts, my code list, and my memos to try to focus in on possible similarities and/or relationships between codes. It took me several "rounds" to condense my existing codes in a meaningful way. For example, initial codes such as *connecting with instructor, feeling comfortable on campus, finding social connections,* and *needing support to accomplish goals* were all organized under the focused code of *valuing community*. I synthesized these codes into a larger theme, which I then defined as its own idea.

Lastly, theoretical coding involved taking focused codes and interrogating how they related to each other, and consequently constructing a relevant theoretical narrative. Theoretical coding pushed abstraction out another analytical level. I integrated all of my focused codes into larger theoretical codes that defined my analytical story. For example, the focused codes *considering importance of grades*, *considering importance of learning*, *considering importance*

of attending/graduating, and *considering importance of future employment* all worked together to form the theoretical code called *traditional academic success*. This theoretical code worked in conjunction with other theoretical codes to form the structure behind the overall theory generated from the current study.

Second coder. I used a second coder[4] to help talk through the utility of my codebook. The goal of this exercise was to see if a second coder could code two transcripts and apply my codes, as I have defined them, to the data. We checked our agreement using ATLAS ti intercoder agreement function and redefined codes/recoded until we had agreement on codes. After two rounds of working with the second coder, we achieved 96% agreement. Nevertheless, assessing intercoder reliability is not common practice in grounded theory, and Barbour (2001) explains that the degree or level of concordance among researchers is not the important part of sharing and debating a coding scheme or qualitative analysis. Instead, the most important part of having multiple coders is to give voice to alternate explanations or interpretations of the data and force the researcher to justify his or her analysis. Although the eventual 96% intercoder agreement was reassuring, the true benefit of this exercise was the process of talking through the foundations underpinning my study analyses.

Methodological Rigor

As there are strategies to determining the quality of data obtained in quantitative studies, there are also criteria proposed to help ascertain quality in qualitative studies. Guba (1981) created the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In the following subsections, I will discuss how I took data quality into account using these criteria.

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[4] *Hillary Rowe, MA served as the second coder for this project. She is also a student in UIC's Community & Prevention Research Program and has a lot of experience conducting qualitative research. She had access to ATLAS ti to conduct coding of transcripts.*

Credibility. Guba (1981) described credibility as how closely the data in a study comes to the "truth." A search for one unequivocal "truth" is counter to the constructivist nature of my research paradigm and my conceptual framework. Charmaz (2014) also described credibility as whether or not the researcher is appropriately experienced and familiar with the setting, and if strong connections have been made between the data collected and the arguments made in the study results. Therefore, within this study the concept of truth will instead align with my credibility as a researcher and how closely the data comes to describing my participants' relayed experiences.

Long before the start of this project, I spent time in settings for refugees and survivors of torture since 2009, for volunteer positions, employment, and leisure. I have also engaged in research relevant to these populations throughout my entire graduate school career. In addition, I recruited students from refugee and immigrant backgrounds to work as my research assistants (including two of my study participants who volunteered to assist after their study interviews). I am also almost three years into a mentorship-based relationship with a refugee background college student. Long before I submitted my dissertation proposal I was already in the process of becoming familiar with some of the strengths she possessed and challenges she faced. Therefore, I have spent many years engaging with and striving to become familiar with the culture and experiences of my participants.

To support credibility in my data, I strived to create an environment where participants felt able to speak honestly about their experiences without coercion or fear of ramifications related to interview responses. I set up my study recruitment so that participants would be required to contact me to discuss eligibility and interview timing. I did not directly contact any participants until after they initiated communication. Therefore participants had to feel strongly

enough about participating to make the effort to opt in, instead of potentially feeling coerced by aggressive recruitment tactics. Additionally, I clarified many times in advance the content and goals of the interview, and reiterated that the students could stop participating at any time, or choose not to answer any questions they were uncomfortable answering. I emphasized the confidential nature of the study, and that participant names would be kept separate from responses.

Moreover, member checking offered participants a chance to append or refine my interpretations of the data. Following each interview, participants were asked if they would be willing to provide feedback on my analysis at a later date. At the time of the interviews all 15 of my participants agreed to be contacted. Member checking helped to reaffirm the credibility of the data, as the participants themselves assessed how closely my interpretations aligned with their point of view, and I was able to adapt them where they did not align. Participants were very positive about the study results, but did provide feedback about some study limitations and avenues for future research. Participants were also asked at the end of the interview if they might want to work with me to disseminate these results in a way that would be most useful to refugee students and institutions of higher education. Once again all 15 participants agreed to discuss dissemination options with me after I had completed the results. This initiative is still in progress. I was not able to meet with or talk to all of my participants for member checking and dissemination planning (see section on member checking and planned dissemination and action). Nevertheless, the relative "truthfulness" of these results is of the utmost importance to the participants, and myself as the desire to create change is inherent in this research study.

Transferability. Transferability refers to presentation of sufficient context surrounding the research results, meaning that there must be sufficient detail about the study that people in

other locations and situations can make an educated decision about whether or not the results are relevant for them (Guba, 1981). To support the transferability of the current study, I reported participants demographic information (see Appendix B.1), abridged participant profiles (see Appendix B.2), and my data collection and analysis methods. I have devoted a lot of energy to describing sufficiently detailed information surrounding the participants' experiences and my research process. The significance of context is inherent in my research process, as it is a powerful component of my conceptual framework. Therefore, others will be able to better understand my actions as a researcher, who participated, and therefore whether or not this research context and its findings are transferable to other contexts.

Dependability. According to Guba (1981), dependability refers to taking into account "trackable variance," meaning being able to ascribe a source to any variance, change, or error in the research process. To support the dependability of my data, I saved (by date and version) all of my raw data, along with every iteration of my codebook, interview guide, and data organization schemes. Therefore I have had the ability to track my progress. Additionally, I developed a decision tree to have a running record of the choices and changes I made throughout. I used it to keep a real time account of the research process, and avoid personal confusion, as I got deeper into the data collection process. Moreover, I created a table of relevant study codes that led up to my grounded theory to demonstrate what focused and theoretical codes launched the study findings.

Confirmability. Confirmability refers to the desire for the results of the study to be as firmly grounded in the data as possible, instead of being unduly controlled by the biases of the researcher (Guba, 1981). One step I took toward demonstrating confirmability was openly reflecting on and discussing my position and background as a researcher throughout the research

and the development of this manuscript. This process helped to bring to the forefront and address my inherent biases and assumptions while conducting this research. In addition, the grounded theory coding process helped to improve confirmability, as the initial coding process requires that the researcher stick to participant experiences as closely as possible. Charmaz (2006) even recommends that the codes themselves be in a gerund format to closely describe the actions in the data as opposed to prematurely abstracting out.

Once again, member checking with participants assisted in affirming that my results were genuinely based in the participants' experiences, as did engaging in debriefing sessions with peers and research assistants. I also appreciated it when these individuals, along with my advisors and mentors, challenged me on my analyses. This process helped me to control the inherent subjectivity in the analysis of qualitative data. Moreover, during my analyses, following the creation of a preliminary codebook, I shared interview transcripts with my second coder and asked her to use my coding system to also code two entire transcripts. This process acted as a check of the assumptions and interpretations inherent in my coding scheme. We then discussed differences that arose in our coding of the data, and endeavoring to reach a mutual understanding that transcended our unique perspectives. I refined definitions in my codebook in response to new understandings and insights gained through this process, and consequently maximized confirmability. As per my earlier discussion of the second coder process, the goal was not necessarily to reach a specified level of inter-rater reliability; rather the goal was for different individuals with different perspectives to engage with the data and discuss their different interpretations.

Additionally, I used my study memos to directly describe and interact with my own assumptions and biases. I tried to regularly challenge myself to assess how my own position

influenced my interpretations of the data, and to record how my assumptions shifted throughout the study. This process of reflexivity (Guba, 1981), helped to enhance the confirmability in this study. Nevertheless, confirmability is also important in the presentation of results; therefore, I have provided textual evidence along with my interpretations and conclusions. Consequently, the audience of my research results does not have to 'take my word for it" and can also form their own judgments about the accuracy of my analysis.

Member Checking and Planned Dissemination and Action

The aforementioned member checking occurred once all analyses were finished and I had a first draft of my study results. All of my study participants consented to being contacted to discuss the study. I emailed, and where relevant texted, them all to ask if they were willing to engage in member checking and dissemination planning. Of my 15 participants, six did not respond to outreach attempts, three agreed to meet in person, four agreed to a phone conversation, and three provided ideas and feedback via email. The member checking process entailed reviewing initial study goals and procedures, participant demographics, and my interpretation of major study themes. I elicited feedback on whether they felt I had captured their experiences in a meaningful way, if I was missing anything crucial, and if I had misconstrued any interview responses. I edited my results description as needed based on their feedback, and I incorporated some of their feedback into the limitations and future directions sections of my discussion.

During the same conversations I also began the planned collaboration with study participants on possible dissemination ideas. However, students' continued involvement in dissemination has been and will be outside of their role as study participants. I anticipate additional conversations and hopefully group meetings to continue to work with interested

undergraduates to use this study to make some concrete change, specifically, to decide how and where to share and/or act on the study findings. Currently, the ideas that have come up in these conversations are as follows: a possible collaboration with publisher, Big Shoulders Books; reaching out to a journalist contact at the Medill School of Journalism or the online magazine, Inside Higher Ed, to collaborate on an article about refugee background college students; and/or asking for meetings with and creating presentations for local colleges and universities. Study findings could potentially be useful to colleges and universities in the US interested in recruiting and retaining refugee background students, and also be educational for broader audiences. We are currently still in a decision making stage and have not made any decisions about the next step toward dissemination.

VIII. RESULTS

This grounded theory study addresses the desire to better understand refugee background students' experiences in college. This substantive theory describes the experiences of 15 such students in college in Chicago. The diverse sample was varied in region of origin (12 countries representing 5 regions), gender (9 women and 6 men), age of arrival in the US (M = 10.7 years-old, Range = 1-23), and anticipated graduation date (December 2018 – May 2024)[5]. See table in Appendix B.1 for more participant demographic information including current participant age, transfer status, major, languages spoken besides English, and racial/ ethnic/and religious descriptors participants used to describe themselves. The schools where students are currently enrolled are also listed. The majority of the students in this study are at relatively affordable public four-year colleges or universities (University of Illinois at Chicago and Northeastern Illinois University). Two students were attending the more costly, and less diverse, Loyola University, a private Jesuit school. One student was attending classes at two community colleges simultaneously (Harold Washington College, and Malcolm X College). Additionally, one student was attending St. Augustine College, which is an independent institution created under the auspices of the Episcopal Diocese, with an emphasis on serving Latino students. It even includes the option of bilingual vocational and academic classrooms. The context of these different institutions of higher education provides a backdrop to participant experiences. See table in Appendix B.2 for abridged participant profiles.

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[5] *At the start of this study, I intended to find a sample of participants who varied in their year in school. However, year in school proved a less useful indicator of time spent in college than originally anticipated. Many students could not traditionally define their year in school (e.g. second year/sophomore), because either they transferred between schools, needed more time to complete necessary classes, or devoted semesters to classes that did not provide graduation credits (i.e. English language learning classes). Consequently, students preferred to provide their anticipated graduation date as an indicator of their college progress. Therefore, I have reported that information instead of year in school.*

Some additional demographic information emerged as uniquely relevant for this sample. Five participants disclosed past personal (n = 2) and/or a familial (n = 4) torture experiences[6]. None of the questions on my interview guide asked about torture, yet these students freely volunteered this information. Although ten students did not share similar stories, it does not mean they do not have similar experiences. Additionally, 11 of my participants experienced familial separation, meaning they were (either temporarily or permanently) separated from at least one parent and/or a sibling. Three students disclosed coming to the US alone, and two are still here alone. These two additional demographic characteristics highlight some of the unique and traumatic circumstances that underscore the refugee youth experience.

As the analyses gained momentum I realized how strongly the sensitizing concepts from the literature I reviewed in anticipation of this study had influenced my data collection and early concurrent data analysis. To hold true to grounded theory, I made a conscious effort to acknowledge these sensitizing concepts in a series of memos and move beyond them (Charmaz, 2006). I may have been overly influenced by ideas surrounding how success is discussed in the educational literature; however, my participants' experiences were much richer and extended outside of those boundaries.

In the following results subsections, I will use my nine theoretical codes to describe the themes that construct my theory of refugee background college students' experiences. First I will discuss the two overarching themes that overlaid and pervaded my entire understanding of the refugee background students' experiences. These overlying themes are 1) visibility, and 2) harnessing the power of the refugee experience. Then I will discuss success as it emerged from the data, as both connected to traditional and non-traditional notions of success, and specifically

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[6] Definition of torture

how it was re-imagined as achieving *balance*. Students discussed six different areas of need that

they cared about and thought of as connected to their sense of balance, and they were 1)

traditional academic success, 2) having a safe and comfortable environment, 3) community and

human connections, 4) health, 5) obligation management, and 6) identity. See the following

figure for a visual of the theory generated on refugee background college student experiences:

Figure I.

Visual of Theory of Refugee Background College Student Experiences
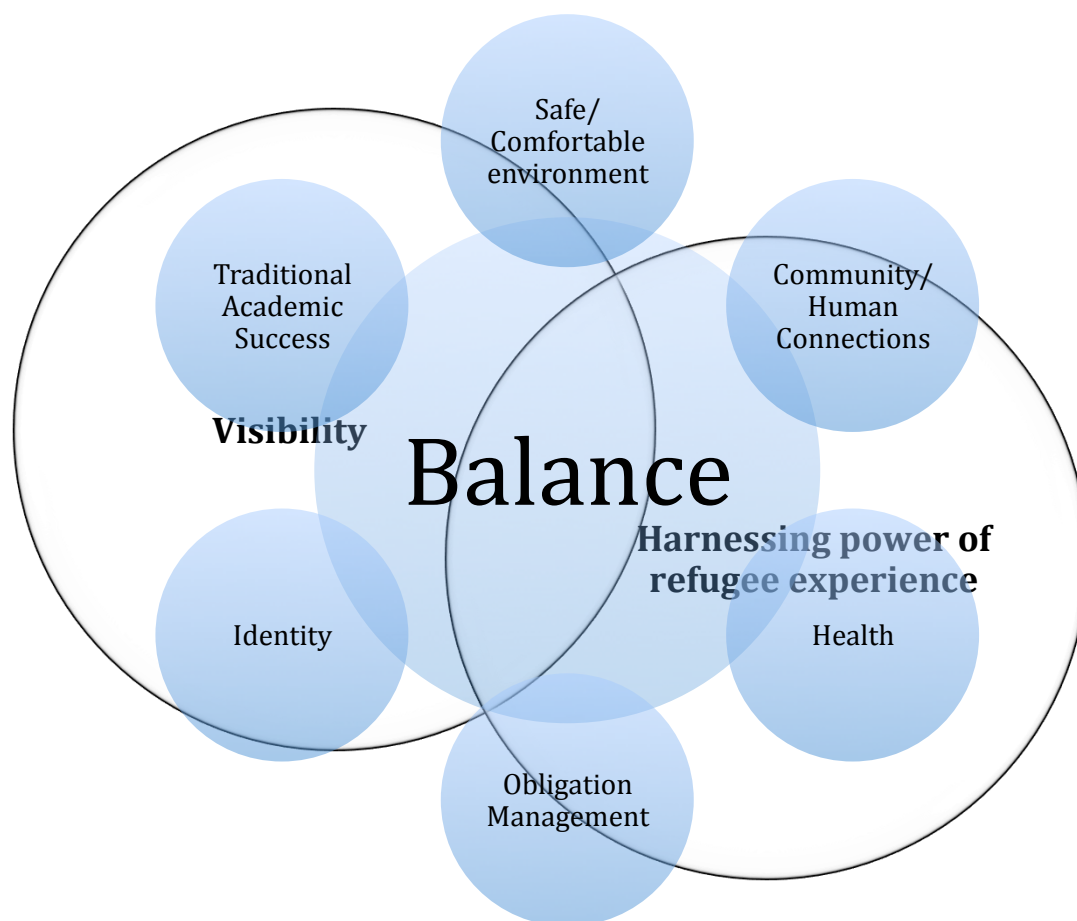
Engaging with Visibility

In this section, I will first discuss the concepts that underlie the theoretical code of

visibility. For a more detailed connection between my focused and theoretical codes please see table in Appendix B.3. Then I will connect the concepts to the data through quotations from student interviews. Conceptually, this code engages with the tensions surrounding the complexity of when refugee background students are visible to others, and when they desire to be visible.

The importance of visibility emerged before I had even finished transcribing my first interview. As soon as I began conducting interviews, I noticed my participants were extremely enthusiastic about the potential of this research project. My memoing process, which involved recording elements of the research not caught in the tape-recorded interview, helped to highlight this theme. Participant excitement would not necessarily have been notable; if it weren't also accompanied by unrecorded comments about how important it was for them to see that this study even existed, and how meaningful it was for them that other people would also see and learn from this research. Students alluded to the research making them feel seen, thus directing my focus to pay attention to the concept of visibility within the interviews as well.

Tensions surrounding participants desire to be seen proved to also be a consistent theme within the interviews themselves.

> *Yeah, it makes me – not school, with personal life, you become down. You feel – also, people don't see you – I mean, they put you down. You feel down. You feel alone. (M, Ethiopia)*

Interacting with ones visibility appeared to be a multifaceted and nuanced endeavor that played a role across the different areas of life the students wanted to keep in balance. In some circumstances, the desire to be seen as a human being, as a person from a refugee background, or as an independent cultural actor was very strong for the students. A desire for visibility was sometimes situated as a personal quest and other times as a collective political task, wanting

refugees or diverse peoples to be accurately represented in their collegiate and societal

experiences in the US. Yet, participants also described moments and environments where being

seen in their national, cultural, or refugee identities was undesirable or unsafe. Experiencing

racism and discrimination is the ultimate representation of unwanted or negative visibility. In the

following subsections, I will lay out different contexts where the tensions behind visibility were

felt by participants and reflect the complexity of their experiences. The contexts are visibility in

school, cultural and ethnic visibility, and refugee specific visibility.

History of visibility in school. This section attends to the circumstances surrounding

when students felt invisible versus visible in a school context, and how the students interpreted

that range of experiences. All but two of the students interviewed for this study arrived in the US

as minors and attended US public schools. Many were old enough to keenly remember the

experience of learning English and navigating a school experience where they could not

effectively communicate with their teachers and peers. Challenges with communication lead to

some students feeling invisible, while others felt hyper visible as they were unable to blend in

with their peers. Much of the conversation around visibility in school revolved around the

interplay of language and visibility. In particular, instances of being ignored or overlooked by

teachers as a result of not speaking English or needing additional help, were common discussed

across different schooling experiences.

> *Um…and another time…again another teacher I just remembered…she was like the library teacher and I can't read English. So yeah I think she would like just completely ignore me. You know I think if you have a student that you don't understand, there are other ways to communicate. There are ways to try or acknowledge their existence. But when you completely disregard them, that's very rude. (F, Mexico)*

> *And uhh when I got there like I didn't understand a word the teachers said cause obviously I didn't understand English. Like I could speak it like but like the words there were just little words […] and like I felt like a toddler in school even in third grade and*

I'm just looking so slow and I would [ask] the teacher for help. Like can you please help me and they're just looking at me like brush me off. (F, Nigeria)

It was very dehumanizing for the participants to feel ignored by authorities who were supposed to help them in a school context. It appeared to participants as if not having the ability to fully communicate with their teachers made them less worthy of assistance or consideration. Or the additional work that these teachers would have needed to do to engage with the student was more than they were able or willing to contribute to the interaction.

Not having fluency in English may have contributed to being invisible in certain school-based situations, and yet hyper-visible in others. For example, the same student who described being disregarded by teachers when she sought help also described difficulty blending into peer groups at school.

When I first started speaking I was speaking so fast, they would tell me to slow down and be like laughing at me. I would say "don't laugh at us when we're trying to speak English" because we're trying very hard to make you understand us and understand you guys so you taking advantage of that...it hurts. (F, Nigeria)

The way she spoke English made her stand out, and was at times a source of ridicule from other children. In a peer context, extra attention was often malicious and directly connected with perceptions of 'otherness.' Although this student is describing language based bullying, similar processes held true for students', racial, ethnic, and religious visibility in school. It appeared to be closely tied with experiences of racism and discrimination, especially among those students who entered schools without much diversity. Students who migrated into ethnic enclaves in Chicago, including several Latino students in the study, never described uncomfortable linguistic or racial visibility among their peers. Additionally, my one White, European participant was the only student who reported never experiencing prejudice in a school context. However, many students described instances of this unwelcome visibility. The same student from Nigeria went to

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on to detail more of the race and migration motivated bullying she experienced in school as a

child.

> *Like, when I first came here, 'oh, monkey.' I have a big nose and like how black my skin is and all that stuff […] Mhm. Yeah. Like, I remember this boy. He would just like…this boy and I think his cousins were friends. Whatever. They would like come up to me and I would be waiting for my dad to pick me up like '[clicking noises].' And I'm just like 'look, like, I don't know what you're saying.' They're like 'oh, isn't that the language you guys speak?' I'm like no… there's like 150 countries in Africa. If you think that Africa is a country, you're wrong. It's a continent. And within that continent is a country. And within that country is Lagos and a city and all that[…] So if you're like coming to me thinking like I'm supposed to understand what you're saying, I'm sorry, like, I don't. Everybody always like come to me like '[clicking noises].' I'm just like 'I don't know what that is, at all. (F, Nigeria)*

Clearly, the above student could not make her skin color or heritage invisible to her elementary

school bullies, nor would she necessarily have wanted to, as she maintained a lot of pride in her

heritage. Nevertheless, some students detailed moments where they felt hyper visible socially

and might have preferred at least momentarily to blend in or even be completely invisible.

Moreover, students struggled with their academic visibility during their school history as

well. Often, not having English language fluency meant those students' academic strengths and

skills were also not visible. This problem had obvious academic consequences for many

students. Teachers and peers often incorrectly conflated limited English language skills with

having limited skills overall. Furthermore, common school practices of putting English language

Learners in more remedial classes contributed to the students' strengths being less visible.

> *Also, because I was shy, so I didn't really speak up a bunch, so people were automatically like oh, since she doesn't speak we don't know anything about her, let's just assume that she's not on the same level as us. I got that a lot and it really hurts because I know if it's up to it and we're put together in a thing I'm pretty sure I can be at your level, so you can't really measure me just because I don't say enough or like my language isn't as good as yours. I felt like the school in a way, there's a whole ESL program where they put you in ESL classes, but they also put you in classes lower than your level just because your English isn't up to the standard, which is what they did to me in the beginning and then I had to make that up by taking 7 AP classes in my senior year.*

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(F, Syria)

It was often very painful for students to feel as if their true abilities were unseen, and it regularly required them to work very hard to rectify that misrepresentation. Many participants interpreted their school experiences as stories of working significantly harder than their US-born peers for far less recognition.

Therefore, teachers who took the time to engage with students on a deeper level as they adjusted to their new schools, and learned English, were incredibly valuable. Those moments of being "seen" as individuals with academic skills and aspirations who also happened to have a language barrier were also potent enough to remain as powerful memories even decades later.

> *So I came here first grade…my third grade teacher…umm…yeah like he was really…I was getting the hang of English then but he would challenge me a little more. And I think that even if I didn't completely understand English, he knew that I was smart. He saw my potential, and I think that's what pushed me even more. And…yeah…I am really thankful to that teacher, because you know despite language barriers…being able to see past that…seeing a child for their potential…I think is really great. (F, Mexico)*

The students acknowledge that this history of experiences surrounding school-based visibility was not experienced in a vacuum. These notable instances provided structure to how these students approached being in a classroom as they entered their college careers.

> *Some teachers that I had in second and third grade I will never ever forget.[...] I think because of those relationships that I had and the things I learned from them, that's what helped me to become successful now in college. I know one teacher, she knew my mom didn't know much about how to teach me, so she told me to meet her at the library and she got me a library card and taught me how to read. From then on I know my reading scores got a lot better, […]so that helped me all through college too. Because if I never had her to teach me how important reading was and I just went through my education without reading much, I don't think I would've had good grades or as good a GPA as I do now.* (M, Yemen)

This participant detailed a heartwarming relationship where a teacher saw him in the context of the realities of his life. Demonstrating that she saw him also meant that she saw value in him and

was willing to prioritize his learning, even if that meant devoting time outside of her workday.

She understood that there were certain lessons that his family did not have the resources to

provide that he needed to survive in US schools. Being seen at the 'right' moments by the 'right'

people helped carve a path to college for this student.

   Engaging with ethnic and cultural visibility. This subtheme revolves around student

cultural and/or ethnic visibility. Students described experiences ranging from not visually

meeting different cultural expectations, experiencing racism or discrimination, and seeing how

their culture and/or country of origin is portrayed in the US.

  First of all, some participants described the experience of interacting with multiple sets of

cultural expectations. Not quite fitting into either cultural world is a well-worn yet powerful

narrative for immigrants who migrated at a young age, or those who are second generation. This

is just as relevant for many refugee background youth, as many describe experiences of standing

out both in an American context and also in a heritage culture context. Students' detailed causing

individuals from either cultural or ethnic identity to do a double take, as they visibly did not fit

into expected norms or stereotypes.

> *And I look different. I'm not a hijabi. I'm in leggings. So, dressing the way I dress and portraying myself the way I do and identifying as queer and having a partner who I refer to as a partner and not a boyfriend throws people off when I'm like, oh, yeah, I'm also Muslim and I'm from Iraq [...] and people are like, how? Or I have a lot of tattoos and a lot of my teachers who get the nerve to be like, how'd your family let you do that? Isn't that against your religion? I'm like, yeah, please tell me more about my own religion. It's a lot of – people don't expect me to be the way I am. [...]I fall in this very weird place where I do some not very traditional things for the Muslim community and I do some – too Arab things for the American community. So, no, it's really sad because I love my people, but they don't love me all the way back. They love me half way, not all the way. (F, Iraq)*

This student described tensions surrounding her cultural visibility. In some ways she looked too

Arab for the US and too American for her Arab friends and family. She described living in a

third intermediary space where the way she presented herself confused or maybe even upset

some people in her life. She endures visibility as a result of not conforming to either set of

cultural expectations.

Engaging with cultural visibility and expectations is not always only a personal endeavor.

Cultural or ethnic visibility also referred to a larger experience of how one's heritage culture was

seen in the US, if it was seen at all. Students desired a well-rounded representation containing

both the very real hardships that they themselves lived through as refugees, alongside the very

real joys of their culture and it's people.

> *Yeah, I think a lot of the news coverage is very negative. Excuse me. They don't show us celebrating Eid. They don't show us during Friday prayer. Like I said, they don't show us picking dates out of palm trees. They don't show any of that. (M, Syria)*

Students experienced moments of seeing their culture through the eyes of US media. This was a

very one-dimensional view, narrowly focused in on headline grabbing stories of adversity and

bloodshed. Though, those stories existed in parallel with stories of love, resilience, and

resistance. Participants lamented how that second set of stories seemed non-existent in the US,

delegitimizing these different aspects of their culture and in turn making them invisible.

Additionally, these portrayals in the news often overflowed into academic contexts where

students would have to deal with incomplete or inaccurate portrayals of one's country of origin.

Instructors and textbooks sometimes provide biased descriptions of foreign events, especially

concerning the role of US government in overseas conflicts.

> *So, it wasn't until college where I was like, this sucks. I wanna take some cool classes because I didn't have that option. I didn't know that there was departments and stuff. So, it impacted me in that way where I would hear people telling stories about refugees, immigrants of Iraq, about the war in Iraq. I'm like, first of all, it's not the war in Iraq it's the war with Iraq because you started it. (F, Iraq)*

The level of flawed visibility that the above student described was a challenging experience for

her growing up in the US. Not all classrooms had carefully curated materials and instructors who were knowledgeable about foreign affairs.

In addition, students often described a complete lack of representation in school materials, where they felt as if the work and accomplishments of their heritage culture or ethnicity was never brought to the forefront.

> *Yeah, I think history classes have always been hard for me because we would learn about things, and I'm always like, okay, well, that's the US. Next, I'm always so annoyed with that stuff. I remember in high school I was pissed. They would teach us multicultural lit and they would give me a textbook written by a black author. I'm like, okay, awesome, what else, what else do you have? (F, Sri Lanka)*

This student was endlessly frustrated by a Eurocentric US school system that failed to even acknowledge Asia in her history classes. Even attempts to incorporate diverse voices did so on a surface level, only highlighting one underrepresented group. She rarely felt as if her culture was seen or represented in an academic context.

Nevertheless, some students detailed moments where they preferred cultural and/or ethnic invisibility when possible. In our current political climate, I frame these decisions as a survival tactic.

> *I feel like the news kind of supports this racialized hysteria about Arabs and about Iraqis. I felt there were moments where I've had to lie and be like, oh, I'm not from Iraq, I'm from Jordan. I was totally born there. Like in Ubers where it's me and some really old White guy who just told me he supports Trump, and I'm like, cool. And I'm silent for the rest of – so, there have been times where I felt like I've had to lie about those things because it's unsafe to be truthful, which is messed up because that's why I came here in the first place. (F, Iraq)*

The above student appeared to desire visibility in many arenas of her life. She was both proud of her heritage and family and very politically aware. Nevertheless, there were instances when the option of selective invisibility was seen as the safest choice, as she did not want to face racism or discrimination, even if that decision was sad and frustrating to her.

Engaging with refugee specific visibility. Much of the struggle with visibility described above is consistent with a range of migrant experiences. Yet, students repeatedly also discussed the tensions surrounding refugee specific visibility. Among participants, discussions involving refugee specific visibility ranged from wanting to be more visible and create community with other refugees, to describing the challenges of being "out" to others about this identity. Other visible aspects of their identity were often tied to being a refugee, including language, culture, and race. Yet, it is not possible to pick out refugee-background people in a crowd, as that identity is inherently experiential. Increased refugee specific visibility on a broad scale was seen as necessary to create the community that many participants craved.

> *I think that the main thing that I would say is to have an overt consciousness of the refugee experience and propagate it, project it towards media as a form of recognition for that experience and as a form to say that refugee students are welcome here. (F, Guatemala)*

Many wanted to live in a larger community where the refugee story is broadly visible and relevant, and those communities (even non-migrant specific communities like their college campuses) embrace that identity. However, there was tension between the positive and negative consequences of disclosing this invisible identity to others. Participants described discomfort being visibly a refugee in non-refugee specific spaces.

> *I think it's a little similar again because you had this feeling of being displaced you know you have this feeling of like you went through something difficult but at the same time like I mentioned there are people very comfortable about coming here and talking about it. For some of us it's not and it's always this feeling of like you already a kind of a minority here. So, having to know that you're a minority within the minority you know. I try not to talk about experiences because some people like don't understand it - you know - or like I don't know- yeah. It's just this feeling like you know minority within a minority. (F, Mexico)*

It was sometimes seen as an act of bravery to be upfront about one's refugee background. Nevertheless, without such acts of bravery it might be impossible for refugee background

students to find each other, as most did not describe current active engagement in refugee serving

organizations; placing refugee background students in an unfortunate visibility Catch 22.

For some, refugee based visibility was undesirable. One particular student, detailed very

little desire to connect with co-ethnic peers or to be open about her refugee background with

others as it brought her pain. She reflected on her desire to leave both Chicago and her identity as

a Syrian refugee behind.

> *I applied to schools in Chicago, but […] I didn't want [that], I don't know. I felt like, at that point, kind of everything was against me in Chicago and I just wanted to get out. I thought that's what I needed, kind of like a fresh start because I felt like everything in Chicago would keep on reminding me of that really rough period that I was in. So, I was like: oh, if I go somewhere else, I can just start fresh, sometimes not tell people where I'm from which I do a lot of the time. Pretend that life is fine. Pretend that I'm anybody else out there. (F, Syria)*

Despite her desires, this student was not able to leave Chicago for college. She desired the ability

to completely blend in here in the US and not face the undesired visibility that her refugee

identity sometimes provided her. This visibility was strongly linked to negativity and trauma. If

she could pretend that she was not a refugee then perhaps she could also pretend that she was not

suffering as a result of that experience.

Moreover, as the current study progressed, it became clear that participating in this

research and engaging with me to share their stories and experiences did more than simply

demonstrate that their identity as refugees was seen and valued. Participating also provided them

an opportunity to step into the theoretical spot light and be deliberately visible as refugee

background people to me, an outsider. Being comfortable engaging with me in this study made

them a visible person from a refugee-background in the research context, and striving for more

recognition and acceptance for others was viewed by some as part of their underlying

interpretation of success in life.

So, learning that the personal is political and understanding that what happening all the things that happened to me, the things I learned are why I feel so successful, and not necessarily the institution of school, because I hate that. And, just honestly, sitting here right now, I feel so successful because seven years ago, I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't be able to have this conversation. It's just very overwhelming and humbling and I always think about it because I'll be doing the simplest stuff. I'll be like, I'm gonna go get coffee from Starbucks, some basic shit. And I'll be like, that's crazy that I can do that. I can just walk down the street and go to Starbucks and get a Frappuccino. [...] I have that option. And I feel, just by existing, just by being here – because I know that there are people and forces and offices, and Trump, that just – they don't want people like me doing what I'm doing [...] and being here and taking up space, and being loud and being annoying, and calling things out. That's how I feel successful. (F, Iraq)

Literally being present and unapologetically visible as a refugee background person can be a subversive act. Being an activist, and seeking visibly for herself and the larger refugee cause was a great source of strength and feelings of success for this student.

Harnessing power of refugee experience

Once again, in this section I will first discuss the concepts that underlie the theoretical code of harnessing the power of the refugee experience (see Appendix B.3 for a table of study results). Then, as with the previous theme, I will connect concepts to the data through participant quotations.

This theme highlights a key study finding, that students derived strength from their refugee background, and they desired to use that strength to help others. Every story of struggle was accompanied by immense growth. I do not intend to ignore the difficult stories of violence, separation from loved ones, and discrimination in this study. Yet, these issues were only parts of long and nuanced lives. Enormous strength comes from persisting within challenging environments and striving to move through them. These students did not just succeed in spite of what they have endured. They succeeded because of the strength they have gained through what they endured.

In the following subsections, I will detail how students have harnessed the power of their experiences as refugee background people and used them as motivation to overcome doubt, negative self-talk, and to cultivate a desire to give back to their families and communities. Their experience as refugees acts as a potent motivator for their perspective on themselves, the world, and their goals for the future.

Cultivating positive self talk. Many of the students described the presence of doubt and negative self-talk in their experiences. Much of this self-doubt stemmed from feeling as if they were at a disadvantage as college students, specifically because of their migrant and refugee background.

> *All of it. All of it. I still feel like I don't know if I can do this, I don't know if I can do this. I literally have one semester left and I still – I'm like – when someone asks me, they're like, when are you graduating, I'm like, well, next semester, if I pass everything. I'm still not confident in that college was made for people like me with the experiences that I have. I know it's not. Yeah. I mean, I said it before. I literally still doubt myself. I'm doubting myself right now as we speak. Yeah, I just don't really feel like I'm supposed to be here, and I won't feel like that until I have my degree, point blank. I'm gonna feel the same way next semester. I've been feeling that way for three and a half years now.* (F, Iraq)

It takes an immense amount of courage and strength to persist alongside deep uncertainty. It's not as if this doubt necessarily goes away for these students. They have developed ways to manage and tolerate the distress attached to the fear they have of not finishing or not meeting expectations. Yet, this type of doubt-based negative self-talk could predict the end of someone's college career, as it could impact function or motivation. It may indeed spell the end for some individuals. However, coping with on-going distress is a skill students likely developed from facing much more distressing circumstances in their countries' of origin, during migration, or adjusting here in the US.

Participants were able to harness the power of their personal experiences and a collective

refugee experience to find inner confidence and face challenges.

> *"Yeah, sometimes I say, "Maybe this is not for me– maybe it's too difficult for me. Maybe I don't have the right resources sometimes. Maybe I don't have the right education. Because sometimes I think – but then – it's just doubts that come in my mind but other than that, I know that deep down I've completed so much in college that I only have a little bit more and I can definitely get it done. You just – I just rise my confidence level that's all and just be – motivate myself on the inside and be like, 'I've done so good in all the classes, I've got on the honor roll.' That I know I'm capable. I mean there are other people that graduated, my brother-in-law came not many years ago and he's near graduation at UIC now and he just came from overseas. So I mean I've been living here for so long, I learned the English language a lot better than him, I know a lot more than him and I'm definitely gonna be able to graduate. Yeah, I've seen other people who have [had] so little and they've been able to graduate so I can definitely."* (M, Yemen)

This student was able to replace negative self-talk with positive self-talk by using his personal academic history as evidence for his competence moving forward. He also used the academic successes of other refugees with fewer opportunities than him to demonstrate that he has all he needs to graduate from college.

Students also described shifts in their attitudes towards themselves and the creation of self-compassion and hopes for the future.

> *"I mean, sometimes I am amazed by what I'm doing or what I have. Sometimes, did I do this? I am amazed because I am going to school, also, I'm working, so sometimes I ask myself – this is not easy. This is very great. So, for that reason, I intentionally talk to people who are – who did [this] for me, so I am thankful. So, I ask myself – this is not easy, so it makes me proud. It makes me to thank people. Also, it makes me happy. So, I'm going to school, I'm working, I have people who help me, so what I want, this is a great thing. This is a very important thing, so I have what I want, so I feel I am hopeful. I've got – well, I can achieve what I want, my goal. I'm hopeful."* (M, Ethiopia)

For the above student, acknowledging all that he has already accomplished despite the challenges inherent in his situation, and all the people that helped him get there, was extremely motivating. He chose not to focus on how hard it is to try to go to school and work full time while waiting for the decision stemming from his asylum application. Instead he shifted his self-talk toward personal pride, gratitude to those around him, and optimism going forward.

Positive self-talk also often dictated a healthy and mature perspective on the world and on their priorities. Participants have the strength to not get overwhelmed by smaller, less consequential obstacles, as their life experience as refugee background people allowed them the ability to take a wider view on what actually matters. Participants were able to put everyday bumps and bruises in perspective because they actually knew what it was like to face truly awful and terrifying experiences. Not only did having a mature perspective change the students' perception of smaller hurdles, it also offered them a new perspective on the negative experiences they had already had. They had the ability to find the good buried in experiences of trauma and hardship.

> *"So, I was supposed to graduate 2017 from my bachelor's, that was the ideal plan. And I start seeing all these pictures of my peers from high school graduating, and [I'm] like, 'Oh, my god, and I'm not there yet.' So, I think that we were looking back into our lives, what we have gone through; believe it or not, even though thinking about the negative things have helped me, because I said, Oh my god, this is the neighborhood that I was exposed to as a child; this are the things that I have to go through. I lost my dad, he was deported – like things like that, I was like, "I'm here for a reason. I don't know what it – this moment, I don't know what reason is, what's the main goal, how it's going to play out in five more years. But I'm still here, somehow. I was not deported, I've been given certain opportunities, and […]even though they're small. But for me, they have helped me a lot. So, it's like, I'm here for a reason. So, maybe it's okay there are negative things."*
> (F, Mexico)

I do not think the students saw their hardship as positive per se, yet many were able to find the positive in where they ended up. They found meaning in the life circumstances that made them refugees or accompanied their migration story, even if the intricacies of that meaning are still forthcoming.

Desire to give back. Another way that the students harnessed the power of their experience as refugees was via mobilizing that experience to help others. Among participants, this desire spanned from a desire to tangibly thank family for migrating, to a desire to help other

refugee background people, to an even broader desire to help their communities. Many students

felt strongly about gaining an education and graduating from college so as to be more useful to

others, both with their improved financial prospects and new skills.

> *"The one thing that has been the best for me? I couldn't imagine – I would say just knowing where I've been and how my life has changed completely. And taking full advantage of the doors that has opened in the U.S. and yeah it just – how much I can help other family members that are overseas or kind of give back to my country and give back to this country as it opened so much opportunity for me by getting the job and education that I need. "(M, Yemen)*

Students also wanted to help family because they were in the position in the US to get this

education, while other family members were not. They wanted to embrace this opportunity on

behalf of and in honor of family who could not do the same. The opportunity was not just seen as

an individualistic goal, and neither were the rewards.

> *"I think it's the support and it's just also ummm I think it's like my background the goals that I have like the reason I want to graduate, I mean I wake up every morning I'm excited to go to school, I like school. But like I said I think about my family I think about the fact that I had to wait 9, 10 years before I saw them again and the fact that I have family over there that can't get a job. I have family that can't go to college that really drives me to keep moving forward and also giving back like I want to be a teacher, I don't have students yet but I love them already. And it's also important for me to represent my culture so like I said when I was at DePaul I had people: ohh Latino in college wow so I don't know it's also important for me to like portray Latinos and refugees as people who can be successful."* (F, Mexico)

The above quotation works through the many layers of rationale behind why this student wanted

to graduate from college and become a teacher. She wanted to do it because she enjoyed school,

but even more importantly she felt the pull to graduate because her family members back in

Mexico did not have the same educational chances. Additionally, she wanted to give back in the

literal sense of embarking on a role in a helping profession, and in the context of being a role

model for Latinos and refugees. She aspired to use her journey as an example to similar students

who were not used to seeing themselves reflected in a college environment.

Other students catalyzed and created meaning from their experiences of stress and hardship, both in and out of school, by aiming to use their education for a larger good.

> *"Right. I think... yeah, back to my background. It's that we've been told – or we, sometimes are told – that we can't or... we don't enough. And that, for me, changes to, "Why not? Why can't we have enough? Why can't we have like everybody else? Why can't we be in this great positions as well?" Like, I also want my last name to mean something; I don't want all these endless nights studying or working to mean nothing at the end. So, I'm already wearing myself out – it has to be for a purpose, to one day help minorities, help someone in the same situation. So, it's to that background, where it's like I tie it back to those roots, where, hopefully, one day, I can help at least one person that would make a difference that would be great. Could I help more, or would I help more? Yes, hopefully. Giving back, giving back."* (F, Mexico)

This student wanted to flip existing expectations for people from her background and simultaneously justify all of the hours of work she has put into her degree so far. Her life goal connected her refugee background to her career ambitions and to her aim to help people who shared similar circumstances.

Many students used their refugee background as motivation to someday provide aid to all of their communities, including both those here in Chicago and those in their country of origin.

> *Especially in my country. I want to help my country, Lagos, so much. I'm not even working for myself, I'm working for my country, for my community, on the South Side as well. I live on the South Side of Chicago and I live in Lagos, Nigeria. I want to help as many communities as I can. But, especially the South Side of Chicago. […] I want to be one of the people, like Chance the Rapper, that's going back to help the South Side of Chicago, and just be there for them because they deserve it. Also, Lagos, too: give them water, lights. The little things that we take advantage of—I do, too—when I go back to Nigeria to give them lights, fresh water. I don't even think I want—once I get myself a phone and an apartment, with a number because I don't have a number right now—once I get a good phone and an apartment, I'm good. I will probably help my mom come here, if she wants to come, because I'm pretty sure she's tired out by now. We've been trying every single year, and she's probably like "you know what, I'm over this." Help my mom to come, help my little brother to come, as well. Then I'm going to help my country and help the South Side. (F, Nigeria)*

The above student appeared almost entirely driven to give back, above and beyond most individually based motivations. Her time as a college student is sharply aimed at helping her

family migrate to the US, and then in turn giving back to the two communities that have shaped

her and been her home.

Balance: Reinterpreting Success

In this section and the following subsections, I will again describe the theoretical codes

that form the foundation of my understanding of balance, and support those results with textual

evidence. This theme encompasses how participants embodied alternative views of success.

Overall, traditional or stereotypical views on success only occupied one small part of the

students' experiences. Instead they reclaimed the concept of success and defined it as achieving

balance. First, I will discuss how my results forced me to confront and re-think my sensitizing

concepts, then I will interrogate the meaning behind success as balance, and then I will examine

the six needs that underlie students' experiences of balance.

According to Merriam Webster, success can be defined as "the attainment of wealth,

favor, or eminence." Coming into this work, I had not fully interrogated what success actually

meant to me. I clearly had my own set of assumptions about success based in the sensitizing

literature I read, and I saw the construct as consisting of impressive grades, and other academic

accolades (e.g. admittance to honors societies, awards, and scholarships). These were the

achievements that I worked for when I was an undergraduate student. Intellectually, as I began

this study I understood that my participants could likely have a different or more nuanced

understanding of success. Yet, I was not prepared for the extent to which my ingrained view of

the construct did not resonate with participants, culturally or experientially. For example, when

asking one participant if she felt successful so far in college, this was her response:

> *When you ask me that question it's very American [...] Because if you were to ask me*
> *how do I feel as a student here? I would say, that I feel very comfortable and I feel*
> *understood by my teachers for the most part. I feel comfortable, I feel safe. That's in part*

being successful. (F, Colombia)

This participant saw my question as not consistent with or relevant to her experience. She correctly appeared to have heard a question loaded with my personally held assumptions pertaining to grades and stereotypical academic achievements. She eliminated that interpretation of success and detailed what mattered to her more. She valued the quality of her experience as a college student, and how she felt. She felt successful, because she had adapted to her college environment enough to feel safe, comfortable, and understood. She was proud of that achievement. The interpretation of success that she rejected, one bound by on-paper accomplishments, may be a concept more often used or valued in the United States, as compared to other parts of the world. Through comments like this one, participants pushed me to think beyond my experiences. They regularly reminded me of my own position when framing this study – that of a middle class, White, US-born college-graduate. Among other things, class, race, culture, and ethnicity can impact perceptions of and the meaning that students attribute to their success (Oh & Kim, 2016). And thankfully, at times my participants chose to discard what they saw as my typical 'American' definition of college success.

Nevertheless, I noticed that participants appeared to weave together two narratives about success during our discussions. They would provide one narrative centered on traditional academic indicators of success. This theme related to students describing success as aligning with the traditional college success literature. This included seeing success as related to good test scores/grades/GPA, broader academic achievements (eg. being in the honors college or getting an award), learning classroom material, persisting until graduation, and/or getting into graduate school or getting a particular job post graduation. It seemed as if my participants understood that this was how most people in the US conceptualized the construct. Yet, they also provided

another non-traditional narrative around their personal views of success, this theme involved success as a fluid idea related to a range of areas including being safe, developing desired personal relationships and community, being mentally and physically healthy, being able to manage their time demands, and seeking out and finding a desirable personal identity. This code also involved receiving push back from students about my use of the term success and the baggage that this term brought to the conversation. Clearly, the traditional definition of success was not large enough to encapsulate the reality of their experiences. Instead, it appeared to be only one small segment of their concept of success, which was achieving balance between these multiple aspects of their lives.

Although many aspects of the traditional concept of success, or its overuse, may have seemed inappropriate to my participants, I do not mean to insinuate that these students have not or will not achieve "wealth, favor, or eminence," classroom learning, high grades, or impressive careers. Rather, the concept of success, as it is often narrowly defined, could not hold the range of their experiences. Instead, this concept of success emerged as only one component of their overall feelings on success, constructed alongside less traditional interpretations of the construct. These refugee background students saw success both as aligning with school based academic achievements and simultaneously as a more holistic endeavor, where traditional success only explained a small portion of their perspective. Participants highlighted how for them success was a fluid and dynamic goal, and that it often relied more heavily on achieving life balance than any particular accolade.

Regardless of what counts as success, the traditional educational literature often defines success as a static outcome that a person either achieves or fails to achieve (York et al., 2015), and not a dynamic state that a person may be moving around or within throughout his or her

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entire life. Participants discussed how their views on success, or what they specifically saw as personal college success, have been fluid. Some used to focus on more traditional successes, including grades, and changed their views and behaviors when they realized what they really valued. For example, one student stated:

> *"Eh, for me success is like a moving target. Sometimes, I think I have found it and then it moves. Or I do accomplish it, but then I have new goals. The successes I have been reaching for really have changed a lot throughout my time in college. I think differently now than when I started." (F, Guatemala)*

Moreover, when talking to students about their success in college, it became clear very quickly that I was really asking them about their success in life. We were not discussing a construct that was rigidly confined to the parts of their day spent in the classroom or library. My initial angle of investigating experiences of 'college success' for refugee background students was flawed, as college success **is** life success if the person in question is a college student. Academic pursuits were only one element of the students' lives, and the experience of being in college could not be disentangled from their broader life (nor should it be), or vice versa.

In addition to viewing success more fluidly, participants also incorporated a broad range of indicators of success that reached beyond the traditional markers of educational success. As stated earlier, outside of the more traditional narrative, participants' responses also highlighted the importance of life balance. They viewed success as 'keeping it all together' or keeping everything in life appropriately juggled so nothing within the system they were trying to manage was neglected or disrupted. They had their needs met and were surviving. This does not indicate needing to do a perfect job in all of these areas of their lives, but rather doing a good enough job at everything to keep it all moving. Students viewed the ability to balance parts of their lives like schoolwork, relationships, and finances, in a satisfying and low stress manner as true success.

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"I was friends with the valedictorian at my school. Like she's very smart and all that and she's like umm. And I asked her why don't you just have fun? [...]Like if you don't know how to balance it like have fun and have good grades and then you're not living life you're just coming and doing this and coming and going. Like you need to live life and laugh and have fun and what not." (F, Nigeria)

This concept of balance as success was based on a more holistic interpretation of life, not limited to fleeting classroom-bound achievements or failures.

When I look at success, I look at it in terms of myself, not in terms of thing that I get. I feel like a lot of people are built the other way around, which is why I feel like a lot of people get devastated if they fail an exam. (...)Really, is that what your prioritizing? Is that what you think is good? So, that was kind of a wake-up call for me where I was like: no, I'm healthy, I have everyone I love by my side, well not everyone, but, for the most part. If I have people that love, support me, I'm fine. I'm not living on the street and I'm doing fairly well, so one test is not going to kill me. And maybe not getting that job is not going to kill me, there's a billion other jobs. That's not how I define my success, but, if I get it, I would be happy, it's my reward. (F, Syria)

As this student highlighted, balance involved having one's needs met, though maybe not exceeded, across many areas of ones life. She was able to find perspective when academic endeavors did not necessarily go as planned. Achieving a sustainable balance of one's energy between things such as work, school, family obligations, social life - and appreciating that balance – was the success story that many students shared.

Interrogating Balance in the Context of a Refugee Background

Balance emerged as the key way that the student's envisioned success. The needs highlighted as most relevant to the refugee-background student's life balance were (1) traditional academic success, (2) a safe and comfortable environment, (3) community and human connection (including family, peers, classmates, teachers, etc.), (4) health, (5) obligation management, and (6) identity. These elements existed together and interacted to create success via balance. Individual students described their lives as an interrelated system wherein they worked to maintain balance across these specific needs, which served as sources of strength or

sources of struggle depending on the situation. Changes in one area (e.g. obligation management) had influences in other areas (e.g. health) and could solidify or upset one's sense of balance. These individual components could either be an indicator of the student's overall sense of successful balance and/or serve to indicate the presence or absence of balance. Some components functioned in both capacities.

For example, health could facilitate other components of life balance (e.g. provide ability to focus on school or cultivating friendships) or serve as an indicator that other components are already in balance (e.g. health may suggest that one has a stable enough situation to not experience the negative health consequences stress can bring). In the following subsections I describe each of areas of need that work together to make up students' experiences of balance, provide textual examples from participant interviews to help understand when these areas can either challenge or facilitate student success, and what relevant supports students' would want or recommend for others.

Traditional academic success. Traditional ideas of academic success served as one element of participants overall view of success as life balance. Though, students were quite ambivalent about the importance of indicators of traditional academic success. They often felt as if these indicators were overvalued and yet simultaneously reveled in the times when they loved course content, mastered a skill, or worked hard for grade. I will discuss participants' perceptions and interpretations of specific elements of traditional success that resonated with them: GPA and classroom grades, learning outcomes, persisting and reaching graduation, and attaining employment. Additionally, I will discuss resources and supports that students valued or would have liked to help support this area of their lives.

Grades and test scores. Participants did not completely reject the importance of grades,

GPA, or scores on standardized tests. Instead, they demonstrated a lot of ambivalence about their

significance, and the meaning attributed to them as indicators of success. Some participants

completely embraced the pursuit of high marks.

> *"I will do whatever it takes me to get that A. I will study a lot or go do some research, or when I don't understand, find the teacher so she can make me understand what I didn't understand. Yeah, for me, the highest standing is –Very important." (F, Congo)*

In this context, grades were seen as a valuable way to demonstrate their progress and

understanding of the subject matter. They were a marker of perseverance and a method to

validate effort.

> *"I was in Orgo II last semester, which is one of the hardest classes at UIC and the thing is on the first exam…I know me and my friends we're at office hours every single time and we were studying every single day and that first exam,[…]you know how much time and how much work, like I was almost failing every other class because I was studying so hard for that class because I got a 94% and usually the highest scores are around the 80's. […] That 94. That was literally the happiest moment." (F, Syria)*

Accomplishing a daunting task, and getting a high grade on a notoriously challenging assessment

was this student's happiest academic moment. The 94% mattered because it was a reflection of

sacrifice and competence.

Yet students, even sometimes those who simultaneously found solace in what grades

represented, also saw them as a large source of stress. This stress could be due to the amount of

effort and sacrifice necessary to achieve a high grade, or the fears associated with not attaining

that goal. For example, the following quote is from a student who relies on scholarships to have

the financial ability to pay for college.

> *"Well, for example, for me because I was getting scholarships because of my academic excellence for me I think it was essential and really important. I don't know if I stopped working and worrying about grades if that wouldn't affect my financial situation. I mean I feel that I was not forced but that I had that commitment, you know?" (M, Mexico)*

This student's scholarships are merit-based, and could have been in danger if he did not maintain

that high level of academic achievement. Therefore, regardless of his own views on grades, he

felt obligated to uphold this bar, as without it he might not have the resources to complete his

degree. Others similarly viewed grades as an unpleasant but essential part of attaining a desired

job post-graduation or getting into their desired graduate program.

> *"I've learned that that's kind of the only thing that defines you. On a piece of paper that's the only thing they look at or your name maybe. And then they look at your grades. So, it's definitely a source of anxiety for me and it's very important.[…]I think that grades are stupid. I think GPAs are dumb, but I think that the way post-college situations and jobs and opportunities work, it seems like the only system to get through college is to have good grades, is to have a good GPA. Yeah, what I'm trying to say is, a lot of the things that people want to do after college, people are given those opportunities based on their GPA, based on their grades. So, I look at it as a necessary evil. I hate it. I hate it so much because I'm not defined by none of that stuff. Literally none of that stuff would tell you any of the stuff I just told you. It's a very vague and alienating picture of the student, but I think – I hate to say it, but I think it's a gateway to opportunities that otherwise maybe would not be possible. " (F, Colombia)*

It is clear that this student did not inherently value grades or see her GPA as representative of

what was important about herself or her achievements in college. Grades did not actually

indicate success for her, or many of the other participants. Regardless, she felt as if she could not

completely stop caring about grades as they were 'a necessary evil' to reach her future goals.

    Learning outcomes. Participants often viewed grades as a proxy for learning, yet as an

often very flawed one. Across the board, students appeared to value learning as an important

result of attending college and key to traditional academic success, above and beyond grades.

However, for some students, ambivalence towards grades was driven by the fact that they did not

feel that grades were a valid indicator of this knowledge.

> *So, I like see a lot of different people around. People who like really can memorize problems for a bit and then forget it. Do you know what I mean? I see people who like actually try to learn this stuff and can discuss and can think outside of the box and do extra work but still get a B. It's just like a grade is a grade. (*M, Ukraine)

This student saw achieving high grades as a skill that was almost separate from an actually deep

and meaningful understanding of class material. Therefore, it was unwise to place too much emphasis on grades as this learning proxy. He went on to discuss how having a solely grades focused college existence would be a waste of time and detrimental to one's future.

> *Yeah, I think that's super key. Like if you waste like four years of your life, and you come out with like a 3.9 GPA, but like you didn't learn anything, what good is it? To your future, like to work and to grad school or whatever you're going to do, it's just a waste. It was just a diploma, just a piece of paper that you get for four years of your life, you know? (M, Ukraine)*

Although, he also acknowledged that getting high grades might help someone get a good job or get into graduate school, that achievement would be hollow to him. Getting good grades without focusing on also learning the material would be waste of the opportunity of being a college student.

  Persisting to graduation and future employment. Not withstanding learning achievements, some participants viewed simply persevering and getting to graduation as a big success. This point of view did not take into account what college students attended, or how things progressed for the student once he or she was in college. The important part here was the ability to have access to and hit these milestones.

> *Successful? I feel like I'm getting there. I feel like I'm barely like, average getting there. I think at this point, if I finished my bachelor's, and for me, it would just be considered success right there. Because it has been stress over stress, over stress, but hopefully that getting a special internship that will get me into the workforce or something like that, that's when I will consider it a success. Ideally, I wanted to get into a program for grad school, but like I said, my situation is still – the constant struggle. So, grad school's still looking kind of far side for me, but I call it right now, what I have – what I have built so far, and how much I have grown, and how much I'm still, you know, close to finishing. That's success enough. (F, Mexico)*

Overcoming obstacles and continuing on in college in the face of many struggles could be a dramatic indicator of traditional academic success. Enduring college in the context of stressful life events is an achievement.

Moreover, students also discussed college success as attaining a desired future job or attending graduate school post graduation.

> *Oh, yeah I mean my mom – my mom wants me – all my parents want me to get education just to have a bright future and a good job. You can be financially stable and that – and they definitely think – my dad is like my mom wants me to get a good education no matter how long it takes and my dad's kind of the guy who is like, 'Finish up so you can get your job as soon as possible'. She does because without the job she knows where I'd be employed now. A lot of people work now. I know I worked at a gas station, I worked at different places just to help pay for some college expenses and just – she knew that like how bad I was struggling and how hard it was and she said, she kind of understands that if I wasn't in a college this would be my future. This is where'd I'd be working the rest of my life. (M, Yemen)*

This student made it clear, that striving for a job that allowed for financial stability, or the acquisition of wealth, was not the only part of success tied to employment. The ability to avoid poverty and the challenges associated with low paying work was also crucial. Yet, much like the discussion around grades, students were ambivalent about whether they thought obtaining the 'right' job was a meaningful indicator of success.

> *Yeah, I don't think it's the job that you want. I think it's whatever – it's however you want yourself to be seen and however – whatever kind of life you wanna lead. If you get that after college, then that's success. I don't really think about the job. I think it's more about, are you leading the life you wanna lead, are you leaving the legacy behind that you wanna leave behind? Then it's success, because I think jobs come and go. I don't think it's – you can make money a lot of different ways. (F, Iraq)*

Once again, this student viewed an overall sense of leading a satisfying life that one wants to lead as more important than any particular job. If the job helped someone create his or her desired life then it was valuable, but she refused to see it as inherently valuable outside of providing money to live on.

Relevant desired resources and supports. When considering traditional academic successes as a component of larger personal balance, many students discussed resources and supports that could have bolstered their existing strengths in this area. As mentioned earlier,

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many students felt as if reliance on some academic ideas of success as accurate descriptors of

students' abilities was damaging to them specifically as people coming from a refugee

background. In particular, many students discussed how they felt as if the general college

expectations with regard to grades and standardized testing for both admittance to and

persistence within an institution of higher education did not take refugee background students

and their experiences into account.

> *When it came to testing for SAT or other tests that allows people to get scholarship, they need to review their expectation for refugees. So, the thing that will be helpful – they need to reduce the expectation so we can also have access. (F, Sri Lanka)*

Moreover, as the quote below suggests, a consistent concern was that scholarships regularly

overlooked refugee background students who did not have the resources to stand out in their

applications.

> *I think [about] scholarship sometimes – it's good, it's good that have [them] for Computer Science, yes. If you have 3.5 GPA and above, Dean's List, perfect, yes. But, sometimes, I think they have it where it's only this group of people, and you forget that there are some of us that we don't have the citizenship, we don't have the permanent residency, we don't have any financial help, for example. That's a big factor, that's a big stressor, where you worry more about paying for food, and your bills than for school. And it's stressful to keep both. (F, Mexico)*

Therefore, if universities really wanted to be inclusive and create an environment where refugee-

background people can thrive academically, then they need have a more holistic understanding

of their applicants and current students. Recognizing the presence of refugee background

students in the first place, and setting up inclusive standards for them related to indicators of

traditional academic success would be a welcome support. Too heavy a reliance on quantitative

indicators of success based off of the experiences of different groups of students both hindered

students' access to and persistence in college.

A safe and comfortable environment. When thinking about the meaning behind living

in a safe and comfortable environment, there was a spectrum spanning between absence of harm and thriving. Specifically this theme was described as the need to feel safe and secure across different life arenas. It involved addressing yet also moving past neutrality toward positive feelings of comfort. This section will touch on different elements that contribute to a safe and comfortable environment at various points along that spectrum. Therefore, discussions of safety, both safety from violence, and safety from the impact of extreme poverty, along with the comfort associated with emotional safety, were crucial to participants. The following subsections will discuss physical safety, financial safety, legal safety, and comfort and emotional safety.

   Physical safety. First and foremost, people from a refugee background have likely experienced first-hand a lack of personal safety. They have also likely experienced the fear and instability that accompany living in an unsafe environment. Therefore students described feeling like they had "made it" as a result of now living somewhere safe where they could go on with their lives and worry about less pressing things. Escaping unsafe environments was what defined their refugee identity and was literally why they or their families migrated to the US. Attaining success in life seemed close to impossible when living in a dangerous environment. Unsurprisingly, the participants in this study greatly valued their physical safety.

> *I think the best part was knowing I can walk down the street and not get bombed, and that was fun. No, but seriously, safety, and I guess I never thought about it when I was back home, but I didn't really experience safety until I was [here] – which is ironic because Chicago is so unsafe. (F, Iraq)*

Many discussed the relief they felt upon experiencing safety in the US. Students regularly described the new feeling of safety as one of the best parts of the often challenging migration experience. However, life experiences taught them that they could never take that experience for granted.

> *I know…I know that things are different here. It is not like when I had to go from village to village for safety. But my history…it taught me to appreciate safety. I understand it may not always be there.* (M, Myanmar)

Just because this student described currently experiencing safety from war and ethnic oppression did not also suggest to him that his personal safety was a given part of his life. He will likely forever actively appreciate the presence of a safe living environment when he has it.

   Financial safety. Financial safety also existed along a spectrum from the absence of poverty to presence of financial security. However, when considering poverty, fleeing from danger often meant that people were forced to migrate without established resources to help build a functional life. This theme highlighted students reported anxiety surrounding financial needs. Students described feeling held back from their goals and/or stunted as a result of financial insecurity. Students also discussed fears related to possible future (and past experiences of) homelessness and poverty, having to drop out because of not having enough money, needing to work too hard/too many hours to stay financially afloat, not understanding the financial aid system, or simply that the need to spend so much money on college was an incredibly daunting obstacle.

   To start, many of these students had experienced at one point or another a lack of basic human necessities, including shelter, clothing, and food.

> *[W]hen I got here, it was sleeping outside and not knowing anybody, not knowing properly the English. I had the knowledge in English – I could write, but I couldn't speak. And also, it was hard for Americans to even say hi to me. I don't know, maybe – for me, I think they judged me the way I was looking because I was looking horrible (F, Congo)*

All of the participants in this study reported currently having housing. However, the prospect of earning money demonstrated more than the presence of disposable income for many students. It also represented safety from hunger and homelessness.

Moreover, when asked about the most challenging part of their lives as college students, many participants detailed their financial struggles.

> *Financial responsibilities, financial side of college. I mean, classes and everything, I would say they're all manageable. You can manage classes and everything[…] It's fine. I would just say the financial side of it, it's just unmanageable, honestly. (M, Syria)*

Some students had financial support from family, friends, or refugee serving organizations, but many needed to obtain enough money to live, pay for school, and even provide support to others all on their own.

> *What I do is I pay rent. Also, I need money, for some days, meals, for food or other stuff. So, what I do is, they pay every week – every two weeks, so I pay rent, and also, I cut some money for my basic needs, and the rest, I will save that, the rest of the money. I don't spend money without any reason. […] So, I can save for [I will pay for my classes. Yeah, [I work as a] bell man. Bell men, when it's very busy, we make tips. The paycheck is less, but you make tips. So, I don't spend money without reason. Especially when I get tips, I save, and then I pay for school (M, Ethiopia)*

The financial demands of higher education were also perceived as a massive barrier to entry for many students when initially applying to college. Some students delayed attending, attended schools that were not their first choice, were forced to transfer schools, or embarked on a terrifying and uncertain financial journey.

> *I think college came into my mind maybe my junior year of high school, you know, that I said, 'Oh, I could do it. Like, I have good grades and I'm even learning another language.' So, by then I was already like intermediate level French so I was really working hard. Yes. I'm just like, 'Okay, I could do this, I could stand out and you know, my application will look great,' and all those things. But then applying for it, and the cost of it, and it just like shredded my dreams. And I was like, 'Oh my God. This is not happening to me.' So even though I was offered good scholarships, they were not good enough. (F, Mexico)*

Much like the student above, many participants were unfamiliar with how college worked in the US, and were therefore also unaware of what a financial challenge it would be to attend until after they had already applied. It was an extremely rude awakening in particular for students

without the proper documentation to apply for financial aid. The above student did find a path to college, but it has been marked by extreme financial struggles.

Even for those students who were able to piece together enough money to meet all of their immediate needs, or had assistance paying for school, a lack of discretionary funds still impacted their lives.

> *[W]hen my friends like they would have money to like go out and all that stuff and I'm like just oh I wish I could go, I'm broke and then they're like just ask you know the people that you live with. And I'm like then I'm not even allowed to go out let alone ask them for money to go out[...] I can't just call my parents you know from Nigeria and ask for you know thirty dollars just to go out to the movies with my friends. That's like stupid. So there was a time when I felt so alone. (F, Nigeria)*

Not having money to socialize also acted as an isolating force, highlighting the differences between refugee background students and their peers. Therefore, financial stability could have a large radiating impact and the ability to improve many areas of one's life, and was consequently, a long-term goal of many students. Some chose to attend college to aspire to higher payer steady employment where they would have the ability to improve their lives, along with the lives of their families and communities.

Legal safety. I never asked study participants any direct questions about their present or former documentation status. However, students regularly discussed status without provocation, and it became clear that concerns about documentation, especially for those students who were undocumented or seeking asylum, were significant. This theme discussed the fears related to the realties of personal or familial deportation back to somewhere unsafe. They also demonstrated how closely linked lack of documentation is with financial insecurity. Fears regarding deportation were particularly salient for students.

> *I came here and then my mom we were trying to get her like a visa so like forever but she can't get one. Cause its like really hard and then I live with my father for like five years*

> *and then he went to Canada. And then I went with him like a year after to get it then you know he got deported from America. (F, Nigeria)*

The student quoted above has not had the ability to live in a home with both of her parents since she was about seven years old, and has lived without either of her parents since age twelve as a result of US documentation struggles. Therefore, legal safety represents more than just safety from personal deportation. It also represented the psychological safety all children have when they get to grow up side by side with their parents.

Moreover, as was mentioned in the previous section on financial safety, documentation status could play a dramatic role in students' ability to pay for a college education, and where the students end up attending college.

> *I was worried after the whole junior year where everything happened, and I was little behind on that. At one point, I was considering taking a year off or a semester off because our papers took forever to get in and I always still considered an international up until the decision date of senior year. A week after that, we got our residency. At that point, I was looking at least, $50,000 dollars of tuition for college and there was no way I could afford that or my parents whatsoever, so, at one point, when decision date came, I was convinced that I was not going to college for, at least, a semester and that devastated me. Seeing all my friends all my friends like omg—you know how on decision date everyone is wearing the t-shirts and everyone's excited and everyone's like: "oh, where are you going?". And I may not be going anywhere. I was lucky and it was in a week after decision date, which was a whole other ordeal because everybody was like oh, well, we kind of closed—because I got accepted into a lot of colleges and I got a bunch of financial aid, but it was still not enough because it was still international tuition. A lot of them were like we can't offer you resident tuition because we already gave out the spots we had and that's actually how I ended up at UIC. (F, Syria)*

With regards to legal status, students not only endured fear of personal and familial deportation, but they also were often forced to live with insecurity revolving around their educational opportunities. Without certain legal status, appropriate financial aid was out of reach.

Comfort and emotional safety. Feelings of emotional or psychological safety were also deeply valued in their relationships and environments. The worry attached to potential changes in

their future safety occupied mental space. Participants reportedly felt both physically and emotionally unsafe living within the current political administration in the US. The same participant who described the period of homelessness experienced earlier also expressed a lot of concern regarding what could happen to her living under this government.

> *It makes me feel unsecure. I don't know when I'm gonna be deported. If you know – my status have been changed, but there is no expectation with this current government. They can do anything at any time. (F, Congo)*

I do not want to understate the insecurity that many participants felt with the election of our current president. The participant quoted above was granted asylum and still worries about her status being ignored. Not only was she worried about the anti-immigrant and anti-refugee rhetoric, but also like others, she has seen governments horribly mistreat their people. Just because the US may not be jailing or deporting legal refugees and asylees now, that does not mean that they will not in the future. Such worst-case scenarios are not unimaginable to many of these participants. The larger sociopolitical environment was a crucial piece of participants' feelings of safety and comfort, perhaps because they did not take their safety or national stability for granted.

I want to revisit the quote initially used to illustrate the complexity of the concept of success among this group of students.

> *When you ask me that question it's very American […] Because if you were to ask me how do I feel as a student here? I would say, that I feel very comfortable and I feel understood by my teachers for the most part. I feel comfortable, I feel safe. That's in part being successful."* (F, Colombia)

This student's comment is worth reexamining, as she was extending her thoughts about safety beyond the physical. Although, I am sure she still valued physical safety, this student also considered her comfort existing on her college campus and being understood as her complete

self, history and all, as an important form of emotional safety.

One step beyond experiencing safety and having one's basic needs met existed the ability

for participants to relax enough to feel content and comfortable. As opposed to purely having

negative stimuli removed, contentedness or happiness also suggested the ability to find positivity

in ones' environment and experiences. This need for contentedness and the view of it as its own

success ran counter to the literature. York and colleagues' (2015) aforementioned academic

success model viewed personal feelings of satisfaction (a variable closely aligned with the notion

of contentedness) as a success proxy variable. Meaning that according to them satisfaction did

not actually count as success but was instead only correlated with success. Nevertheless, students

in the current study saw contentedness as a valued end goal in and of itself. Students saw comfort

as part of their own view, and often also the views of their family members, when considering

success. It was a part of and simultaneously represents success as balance.

> *My mom thinks of success more if like I'm happy. She would care more about if I don't get good grades, but I'm healthy, I'm happy because it was really hurting her to see me not eating, not sleeping, but I was doing well in school. And she was like: "I don't care about school. I want you to be a person, not a zombie." I feel like she doesn't necessarily care about academics as much, as long as you're happy with whatever you're doing. (M, Syria)*

As discussed earlier, happiness or contentedness was more than just a precondition for "real"

college success as defined by grades or a good job, but was valued in its own right as an

important outcome beyond having one's basic needs met.

Relevant desired resources and supports. When considering tangible ways for

institutions and individuals to help support refugee background students in attending and

graduating from college, no discussions revolved specifically around physical safety. This

omission may be a result of students not seeing their safety as within the purview of their

respective colleges.

When considering financial safety, attaining the necessary finances to pay for college was a pervasive element of students' experiences, especially for those who did not have documentation. Financial struggles might be the most salient struggles for the participants in this study. Finances were also described as the biggest factor that almost blocked college access, shaped their college application experience, and could potentially still hinder graduation.

> *Yeah, like maybe for students who have, you know refugee backgrounds [...] there was some kind of assistance, financial assistance through our college. Maybe something as simple as – I know because I had to – like parking here was so expensive it was like $700 and something just this semester and that's how much I made for like, how many months I've been working with UBER. Maybe sometimes either getting like if you fit that criteria and you've been getting a certain percentage or getting it waved or something, I think that would be – a lot of that. Maybe even like food is very expensive nowadays too, a lot of stuff. (M, Yemen)*

Participants suggested that colleges could consider offsetting some of the 'hidden' costs of college for refugee background students, such as parking, housing, or food.

Additionally, although a few students had financial assistance from their families, most had to find the money themselves and consequently navigate a complicated financial system with little help. Therefore, as one student suggested, making the various financial options on campus more transparent and accessible would be very helpful

> *I think knowing about the services and the options available to me. I think umm again because there is a lot of services on campus and all that, that help you specially with financing your money and all that stuff again I think a lot of colleges just assume you know or you were told and specially for a lot of people coming…like I said asylum and that stuff a lot of people don't know about it, right? (F, Sri Lanka)*

Some students described the desire to change the college payment system entirely to acknowledge the financial struggles of refugee background students, and not require the same payment schedule.

> *They should understand that these refugees don't have money to do certain things. They should have a waiver or something for first-year. I mean, that's a lot of money. But, they could have refugees do a job and pay them back or something. Just the whole money factor, because college is money, money, money. It's like corporate. Stop taking our money and just help us. Help the refugees get to a certain place. Then, you can start taking their money. (F, Congo)*

As this participant suggested, undergraduate institutions could institute a system for refugee-background students to pay on a deferred schedule or even to work on campus in exchange for financial assistance.

Many of the resources and supports relevant to one's legal safety were closely connected to financial safety as well. As stated above, being undocumented or not having asylum could make paying for college challenging, and alternate school policies and scholarships could make a world of difference for these students. Furthermore, these needs also merged with comfort and emotional safety as some students also discussed the importance of sensitive services at their chosen colleges. Students who had attended more than one college were often able to describe differences that made accessing help as a person without US documentation easier at one institution compared to another. One student discussed how having a counselor who was Latina (like the student), who appeared unfazed about her undocumented legal status, and who was knowledgeable regarding how she could access services was a very different experience compared to trying to get the same help at a previous school.

> *Yeah and I think also maybe the difference between DePaul and here was having like counselors that understand you. Yeah so the one I had at DePaul nice lady and all that, right but I just never felt really comfortable telling her and or every single time I had to go to a financial aid counselor telling them I'm undocumented this and that I felt like it was difficult not only did I have anxiety because of what they're gonna tell me but I mean I felt embarrassed like I literally felt embarrassed to tell them so I don't know just that lack of comfort I can…I couldn't tell them that I'm undocumented all that stuff its just you know…(F, Mexico)*

She highlighted that feeling seen by, represented by, and unashamed in front of ones' service

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providers was equally as important to her as the actual services offered.

Community and human connection. For these students, the term community was used broadly and referenced peer and school-based relationships, family relationships, and/or co-ethnic and neighborhood connections. Students discussed how finding belonging and support in their chosen communities and being able to form and maintain positive human relationships, with people ranging from family to teachers to strangers, was both an area of need to achieve balance and necessary for achieving other aspects of balance.

> *It's a big world but like I met people from India, Vietnam, and like Jamaica like (all of it) is very exciting. So like success means to me like meeting different people you know like [...] having a good relationship with my professors not just being a student and teacher but like having a good relationship with them [...]And also, [...]like being happy and comfortable in the school that I go to cause like yeah you can go to a good school but like what if you're not happy what if you're not doing good? There's no point, I'm just wasting my money and time so I want to have, I want to be comfortable here and just like have fun. (F, Nigeria)*

In this instance, not only were diverse peer connections were valued, but so was having a relationship with a professor that extended beyond the cursory classroom interaction. Also, clearly being happy and comfortable in one's environment, as discussed in the previous section, was greatly influenced by students' relationships with the people in those environments.

For some, a diversity of social connections was a priority. For others, more functional and meaningful human connections were found in communities that shared their ethnic or religious background.

> *Sometimes, if you had a difficult time at a store, a market, anything like that, if you wanna buy anything, we ask each other. We also spend social time together. Yeah, we have a Karen[7] community here, which is some people that settled here, came before us, like maybe five families or six families, so we talk. It's easiest with them. (M, Myanmar)*

Yet, co-ethnic communities or communities from one's country of origin were not always

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[7] *Karen refers to a number of ethnic groups primarily located in central Burma/Mynamar (Karen).*

comfortable or safe spaces for refugees. This was especially salient for people on arrival to the

US.

> *World Relief was a really big part in my family's arrival. They definitely helped us. Not much, really, the Arab community at the time. It wasn't that big in the north side. There weren't any mosques that were close by. And also, we were politically traumatized, so we were not really trying to fuck with any of the Arabs anyway. (F, Iraq)*

The psychological scars left behind from experiencing persecution at the hands of people from

one's country of origin could be long lasting. Therefore, finding community with one's co-ethnic

or co-national peers was not a given for students and their families as a result of their refugee

background.

Participants also described challenges with finding friends and really bonding with other

people in a school context.

> *Yeah, I think that when you come in that kind of situation there are all these sides of you that other people don't understand and you know that they don't or will ever understand. Because it's a different reality in a sense to the reality that we have here and so it's kind of explaining it to them. But sometimes it's not even explaining it to them; it's explaining it to yourself. Like, why other people wouldn't understand or won't always completely grasp what you're saying. I even talk to my friends about the situation in Colombia but I think that if you don't live through it or meet people that live it in a certain sense, then you're not going to grasp what it's like. (F, Colombia)*

Coming from a refugee background sometimes made is difficult for students to feel heard or

understood by others, as most of their peers here in the US could not relate to their experiences.

Meaningful relationships were not only formed or valued in a school context, they were

also formed at home. Relationships with family, and the work needed to create and sustain these

positive relationships, especially when this connection was stressed by circumstances

surrounding forced migration, was also be a source of strength.

> *I think at home. I have worked so much with my mom, it has only been us. And I call it like a battlefield. We had been through so much and at that time because of all that we have been through, there were disconnections, there were problems. We had to go*

through counseling services, family therapy. I have to go to therapy on my own. So, it was balancing therapy, school, like three jobs, in high school. So, I know that at some point even though family stands for, you know, the bigger picture of brothers, dad's and everything, my family has been my mom. so, I know we suffer a lot. Like our connection. So, working on it, that was understanding her side and that it was not – Even though I had it tough as a kid, she had it also difficulty. It's very difficult not seeing her kids for like 15 – 14 years. [...]And I think even though having your degree and you know, being a CEO of somewhere, it looks great and you know, you're applauded for it, I think when you have a special relationship with your mother or your caregiver, I think that's priceless. And it takes a while. (F, Mexico)

This student highlighted how other interpretations of traditional success were surface level achievements that could be replaced or recreated. Most human beings do not get the opportunity to form many profound relationships across a lifetime. Moreover, sometimes these relationships take a lot of time and work to cultivate (i.e. therapy), and that time has to be prioritized along with other commitments. Parent-child relationships are particularly unique and inestimable components of any individual's life balance as they can provide a deep well of support.

Students described moments of human connection as indicators of success. Additionally, they discussed how community was necessary for achieving other components of balance in their lives, including maintaining a safe environment or traditional academic accomplishments.

What makes me successful is – the first reason is people who are helping me. If they don't help me, how can I survive, first thing. To me, going to school is optional. The first thing, if I can't work or if I can't get basic needs, house, food, other services. The first needs are those things, house, food, clothes. Those things, you have to get those things first. And then, after that, you can go to school. So, I tried to mention early, everything, what I have is the effort of people who are helping me. For example, the effort of Kovler Center[8], the effort of my lawyers, the effort of other people, so those peoples' effort made me successful. (M, Ethiopia)

Much like the discussion in the previous subsection about obtaining a safe and comfortable environment, meeting one's basic needs was deemed crucial. However, survival was often achievable because of the work of a community of people outside of the individual student or

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[8] *Heartland Alliance's Marjorie Kovler Center is a program for survivors of torture living in the Chicago area. It provides medical, mental health, and social services (Marjorie Kovler Center).*

student's family. Other aspects of balance and success were not seen as possible without a

cohesive group effort.

Even the suggestion that people could view college success as a result of personal

qualities was offensive to some. For example, when asked the specific question - *Is there*

anything about you, any personal characteristic, that you believe has helped you to succeed in

college? – one participant looked visibly annoyed by the question and provided me the following

response.

> *No, that person is a senior because they have the resources they needed, they have the*
> *support they needed, alongside with who they are, and that's why they're a senior. So, I*
> *think I was privileged with a lot of support from programs, from parents, friends, family,*
> *partners, dogs, and mentors to be able to feel empowered enough to be the person that is*
> *still here. So, no, I don't think that there is a personality trait for college success. There*
> *isn't. There's just support or there's not support. (F, Iraq)*

Although some students referenced their stamina, perseverance, or resilience, others simply

rejected the question off hand, as they were only able to see their achievements as a result of

extensive group intervention and good fortune.

Relevant desired resources and supports. A regular theme among participants was the

desire to create community with other refugee background students through a club or gathering.

Students regularly described not currently knowing many other refugee background students, and

how that was a gap in their social lives.

> *I think the refugee identity is so broad that it can't be attached to one ethnicity or race or*
> *culture. Yeah and I don't know, it would be really cool to have more refugee friends. I*
> *only had two more and that's it. What? That's insane. (F, Guatemala)*

Moreover, the ability for people to bond with others who shared this refugee identity seemed

important to participants above and beyond race, ethnicity, or nationality alone. Culturally

relevant spaces did not automatically provide desired support and acceptance.

> *Umm I think like I said I think umm not necessarily like a support group but perhaps or sometimes even umm… just like people that understood or like knew about your experiences or your particular situations. Because like I said you know with […] the Latino culture center I think they always focus a lot on undocumented people that came here for this particular reason and they really exclude you from that narrative. So it's like okay I don't really belong here. So I don't know just like acknowledging your situations happens and you're not literally like the only person. (F, Mexico)*

This type of support was seen as an avenue to feeling less alone in a unique shared experience, and to better withstanding the challenges of college. Feeling connected to others was an important segment of life balance. The most meaningful connections vary person to person but could include diverse peers, co-ethnic peers, family educators, lawyers, and staff at refugee serving organizations. Still, an area of need expressed by participants was to form relationships with other refugee background students. This would fill a niche in their social lives with others who would be more likely to understand the intricacies of their experiences.

Health. When discussing the term health, I am referencing both physical and mental health. This theme related to students desire to be physically and psychologically healthy, and the work they put into promoting wellness. Health appeared to both function as source of balance and as an indicator that one's life was not balanced because of disruptions in other arenas.

The following participant quote provides insight into how health problems could be a result or a symptom of imbalance.

> *Yeah, stress is like big, but I know how it works[…] It's not a thing, but I did have like a bad [stomach issue]. And sometimes, stress triggers it like big time. I did all the tests possible, CT scans, everything. The doctor gave me endoscopies and stuff. Everything was physically all right, but my bowels just get pain, especially during school. Even in summer, it wasn't that big of a problem, but when I'm in the city for school, it'd be like every day. (M, Ukraine)*

For this student, issues with one's mental and physical health demonstrated that other aspects of his life were currently working. In this case, the student was overwhelmed by the demands of

school, and when that stress spilled over it resulted in physical problems.

Nevertheless, health could also be the component that is struggling and therefore causing

the disruption and imbalance in the participant.

> *I have a brain tumor. And I had severe depression, which I used to pass out even in school. So, it's very challenging. And from what I went through – it's very challenging, but what to do? [...]How I deal with my brain tumor is I stay active. I do a lot of sports, and I also just be positive. I'm very positive about the future. (F, Congo)*

In this case, having serious health issues, like a brain tumor, was an aspect of this student's life

that she needed to work hard to manage. Her health disrupted the balance in her life, as opposed

to simply being the indicator that other parts of her life were not working well together.

Moreover, health was not simply the absence of stress or disease. Gaining health also

meant investing time and energy in positive habits, including getting sufficient healthy food,

sleep, and exercise. The following student referenced such habits when asked how she managed

a hectic life while in school.

> *I try to sleep in [...] That contributes to all of that. Sleep, sports, exercise just helps a lot. (F, Sri Lanka)*

All of these facets related to leading a healthy life contributed to this student's feeling of balance

and ability to manage other stressors. Efforts to manage and improve health appeared to serve as

a bolster to other potential sources of imbalance. Finding balance did not mean that there was

nothing less than ideal in a person's life. Instead it meant that these troubles did not disrupt the

student's ability to live the way they wanted to live.

Relevant desired resources and supports. When thinking about desired resources to

students, many referenced supports for mental health challenges. Students described wanting a

college environment where instructors expected and accounted for the possibility of mental

health difficulties and trauma in their students.

Yeah, like I said, I have generalized anxiety disorder, depression, PTSD, and [...] a lot of that has led me to feel like I can't take certain classes, I can't be on campus at night, little things. I mentioned the incident with my social 100 class [and] that I was triggered by the image that I saw. And I didn't understand triggers, like what the hell is a trigger? And now I have to be very kind to myself when stuff like that happens. Like I said, I'm taking a lot of race and gender classes and those can be really intense and tough. So, there are times when I feel like, okay, my professor just said the word rape like he said coffee. I need to leave. I've had to leave classes before. I've had to email professors and be like, that's not how you talk about that. (F, Iraq)

Mental health difficulties can manifest in different ways in the classroom, and are not necessarily unique to refugee background students. The student quoted above referred to an experience where she unsuspectingly opened a textbook and saw an image of Abu Ghraib prison, the location where her brother was previously imprisoned and tortured. This experience was re-traumatizing for her and changed the ways she felt going to class. Consequently, it would be safe for instructors to always conduct their classes as if there was someone in the room who is from a refugee background and has experienced trauma, and curate any lectures and materials accordingly. This would help to create welcoming and safe learning environments for these students.

Obligation management. A discussion of obligation management was in many ways the area of need in these study results that felt most closely tied to the concept of life balance. It literally involved the discussion of students' ability to find enough time to accomplish all the necessary parts of daily life. Specifically, this theme reflected the need for students' to manage their obligations effectively given many competing demands. Participants discussed obligation management challenges associated with the demands of different life arenas, including schoolwork, employment, and family obligations. Students describe feeling overextended, overwhelmed, or burned out as a result of not being able to manage the different pulls on their time. None of these parts of their lives were inherently problematic when discussed individually,

yet when existing together they could take up too much time for the participants to also be able

to decompress and care for themselves. Therefore, students described ending up feeling bad,

anxious, and/or depleted. They even discussed suffering physically and mentally and/or

contemplate dropping out of school as a result of not meeting this area of need.

> *Yeah, I was in one semester where I was like, I was just going to school, going to work. I would sleep for probably for like 4 to 6 hours a day—that was like the toughest semester. So, at that moment, I was like: "oh, omg, I should like drop out of college", but I was like, why? I mean I'm like halfway through college […]so I mean it's just stupid, you know, for me to drop out of college. But, yeah, that semester was hard for me because I was working a lot, I was taking like 20 credit hours, classes that were so hard [like] business, calculus. (M, Mexico)*

Study interviews were saturated with quotations like the one above. I heard many stories

describing how a student was close to a breaking point and needed to reassess their priorities to

attempt to find balance. Obligation management was not simply a discussion of whether or not

students' had developed the ability to manage their time. The theme incorporates the unending

perceived weight of refugee student obligations or anticipated obligations and the dark cloud it

often created over them as they went about their daily activities. Obligation management

struggles were marked by worry and exhaustion. Moreover, self-care, including sleep or

socializing, were often unfortunately the first activities student's cut from their lives when

healthy obligation management became untenable.

> *It's very hard. It's not easy to be a full-time student and – working full-time. You cannot get enough time. You might go to, or you might attend classes that you struggle to find enough time to do homework, also to read for a test or a quiz. It's very hard.[…] So I work eight hours, but my classes, for one class, it will only take three hours. After that, after three hours, I go to the library or I come directly to home, and then I read or do homework at home, or maybe I don't come directly to home, I go directly to the library. […] It's not enough. I can't do other things.[…]If I don't have class, for example, I don't go Friday, Saturday, Sunday, so I do most of my homework on those days. Also, I prepare myself for quiz or exam on those days. I want to join clubs and meet people…but my situation, it's very hard. (M, Ethiopia)*

Participants often displayed incredible strength and self-discipline in maintaining such grueling routines. Finding a way to sustain this delicate time balance was an admirable endeavor that many are unable to accomplish. Yet, it was also clear that students mourned activities they could not indulge in, and looked forward to a time when they would feel more able to create time for other needs in their lives, like self-care. Although, for some, finding and setting limits on using one's time was a valuable skill that they acknowledged cultivating.

> *It's very important I think but I think that my perception of that has changed because when I was in high school, I thought that if I did like five or six activities at once, like that showed how multi-faceted I was and how interested and involved I was in things. Because I guess that's a little bit cultural as well because my mom has always taught me that someone, a Colombian woman is a woman that can do a lot of things at once. I definitely can't do a lot of things at once. And so, I think, I've realized over time that that's not my strong suit and when I over extend myself that way I end up just hurting myself. So, I try to engage in activities that show what I'm interested in but I think I'm trying to learn to not over extend myself. (F, Colombia)*

Nevertheless, the obligation management struggle could be especially challenging for refugee background students. They may have to put in extra work for their courses as they often lack certain supports, lack familiarity with how college works, or in addition they may need to overcome a language barrier.

Additionally, participants often provided significant familial support, often because their English language skills were better than other family members. These skills thrust them into a familial liaison role, helping others navigate the demands of living in the US.

> *Yeah, I am basically [...] an unpaid assistant for all of my family members. I book all the doctor's appointments. I fill out all the job applications. I apply to all stamp and Medicare needs. I've taken off school to go help them through things in English. I'm still the one who is the most fluent in English. Not even that fluent, clearly, but I'm the most fluent in English. One of my sisters now speaks English and she does okay, but one of them just is not at all able to do it. So, I do a lot of that. I do some childcare for my cousin, too. And I also have to play this weird role where my cousins from Iraq or the ones in Jordan would call me and be like, so, how do you spell eggplant? So, I also play cultural liaison. (F, Iraq)*

Yet, these family demands can put a strain on an already full schedule, and cause some students to fall behind academically. Moreover, students also regularly hold time-consuming jobs to try to cover their large financial demands as students.

Relevant desired resources and supports. Students discussed a desire for understanding from others, especially instructors, about the complexity of their schedules. As mentioned earlier, sometimes students cannot help but slip academically as a result of competing interests. When asked about how she deals with obligation management challenges, the same student who described the challenges of meeting her family's needs above also went on to say:

> *It sucks. I mean, I don't mind doing it, it's the least that I can do, but it sucks because I'm not just worried about passing classes. I'm not just worried about my own health insurance. I'm not just worried about being a teacher. I'm worried about, is my sister's car insurance – did the payment go through? Did I set that up correctly? Do I need to call AT&T and scream at somebody? Is my sister sick? When is a good time for me to make an appointment before she collapses? So, it's a lot of things to juggle and it made me feel very adult when I wasn't really an adult yet, because I was doing adult stuff. It sucked. I don't [manage it]. I try to plan, I plan a lot. I don't know how. I don't have a way of doing it. There are some weeks where I prioritize them and then all of my stuff just ends up falling behind. There are some weeks where I'm like, it's finals week and I can't, but I also know that my sister's sick and I didn't book a doctor's appointment, but it's because I'm doing a final. Do you know what I'm saying? I don't have the healthy way of balancing it, I just don't. I kind of just take the L and struggle. I wish my teachers and TA's understood that. (F, Iraq)*

Persisting in the face of struggle was a common management strategy for individuals enduring the demands of conflicting obligations. Although tangible assistance with some of these demands (financial support) would be extremely helpful, experiencing kindness and understanding from college faculty and staff would open up the option for accommodations that could help students cope with obligation management struggles. Refugee background students often have so many demands on their time that it is challenging to cope. It takes a lot of strength to juggle schoolwork, employment, and family obligations; let alone including sufficient time for

socializing, sleep, and other self-care. The time needs associated with the financial strain of college can be particularly challenging. Students described a desire for recognition and understanding from their instructors about what they are dealing with, and why their classroom performance may not be perfect.

Identity. Students described a need to have an identity with which they were comfortable. For some, certain identities were sources of strength. Having a robust identity provided pride, motivation, gratitude, and avenues for coping and self-care. Specifically, in the following subsections I will discuss the important role of participants' religious identity, cultural identity, and refugee identity.

Religious identity. Religious identity helped contribute to and bolster balance in several key ways. It provided motivation and support during life challenges.

> *God. Well, Allah, but that is God. Praying the most, because when I felt like I wasn't good enough—well, not good enough—but when I get bad grades on my test scores, I will take a chill pill. "I got this." I'll motivate myself […] with the attitude I have, an amazing attitude. I know a lot of my classmates and friends, they will get like discouraged and not even come to class over one little thing. Me, I come to class. I always come to class with a big smile on my face. I'm always energetic because I always put 110% in everything I do. (F, Nigeria)*

Religious conviction and a strong belief in a higher power provided some students with the strength to endure challenges, persevere in difficult environments, and to believe in themselves and what they have to offer the world. Much like how one's refugee background was a potent source of motivation, faith functioned similarly for many students.

Religious identity also offered some participants an avenue for gratitude. Thankfulness for what they had and hopes for the future were extremely valuable tools for many students.

> *Before I meet them, when I came here, I – it's difficult to imagine that I meet good people, how I will survive, what will happen in my life. You'll have many [thoughts] come in your mind, but I trust god. I trust god. God will give me his own people. (M, Ethiopia)*

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Religion appeared to bolster students' beliefs that they were not alone in the challenging journey

they have faced, and that they can also believe in a bright future. Additionally, for some, it

helped provide positive structure. Religion helped create a backbone with which they arranged

other areas of their lives and kept those areas balanced and healthy.

> *Oh yeah, for sure because as a Muslim I pray five times a day and so it's always if I ever I feel down emotionally, spiritually, I know there's always hope just – there's always good that comes out. Anything's a test and prayer always there for me so as a Muslim I pray five times a day so it goes around my schedule perfectly. I stay consistent to it and if I stay consistent prayer I'm usually consistent with other habits or getting homework done, exercising, eating, anything, so it helps me build a good schedule and it helps me just go day-by-day very well. (M, Yemen)*

This student got significant comfort from his daily religious routine. The consistency of his faith

allowed him to feel grounded and to embrace consistency in his activities.

> ***Cultural identity.*** Students also described deriving pride and strength from maintaining a

strong connection to the culture they were born into.

> *Well, there were people from Haiti, but they were born here. Or like, they came here earlier than I did so that they understood English. Or, they were already like succumbed themselves to like American lives…like American ways. They lost their culture. They blend in with Americans. But, I'm proud to be who I am. You can hear my accent as thick as ever. When we have tradition days, when we didn't have to wear uniforms, I would wear my African clothes to school because I'm proud to be who I am.* (F, Nigeria)

The above quotation was taken from a longer conversation about how this student was more or

less the only immigrant in her school. She faced significant bullying from her classmates as a

result of being a recent migrant from Africa. Yet it soon became clear that she actually pitied her

old tormentors. They did not have this gift of strong cultural identification. From this identity,

she gained deeply positive feelings about who she was as a person, and it gave her the drive to

put her culture at the forefront, even if she risked ridicule as a result.

Moreover, students described distress when they felt the ties to their culture slipping

away. This positive identity appeared to be a necessary piece of their experience of balance. As

many of the participant came to the US when they were very young, their connection to their

heritage culture was different from that of an adult, and in turn had the potential to be more

fraught.

> *Since I was separated from my culture so early – my family – I remember I was searching for my identity because I was losing it; because, in here, you only need to speak English to survive – for your coursework, everything.[...] Yes, most of my friends, even though they were Mexican background, and things like that, it was always English. So, I do remember that even their Spanish – whenever they tried to speak Spanish, it wasn't the same. [...] And I remember one day on the bus, I saw two guys speaking the same way I recall my neighborhood as a kid speaking, and I had to talk to them; I had this urge, and I was like, 'You're from this region.' And they were like, 'Yes, how do you know?' And I'm like, 'I haven't heard that sound, that accent in so long.' And that's when I was like, I'm losing the connection. And I got involved with Mexican folklore music [...] My peers, [got] into the Mexican folklore, they saw the big dresses, and that it, like colorful, and I'm like, 'There's more to it; there's dances for your region, for where your parents are from. 'And I remember school assemblies, any presentation, I would to it like presenting Mexican folklore. I would do them, because nobody else knew – and like I said, that was not language per se, but cultural, and it's all involved right? (F, Mexico)*

In order to happily function in her life here in the US, this student needed to seek out links to her

cultural identity through both language and traditional dance. When she became aware of her

tentative grasp on her cultural identity it was a source of anguish. She also appeared to value her

newfound cultural expression more than her co-ethnic peers. In many ways this longing appeared

connected to how she had been largely insulated from the danger her family faced in Mexico,

and she had not wanted to leave. As she grew older there was a conflict surrounding her cultural

identity and she worked to hold on to her positive memories and ethnic pride.

Refugee identity. There were obvious tensions surrounding students' refugee identity.

They described a process of coming to terms with this identity, which ranged from embracing it

to rejecting it. Students detailed accepting their refugee identity and connecting with others who

share it, the challenges and rewards of sharing this identity with non-refugees, not wanting to be

essentialized to this identity, and the desire to abandon the identity entirely. Many participants

had already embarked on a journey to find personal acceptance and solace in their cultural

identity, but also accepting a refugee background identity appeared to be a related yet different

process.

> *Yeah, definitely. As it affects me as a student because I think on the mental health spirits and like anxiety thing. And then, socially it affects me as well, because it affects the way I relate to people. But I think that has taken me a lot of work to create and be comfortable with my identity and I think that not everyone has the time or the space to do that. Like, my opportunities have been my experience, I think, has been very privileged in that aspect. (F, Colombia)*

It appeared challenging for many to be open with others about their refugee identity, as they

were both not yet comfortable with this part of themselves and concerned with the potential

reactions to this disclosure. She recognized that this identity changed how she interacted with the

world and engaged socially.

Being open and comfortable with one's refugee identity had its challenges as well.

Students who regularly shared this aspect of their experiences also sought not to be reduced to

only their refugee identity.

> *So, going to rallies and protests and stuff like that, especially the one that happened on campus was really weird, because people who knew I was a refugee were like, why are you not in the middle of this? Why are you just not in the face of an officer right now? I'm like, because I don't wanna get deported. So, there was this expectation of that, but then also whenever I'm […] in an advisor's office, and I'll be like, oh, I'm applying to this program, I'm very excited, but there was a personal essay. What should I write about? They're like, well, you're a refugee, so that's a good point to write about. And it feels like they want me to commercialize and almost sell out. I don't know how to explain it. Yeah, like romanticize it. That just was not cute and I'm not – I'm more than just a refugee. I've come here, and I've made interactions with people and connections that have changed me and shaped me as a person. I went to schools, I've done all this stuff, and people don't see that unless they know you're a refugee.[…]So, as a refugee, and people are like, you're a refugee? And I feel like the political climate doesn't help that because people are really trying to find out, is the news right, so then they ask me. I'm like, I'm not your spokesperson, go Google it. (F, Iraq)*

The above student is not ashamed of or shy about her refugee identity, yet she simultaneously

feels as if others try to push her to exploit her identity to make a political point or receive

personal gain. She is uncomfortable simplifying herself, and her identity, to conform to these

roles.

   Relevant desired resources and supports. Students generally did not discuss desired

supports related to their religious or cultural identities. This result could speak to how the

majority of these students were attending extremely diverse undergraduate institutions. Most of

the discussed resources instead centered on how their colleges could acknowledge and embrace

their refugee identity. For some, an informal campus space or group centered around refugees

and their experiences was not sufficient to support refugee background students and their

visibility on a college campus. Students desired formal, administrative visibility via a concrete

office created by their undergraduate institution to specifically serve refugee students. Such an

office could create space for community building, alongside tangible catered services and

demonstrate broader administrative refugee acceptance.

> *I think universities like UIC could help students with a refugee background succeed by*
> *recognizing that it's tough and being like, we see you, we hear you, here's an office for*
> *you. They have a lot of offices at UIC, [none for] refugees. We have the legal services, but*
> *that's not gonna help me in my homework, is it? So, I wish there was a centralized –*
> *because I really feel like recognition through these institutions is a way to gage if we've*
> *made improvement. So, if we still don't have an office, if we still don't have a designated*
> *branch or place in UIC where refugee students can go get help or go and form*
> *communities, we're not supporting them enough. (F, Iraq)*

Having a refugee focused student office could translate into greater campus-wide recognition and

de-stigmatization of this identity. It could also indicate a shift toward more appropriate or

accessible services better aligned with refugee background students needs.

   Overall, students' felt as if their undergraduate institutions had room to grow when it

came to understanding the challenges specific to this identity and providing appropriate

accommodations. The above student went on to say:

> *Kind of meeting students half way and looking at them as individuals and not numbers, and that could mean the student is like, I have this paper and it's not translated, accommodating those – understanding that when people pick up five pieces of clothing and leave their countries, their homes forcibly, they're not preplanning for how I'm gonna fill out my FASFA, so I need my dad's birth certificate. Nobody's planning for that, and I think we really gotta start meeting [...] refugee students half way because they've already met us past the finish line just by being here, and institutions that are so rigid that don't want to accommodate people's languages, identities, religion, sexuality, races, and gender and cases, it doesn't make sense. A lot of schools want diversity and they say they're diverse, but they're not really ready to accommodate what diversity looks like, and it looks like translating. (F, Iraq)*

I believe that the point this student was making was that many universities talk a lot about

valuing diversity among their students, and yet do not adapt their processes to actually make

room for what accompanies specific kinds of diversity.

IX. DISCUSSION

Overview

The purpose of the present study was to examine the experiences of refugee-background college students currently in school in Chicago. Additional goals were to investigate this aim from a strengths perspective via looking into how students perceived and discussed their success, what may have facilitated or challenged their successes, and what practical lessons could be imparted to help others. The theory generated speaks to students interactions with 1) their external environment through engaging with different aspects of their visibility, 2) their internal strength as a result of their refugee experience, and 3) the dynamic process underscoring students experiences of balance as success. In this discussion, I will highlight contributions this study makes to existing bodies of literature by more deeply examining the different themes in this generated theory. Then I will shift to position the themes in a societal context and discuss how this theory may or may not be relevant to different populations of college students. Lastly, I will detail study limitations and implications for future policy and research alongside specific recommendations.

Examining Visibility

In the context of this study, the theme of visibility illuminated student experiences and desires when interacting with others. The theme encompasses tensions surrounding when and in what light students want to be seen, and what parts of themselves they want to be salient to others. It can be beneficial, complicated, and/or painful to feel either visible or invisible in a school context, cultural context, or refugee-specific context. This theme of visibility augments the acculturation literature both individually and communally, as visibility and acculturation influence and exist adjacent to each other. Visibility can play a role in how students acculturate,

and their acculturation can influence how visible they are. In this section I will dive deeper into visibility as a concept and, demonstrate how it augments the acculturation literature.

My results indicate that the conversation around visibility is really one way of speaking to the experience of difference and "otherness." The arenas that stood out to students as most relevant to their visibility were the school context, cultural and ethnic visibility, and refugee-specific visibility. Culture, ethnicity, and refugee background are some of the most critical ways my participants might be different from other Chicagoans. Additionally, school is typically the first context where they come into close prolonged contact with their new host culture and experience being seen as different. Schools are a hotbed of acculturation; the process migrants and members of host communities go through to incorporate multiple cultures (typically heritage and host) into their daily lives (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936).

The acculturative process can be shaped by migrant visibility and vice versa. Acculturation can differ based on migrant country of origin (Liebkind, & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000). Moreover, not all environments exert the same level of acculturative press, or acculturative demands on the people in those spaces (Trickett & Birman, 2005). School environments are traditionally marked by exerting an assimilationist press on students (Trickett & Birman, 2005), meaning that conformity is desirable in this context, yet potentially impossible for highly visible students. For my participants, not feeling seen by teachers often felt like not being valued, or that attempting to cross a linguistic and cultural divide to connect was not worth the effort. When teachers did put in that effort, it resulted in experiences that students' acknowledge shaped their current relationship with academics. Not being seen by peers was lonely, but it was sometimes worse to be seen, if that visibility revolved around 'unwelcome' differences, including different language abilities, skin color, dress, and cultural or social

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practices. Understandably, according to my results, this school visibility narrative was much subtler among the children who moved into ethnic enclaves and/or were in school with a high concentration of co-ethnic peers. Acculturation too may look different in such a context (Birman et al., 2005).

The tensions surrounding cultural and ethnic visibility both inside and outside of the school context also provide a framework for understanding the experience of not conforming to visual cultural expectations. It can be both a challenging and liberating space to inhabit when you don't visually fit schemas for either your heritage culture or the US. Familial and heritage cultural spaces often exert different acculturative press than educational spaces, where culturally specific behaviors are paramount (Trickett & Birman, 2005). Acculturation patterns also look different in children compared to adults, as children may be more likely to selectively acculturate or create a cultural blend (Birman & Trickett, 2001). Gaps in acculturation can form and lead to conflict in migrant families and communities across a range of immigrant groups (Ho & Birman, 2010; Smokowski, Rose, & Bacallao, 2008). My study participants reported community and familial level distance, conflict, and misunderstanding, when they presented themselves in a manner that was visibly different from the norm.

Moreover, although some literature on acculturation takes into account the context surrounding migration and resettlement, it still often typically focuses on the process of, and impact on, individuals. Yet cultural visibility is not entirely a discrete individual experience, and can also refer to how a person's culture or ethnicity is seen more broadly in the US. For many students this included having their culture or country of origin misrepresented or reduced to one unflattering view in the media. It also meant feeling as if their culture or country of origin and its people were irrelevant, as they were never discussed in school. In addition, choosing cultural or

national invisibility, when possible, was a difficult but sometimes necessary choice for participants to try to minimize prejudice and discrimination.

My results also suggest that refugee-specific visibility functions differently than cultural and ethnic visibility, as much like most other types of hardship and trauma, it is an inherently invisible characteristic. Tensions surrounding refugee-specific visibility developed among participants in tandem with the desire to connect with others who might be able to understand their history and how it still impacts them. However, it is not necessarily easy to identify other refugees outside of the context of refugee serving organizations, and the majority of my participants were not currently actively involved at such organizations. This refugee invisibility connects back to my realization that snowball sampling was ineffective with this population, both because many refugee-background students are not in college, and because they are literally not even visible to each other. Students also desired general refugee visibility in their larger social and educational environments, as once again it signals open acceptance of refugees in that community.

Yet choosing refugee specific visibility is not necessarily an easy choice. It can accompany stigma, perceived victimhood, and essentialization to that identity. Choosing this visibility can be a political act of resistance within our current governmental regime. Some participants desired to abandon the identity entirely, as interacting with others as a known refugee was a constant reminder of their trauma. Acculturation too can differ in a refugee context. For example, Knipscheer, Drogendijk, Gülşen, and Kleber (2009) researched the relationship between acculturation and posttraumatic stress in adult migrants from Turkey living in the Netherlands. They sampled migrants who were either ethnically Turkish or ethnically Kurdish (a group far more likely to be forced migrants). Interestingly, for ethnically Turkish immigrants, keeping

their heritage-based traditions predicted less vulnerability for posttraumatic stress. However, for the Kurdish immigrants, keeping their traditions predicted more vulnerability for posttraumatic stress. Migrating to get away from persecution, war, torture, and/or death changes the way that people adapt to and interact with their new environment. Those people who migrate by choice show less acculturative stress then those people who migrate involuntarily or under duress (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987). Therefore it is also possible that the tensions surrounding visibility may too have a different or greater impact on refugee background students compared to if the construct was examined in people who migrate for different reasons.

Lastly, participation in the study itself engaged tensions surrounding refugee invisibility. I described earlier how the students were excited to participate in an activity (i.e. my study) that made that identity and it's value in research visible. I recognize now that my participants saw talking with me as a way to fulfill both a personal and academic need to make refugee background experiences more visible. Research and support systems often inappropriately mix refugee experiences with larger immigrant experiences, and larger ethnic and racial minority categories (Birman, 2005, Boise et al., 2013, Sarr & Mosselson, 2010; Stevenson & Willott, 2007), and therefore refugees' unique contribution to research is also often invisible (Birman, 2005). We cannot make useful decisions and influence policy without research directly targeting the refugee experience. Although the goal to highlight refugee voices was evident to me from the beginning of my dissertation process, it has been very meaningful to see overlap in the needs of my participants and my own actions as a researcher.

Within the overarching theme of visibility, elements of students' experiences, specifically those related to cultural and ethnic visibility, inform acculturation theory, by contributing another layer with which to considers the acculturative experience. How an individual engages,

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intentionally and unintentionally, with their different cultures can alter their visibility across diverse environments, and similarly differing ways that a person may or may not be visible can alter how they are able to acculturate.

Examining the Power of the Refugee Experience

Stressing the strength and grace with which the students in this study approach their experiences is a study asset, and this perspective serves as a contribution to the refugee education literature, which is often very deficit focused. Moreover, in the section of my results dealing with participant identity, students often described not wanting to be essentialized to their refugee identity. There is a tension discussed throughout this project of students wanting their refugee identity to be accepted but simultaneously not wanting that to be the only thing that people see when they interact with them. That identity can be challenging for students because it is an often stigmatized identity associated with trauma and disadvantage. The theme of harnessing the power of the refugee experience provides an opportunity to flip that narrative with a strengths focus.

This theme is also the story of gaining insight into an empowerment process. Empowerment can be described as a process of gaining control over oneself, one's past, and one's future. It involves gaining confidence and agency in one's affairs (Rappaport, 1987). Harnessing the power of the refugee experience is absolutely a story of students gaining self-assurance and agency through reclaiming their history. Their refugee background helped them develop very mature perspectives on their priorities and assisted them in thinking through what they had already accomplished, allowing their history to serve as a source of confidence, and self-compassion. Participants were even able to sometimes see the good in their past hardships. Being able to see this proverbial "silver lining" served as another way to reclaim their past

experiences instead of having those experiences dictate their thoughts and behavior. This theme

also highlighted how students' refugee background underpinned their personal and collective

drive. Harnessing the power of their refugee experience emphasizes how students were learning

to increase control over their past by using it to assist them in their present, via positive self-talk

and managing living with their doubts and fears. Cultivating positive self-talk aided in persisting

in college in the face of doubt and insecurity, which is something that these students have

experience doing before as part of their experiences in their country of origin, migration

experiences, and/or their acculturation experiences. Many aspects of the refugee background

experience are marked by a significant lack of control, especially for children. Therefore it is

especially important to consider how this theme digs into participants' act of reclaiming that past

chaos, helplessness and the identity that came with it.

This is not to say that the participants in this study have achieved perfect control over

their lives or that they have absolute access to many of the key arenas that shape their

experiences. Many still struggle with issues like unstable finances, documentation, or illness that

are very much out of their control. However, I would argue that the data presented here represent

a particular point in a non-linear empowerment journey. Earning an education will help to

provide them more power and leverage over their futures via employment, financial stability, and

social status. Harnessing the power of their refugee experience now aids in persisting and

thriving in school to achieve that end. Yet that is not the central vision many have in their

futures. Instead, they see their education as a key element in their plan to give back. Participants

have a strong desire to give back to family members who sacrificed for them, to other refugees in

similar situations, and toward their larger host and heritage communities. This is an example of a

powerful empowered choice that participants have already made about their futures and look

forward to enacting.

Examining Balance

The results presented here highlight how my participants were not bound by a traditional understanding of success, tied exclusively to things like grades or future employment. On the contrary, they saw success as achieving balance, which meant finding a maintainable way of living where they were content and their needs were being met. Participants discussed a range of areas of their lives where they had different important needs, including traditional academic success, a safe and comfortable environment, community and human connections, health, obligation management, and identity. When considering what facilitated and/or challenged their balance, each of these elements of their experience had the power to do either, as ups and downs in any individual domain could influence the entire system. The real lesson learned from these results was how the ultimate success was getting these different areas well balanced together in one individual system that was unique for each participant. Although the specific calibration of that balance was distinctive for everyone, the broader areas of balance remained the same.

My findings concerning success as balance help to inform a life balance model created by researchers in occupational sciences and validated across different populations (Matuska & Christiansen, 2008). Matsuka and Christiansen (2008) define balance as a "satisfying pattern of daily occupations that is healthful, meaningful, and sustainable to an individual within the context of his or her current life circumstances" (p. 11). This closely reflects my results, as my understanding of student balance saw it as a manageable state that allowed students the ability to meet their needs and feel content above and beyond basic survival. My theory incorporated six needs that require managing in order to try to find balance. Finding balance did not mean that students had no struggles; rather it indicated that these troubles did not upset their ability to have

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a nourishing and maintainable way of living. Matsuka and Christiansen (2008) similarly suggest that when certain key areas of need are not met, people experience less general well-being. Their model described those necessities as the following: "(1) meet basic needs necessary for sustained biological health and physical safety; (2) have rewarding and self-affirming relationships with others; (3) feel engaged, challenged, and competent; (4) create meaning and a satisfactory personal identity; (5) organize time and energy to meet important personal goals and personal renewal" (p. 11). This model has been applied to clinical samples, including women with chronic stress-related mental illness (Hakansson & Matsuka, 2010) and those living with multiple sclerosis (Matsuka & Erickson, 2008), and in the general population (Wagman, Hakansson, Bjorklund, & Falkmer, 2012). Additional studies using this model have suggested that the arenas of a positive larger social environment (including media, norms, and global influences) and financial security are also important elements in achieving life balance (Wagman et al., 2012).

The categories that emerged as relevant to my participants have commonalities with those Matsuka and Christiansen (2008) explored. They both converge with and diverge from this existing model. The understanding of balance that I developed contributes to the literature as it underscores specific elements that may not necessarily matter to people not coming from a refugee background, or may not simply matter as much. Matsuka and Christiansen's (2008) first necessity, to "meet basic needs necessary for sustained biological health and physical safety" overlaps with two of my facets a 'safe and comfortable environment' and 'health.' However, Matsuka and Christiansen take a more surface look at safety, only really incorporating physical safety. In contrast, this was one small portion of the elements of safety and comfort that mattered to my study participants. They also needed emotional safety and comfort, financial safety, and legal safety. Wagman and colleagues (2012) did seek to extend Matsuka and Christiansen's

(2008) model and include financial security. Nevertheless, I placed finances under an umbrella of safety because in refugee populations financial insecurity very often means poverty, hunger, and homelessness. Therefore money equals safety in this group in a way that it may not for many other populations. Additionally, I included legal safety, as tenuous documentation status is also a risk to participant physical and emotional safety. It could mean living with constant fear of personal or familial deportation back to an unsafe area, or of the reality of that coming true. Moreover, legal safety plays into financial safety, as people without documentation can have trouble paying for college, as scholarships and financial aid are more challenging to find. These areas of divergence between the models could demonstrate how some life balance needs may matter more to people from a refugee or migrant background more generally.

Matsuka and Christiansen's (2008) second necessity "hav[ing] rewarding and self-affirming relationships with others" has great overlap with my component of community and human connection. My element extends past the existing model, as my discussion of interpersonal needs is more overtly communal. It recognizes a larger sense of community and the tangible benefits of support across contexts. The third necessity of the existing model is "feel[ing] engaged, challenged, and competent." This area aligns most closely with my component discussing traditional academic success. I think the purest and most optimistic perspective of traditional academic success is that it reflects engaged and competent students. The moments when students described being most at ease with grades as an evaluative tool was when the grades reflected their efforts to overcome a challenge and or their perceived augmented or affirmed competence. Yet, the need that many students described in the arena of traditional academic success was a surface, on paper, need that would only function to open present and future doors for them. Although, students' personal feelings of engagement and competence

mattered, they were not the parts connected to immediate student needs surrounding traditional academic success. This distinction may stem from the fact that the Matsuka and Christiansen (2008) model originating in the occupational sciences literature. Therefore, their understanding may be skewed toward work as opposed to a school environment.

The fourth necessity from the existing life balance model, "creat[ing] meaning and a satisfactory personal identity also aligns very closely with my component of identity. The primary distinction between my conceptualization and Matsuka and Christiansen (2008) is that mine focuses specifically on identity as it pertains to religion, culture, and refugee status. This was not the focus of the existing life balance model, as the authors instead described a broader more holistic sense of personal identity. Lastly, Matsuka and Christiansen's (2008) fifth necessity was, "organiz[ing] time and energy to meet important personal goals and personal renewal." This too very closely aligns with my component of obligation management. This may actually be the area where our models find the greatest overlap, as organizing one's time and energy is a broadly useful ability across populations and life circumstances. Although my participants may be juggling different demands than other samples, the goal remains the same.

Positioning Theory in Society

Through many phases of the current study, individuals both familiar with community research and people in different fields would regularly pose the same question to me - Is this experience and the theory generated broadly applicable or specific to people coming from a refugee background? I realized that largely the answer is simply - Yes. The theory generated is simultaneously broad and uniquely relevant for people from a refugee background. Depending on which aspects of the theory are attended to at any given time will reflect the transferability of the study results.

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First, I want to highlight how the demographic categories describing this sample look different from most samples. I included personal and familial torture history and familial separation in my results. These descriptors illuminate the distinct and often traumatic experiences of refugee-background young adults. Participants were not directly asked about torture, yet five participants disclosed personal and/or familial torture histories, and how they served as motivators for their forced migration. It is important to keep in mind that although five participants disclosed this information in an unprompted fashion, that does not indicate that the remaining ten participants did not have similar histories. I can only state that they did not report similar histories spontaneously during their interviews. Additionally, familial separation was defined as experiencing temporary or continued separation from at least one member of their immediate family (i.e. parents and/or siblings). Eleven participants experienced and/or still experience familial separation in the US. Three participants migrated to the US alone, two of them have spent their entire time in the US alone, and five participants have spent their entire time in the US without both of their parents. These matter of fact characteristics help to emphasize how this group's experiences differ from others.

Yet, when thinking through the results, I even found myself, as a person not from a refugee background, identifying with the results. Most people desire appropriate visibility in their lives. They want others to be respectful of them and their needs during interactions and to acknowledge their value as a human and an intellectual. However, most people also have circumstances when they too wish to be invisible. Those moments may differ for different people. For example, women may struggle with the visibility of their gender identity in the context of street harassment. Many identities have the power to be both desirable and problematic depending on the person and the context.

Moreover, another key way this theory is unique to refugee background students involves how participants have mobilized the power inherent in their refugee experience. The self-knowledge and mature perspective these students have acquired offers them a rich source of strength. Once again, the act of using experiences of overcoming obstacles as a foundation for confidence in one's abilities and motivation is not a unique trajectory, as gaining strength from adversity could apply to people having faced many different kinds of hardship. Like refugees, many immigrants and ethnic minorities face challenges associated with living in poverty, trauma, and language and cultural difficulties. Hardship is not unusual, but the refugee experience is a distinctive kind of adversity that instills rare strength.

Striving for life balance is also a very common human experience. Most people have a myriad of challenges and needs to attend to on any given day. Yet balance may not register as success for different groups of students, who have different histories and priorities. Also, much like the Matsuka and Christiansen's (2009) life balance theory, the broad areas of need that emerged from my results appear relevant to most people at first glance. Traditional academic success is likely valued by any student, alongside a safe and comfortable environment, community and human connection, health, obligation management, and identity. On the surface, we could all insert our own needs and stories onto these subthemes.

Yet, on closer inspection each of these areas of needs reflect more specific realities. The desire for traditional academic success is colored by my participants' academic histories, their joys at mastering challenging material, their dismay at feeling misrepresented by their grades, and their intense desires to create different lives for themselves and their families. The need for a safe and comfortable environment is deeply connected to the students' refugee backgrounds, as they often have a first-hand understanding of violence and poverty. Moreover, they require legal

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security in the form of documentation and freedom from personal and familial deportation back to unsafe regions, which is a specific realm of safety. Their need for community and human connection is often tied to their co-ethnic community and shaped by the complexity of feeling misunderstood by non-refugees. In addition, community was seen as a key source of both emotional and tangible supports and success for my participants. The desire for good health is universal, yet in this context it is also directly connected to some of the physical and mental health consequences of being a refugee and/or survivor of torture. Even obligation management, which is relevant for most adults with jobs or families, looks different in a refugee background population. The challenges of their financial situations, and the often strong need to care for family, adds to the areas in need of management, and the consequences if they slip up. Lastly, most people can relate to wanting a positive sense of self and identity. However, within this sample, identity was often more communal than individual and connected to religion, culture, and their refugee background. Taken together, the nuance this sample provided in the creation of this theory is both as unique as a fingerprint when examined as a whole and broadly transferable when analyzed piece by piece.

Limitations

As with any study, there were many limitations to this work. First of all, although this study was in early planning stages before the 2016 presidential election, recruitment for this study began under our current governmental regime. Interviews took place during a particular political climate involving a lot of fear, discomfort, and anger for many participants. This was evident in their interviews. Such a noticeable societal shift may have also played a role in some people choosing not to self-identify and participate in this study. It was more challenging to recruit participants than originally anticipated, perhaps due to the political climate, in

combination with UIC changing their mass email rules. A few months into recruiting the university stopped allowing research studies into their mass emails without warning. However, after this change and a stall in my recruitment, I recruited the remaining six students from refugee serving organizations and other institutions of higher education. I believe that these additional students helped to augment and solidify my emerging themes, yet the context surrounding my recruitment may have altered the participants in my sample.

Furthermore, I acknowledge that my identity may have influenced how much my participants were willing to share. Although I engaged in many purposeful behaviors to put participants at ease and develop rapport, I am still not a refugee. Despite the fact that I shared my family history and how I created this study in part to honor my grandparents, I could not relate on a firsthand level to their struggles or share their experiences. Therefore, my participants may not have been comfortable fully confiding in me. Moreover, I am also female and in some cultures it may be more or less taboo for a man to meet with a woman alone. I offered to meet participants at any location where they would feel comfortable, yet once again this could reflect the motivation behind some participants self-selecting out of the study. Also, I am white, straight, cisgender, and middle class. This in and of itself could have influenced participants' comfort in interacting with me, or lack thereof, regardless of my immigrations status. In addition, I cannot ignore that for many of my participants English was not their first language. I may be missing both cultural and linguistic nuance in our conversations. Yet, it would be likely impossible for one researcher of any background to understand that degree of nuance with a diverse group representing 12 countries across Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East.

Another limitation to the current study is that the themes and my interpretation of them

have evolved from the day of the first interview through the completion of this manuscript. Although member checking was an extremely helpful process, the study could have benefitted from a second round of interviews to help dive into and clarify emerging ideas. Unfortunately, I did not have the time or resources to accomplish that. One area in particular that I would have addressed was gender, sexuality, and disability. I now recognize this as an area lacking in my questions and analysis, as did my participants. I did not probe into these areas as they were not salient to me in the development of the study, and their absence did not appear to me until I was deep into my analysis. I was focused on specific areas of human diversity as opposed to all areas of human diversity. All of my participants self-identified as cisgender in the demographic questionnaire, and only one self-identified as queer. I did not probe into these identities or how they may have interacted with their cultural, religious, and refugee identities. Moreover, none of my participants disclosed being married or having any children. I realize now that this might not have been a coincidence, as additional familial obligations may have made college impossible. Questions probing into their family structure or family planning may have illuminated other areas of their experiences.

Implications and Recommendations

The substantive theory developed in this study has wide-reaching implications not just for the literature but also for educators and those who create institutional policy. The theory helps to provide insight into why college is important to refugee background students, what their goals are as students, and what may help to get them in the door as new students and out of the door as graduates. The current study advances the field by providing an opportunity to hear directly from refugee background college students about the realities of their lives. This is also an opportunity to make change as a result of what was learned.

A goal of this study was to create a methodologically sound, participant experience focused, and academically relevant theory alongside practically useful lessons and recommendations. Specifically, one aim for my participants and myself was to make suggestions for educators and administrators in institutions of higher education to consider. Suggestions primarily arose along the lines of the needs students described valuing in order to achieve balance. Yet when synthesizing these results, the themes of visibility and harnessing the power of the refugee experience also became evident again on a newly exposed level. From this synthesis emerged three particular recommendations for institutions of higher education: 1) Collect refugee specific information and use it, 2) Deliberately support a refugee student community, and 3) Act as if every student could be from a refugee background. In the following subsections I will discuss each of these recommendations in more detail.

Collect refugee specific information and use it. When integrating student recommendations for desired supports and resources, it became clear that many of their desires would be impossible to enact until institutions of higher education started collecting refugee relevant data. When beginning this research journey, I realized that UIC, along with other colleges and administrators, had no idea how many refugee background students went to their school, and had no way of accurately determining this information from their existing data. I am not necessarily espousing that these institutions collect data on legal status, as that is sensitive data that could be misused. However, with no data, there is no power to allocate appropriate accommodations and resources to this population. Therefore, some changes need to be made.

Participants lamented inappropriate expectations for the grades and test scores necessary for college admittance, and scholarships. A consistent concern was that schools and scholarships systematically overlook refugee background students who face unique challenges and do not

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have the privileges and resources to complete competitive applications**.** Affirmative action and ethnically specific scholarships (i.e. awards aimed at Latino students) do a lot of good work toward educational equity, yet they typically fail to recognize refugee background students, who often have a different academic trajectory. More refugee focused programs and scholarships could fill that gap.

Deeply intertwined with these academic standards is the ability to obtain the necessary finances to pay for college, especially for asylum seeking and undocumented students. Students described financial issues as the principal issue that almost stopped them from attending college, altered their application and admittance process, created extreme worry and stress, and could still have the power to obstruct or delay their graduation. Participants suggested that colleges could implement a system allowing refugee-background students to pay for college on a deferred schedule or even to work on campus during or after their education in exchange for financial assistance. Additionally, participants suggested that colleges could offset some costs adjacent to college tuition, including such things as parking, housing, or food for refugee background students.

These recommendations hinge on refugee visibility. Recognizing the presence of refugee background students in the first place, and setting up inclusive standards for them related to grades, test scores, and financial aid could go a long way to admitting and retaining more of these students. It is important to see refugee background students by taking the time to investigate and validate the challenges they face academically and financially as a result of a common lack of resources. It is important to see them by collecting enough information to identify refugee background applicants. It is also important to see them by recognizing the value that refugee background students bring and consequently making appropriate accommodations

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and resource allocations to let them in the door, ease stress while they are here, and support them through graduation.

Deliberately support a refugee student community. A regular story among participants was the desire to create community with other refugee background students. Students often described not knowing many other refugee background students, and how that was a void in their social and emotional lives. In addition, spaces oriented toward their cultural identity did not inevitably provide desired support and acceptance, because the people in those spaces could not necessarily relate to their experiences and perspectives. Some participants desired a refugee student group or club, which could function as a space for socializing, supporting each other, and advocating for refugee specific causes. Other students instead wanted formal administrative support by means of a distinct office created specifically to serve refugee background students. This office would signal administrative and campus wide visibility and acceptance. It could also have the power to both build community, like an informal club, and also offer tailored services relevant to refugee background students.

Supporting a refugee student community means fostering their relationships with each other and strengthening their experience with appropriate programming and supports. Intentionally and thoughtfully creating space for a refugee student community provides institutions of higher education an opportunity to help refugee background students feel cared for, seen, and valued by their school.

Act as if every student could be from a refugee background. It is a valuable lesson to remember the invisibility of the refugee identity, and to learn not to make assumptions about refugee background students. My 15 participants were from 12 countries, spoke 14 different languages besides English, used 8 different descriptors to detail their racial identification, and

had a wide range of majors, skills, interests, and plans for the future. Some students presented as from an immigrant background, and some presented as US born, with typical American dress and no accent when speaking English. Therefore, I would recommend that educators and staff behave as if every student they interact with could be from a refugee background, because it is true.

Sensitive, well-trained service providers, representing diverse (including refugee) backgrounds may be equally as valuable as any actual services provided. Participants discussed how they could benefit from more transparent and accessible campus services (financial services in particular), where they felt comfortable being vulnerable and honest about their challenges. Refugee background students are less likely to have family that has experience with or can help them navigate these services. Furthermore, seeking services can be a sensitive experience as it might involve undocumented students divulging legal status or other personal details. Therefore, staff members that understand and anticipate the range of students that might walk through their door can contribute to students feeling heard and unashamed as they navigate the complex demands of being a college student.

In addition, instructors would also benefit from conducting their classes as if there is always at least one refugee background person in every classroom. Study participants described painful and alienating experiences in their classrooms where instructors discussed or presented triggering material, like violent acts or details from the conflicts in their home countries, in a cavalier fashion. Refugee background students could greatly benefit (like many students) from a college environment where instructors expect and account for the possibility of mental health difficulties and trauma in their students, via curating the materials and lectures they choose to share and more importantly the manner with which they introduce potentially difficult topics.

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Students also discussed a desire for understanding from instructors regarding the complexity of their lives and the often challenging schedules they maintain. As mentioned earlier, sometimes students cannot approach schoolwork as their top priority given all of the competing demands on their time and energy. Recognition, understanding, and flexibility from instructors and teaching assistants surrounding the reality of their lives can make or break a classroom experience, and contribute to a student's ability to find balance in his or her current situation. Therefore, instructors should consider that they might not be able to recognize a refugee background student, and that being prepared as if there always are these students in the audience can create a more comfortable and responsive environment for all their students.

Conclusions

Instructors, staff members, and administrators at institutions of higher education have the power to develop a more holistic understanding of their applicants and current students. Refugee background students want to be seen and accepted as complex, multifaceted individuals with many identities, challenges, and strengths. These students have likely had a difficult past that still challenges them to this day. However, that past is not a liability, instead these students have developed immense strength as a result, that benefits them and those around them. Colleges could gain from making more room in their practices, processes, and campus spaces for such mature and hardworking students. Investigating and understanding refugee background students' perspectives and goals (i.e. how they are more likely to view college success as balance), can provide a foundation of information and understanding for these efforts and how to best recruit and serve these students. By explicitly embracing refugee visibility and recognizing the power these students have harnessed as a result of this background, colleges can make clear the following message: Yes, refugee background students and their identities and experiences

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matter. Yes, refugee background people enrich and add value the spaces they inhabit. Yes,

refugee background people are worth accommodating.

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Appendix A IRB Approval

Approval Notice
Initial Review (Response To Modifications)

June 30, 2017

Emily Bray
Psychology
1007 W Harrison St
BSB 1009, M/C 285
Chicago, IL 60612
Phone: (201) 788-3252 / Fax: (312) 413-4122

RE: **Protocol # 2017-0544**
        "An Investigation of Strength: Refugee Students' Success in Higher Education"

Dear Ms. Bray:

Please note that stamped and approved .pdfs of all recruitment and consent documents will be forwarded as an attachment to a separate email. OPRS/IRB no longer issues paper letters and stamped/approved documents, so it will be necessary to retain the emailed documents for your files for auditing purposes.

Your Initial Review (Response To Modifications) was reviewed and approved by the Expedited review process on June 27, 2017. You may now begin your research

Please note the following information about your approved research protocol:

Protocol Approval Period: June 27, 2017 - June 27, 2018
Approved Subject Enrollment #:   25
Additional Determinations for Research Involving Minors: These determinations have not been made for this study since it has not been approved for enrollment of minors.
Performance Sites: UIC
Sponsor: None
PAF#:   Not applicable
Research Protocol(s):
a.   An Investigation of Strength: Refugee Students' Success in Higher Education; Version 2.1; 06/30/2017

Recruitment Material(s):
a.   Recruitment Flyer; Version 2.1; 06/15/2017
b.   Reminder Script; Version 2; 06/15/2017

c.   Email Text; Version 2; 06/15/2017
d.   Prescreen Script; Version 2.1; 06/15/2017

Informed Consent(s):
a.   Consent Form; Version 2.1; 06/15/2017
b.   A waiver of documentation of informed consent has been granted under 45 CFR 46.117 and an alteration of consent has been granted under 45 CFR 46.116(d) for recruitment purposes only; minimal risk; verbal or electronic consent to screening/eligibility questions will be obtained; written consent/ will be obtained at enrollment.

Your research meets the criteria for expedited review as defined in 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1) under the following specific category(ies):

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes., (7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including but not limited to research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Please note the Review History of this submission:

Receipt Date	Submission Type	Review Process	Review Date	Review Action
05/17/2017	Initial Review	Expedited	06/10/2017	Modifications Required
06/16/2017	Response To Modifications	Expedited	06/27/2017	Approved

Please remember to:

    Use your **research protocol number** (2017-0544) on any documents or correspondence with the IRB concerning your research protocol.

    Review and comply with all requirements on the OPRS website at,
"UIC Investigator Responsibilities, Protection of Human Research Subjects"
    (http://tigger.uic.edu/depts/ovcr/research/protocolreview/irb/policies/0924.pdf)
Please note that the UIC IRB has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.

Please be aware that if the scope of work in the grant/project changes, the protocol must be amended and approved by the UIC IRB before the initiation of the change.

We wish you the best as you conduct your research. If you have any questions or need further help, please contact OPRS at (312) 996-1711 or me at (312) 355-0816.

Sincerely,

Alison Santiago, MSW, MJ
Assistant Director, IRB # 2
Office for the Protection of Research Subjects

nclosure(s):

1. **Informed Consent Document(s):**
   a. Consent Form; Version 2.1; 06/15/2017
2. **Recruiting Material(s):**
   a. Recruitment Flyer; Version 2.1; 06/15/2017
   b. Reminder Script; Version 2; 06/15/2017
   c. Email Text; Version 2; 06/15/2017
   d. Prescreen Script; Version 2.1; 06/15/2017

cc: Michael E. Ragozzino, Psychology, M/C 285
       Amanda Roy (Faculty Advisor), Psychology, M/C 285

Appendix B Data Collection Materials

B.1 Demographic Questionnaire

For Researcher Use Only
Participant ID: _____   Date: _____

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1. How old are you? _____

2. How do you identify racially and/or ethnically?

   _____

3. What is your gender? _____

4. Where were you born? _____

5. If you speak any languages other than English, please write them below:

   _____

   _____

B.2 Interview Guide

Refugee Higher Education Interview Guide

As we talked about before (e.g. during recruitment and consent), I am interested in learning about refugee background college student's experiences. During this interview I will ask you about the supports and difficulties that have both facilitated and challenged your access to and success in college, and the types of additional supports and resources that might be helpful to you throughout the rest of your time in college. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions; I just want to know what your experiences have been and what you would want in the future. Once again, as was stated on the consent document, you can opt not to answer any question or to end the interview at any time. Additionally, everything we talk about is confidential. Let's start!

Warm-up Questions/Basic College Info
I am going to start off by asking you some basic questions about your college experience so far

1. How long have you been at [NAME OF COLLEGE]?
2. When do you expect to graduate?
3. Were you at any other schools/Universities before [NAME OF COLLEGE]?
4. What is your major? Intended major?
5. Do you live on campus or off campus? With whom?

Personal Background
Now we are going to switch over to talk about some of your personal background

1. When did you come here to the U.S.? How old were you?
2. Who did you come with? Did you come with your family?
   a. Were you all together? Or did you get separated?
3. Do you remember/know why you had to leave your country?
4. What was your life like in your home country before coming here? Before and/or after things got unlivable? What did your family do?
5. What was your journey to the U.S. like? What do you remember of it (what were you told about it)?
6. What do you remember about adjusting to life in the U.S.? Can you recall some of the best/hardest parts about living here?
7. Do you know/remember if you family got any help when you all arrived? If so what kind? From whom?

Journey to College
Now, we are going to change over to talking more about your journey to college.

1. Did you always think you would go to college? When did you first think about applying?
2. Why did you want to go to college?
3. Was anyone/anything in particular instrumental in supporting you or motivating you to attend college?
4. Was anyone/anything in particular unsupportive or discouraging?
5. What was your college application process like?
   a. Did anyone help you with applying?
   b. How did you decide on where to apply? How did you choose to attend [NAME OF COLLEGE]?

Defining Success
Now are going to talk about success and what it means to you.

1. What does being in college mean to you? What is the point/ what motivated you to come here?
2. Where in your life do you feel most successful?
    a. Home? Work? Extracurricular?
3. Do you feel successful at [NAME OF COLLEGE]?
    a. How so? Why or why not?
4. Can you describe a particular time when you felt really successful in college at [NAME OF COLLEGE](or if relevant other college)?
5. Can you describe a time when you were worried that you were not succeeding?
6. When thinking about college success, can you describe how important you think grades/GPA are?
7. How about how the importance of learning/understanding the information well?
8. How about the importance of your time in college helping you get a good job after you graduate?
9. Do you think your peers share these same opinions about what success in college means?
    a. Why or why not? If not what do you think they think?
10. Do you think your family shares these same opinions about what success in college means?
    a. Why or why not? If not what do you think they think?

Facilitators and Challenges
Now I wanted us to focus in on more specific aspects of your life that may helped you succeed in college, been challenging for you, or helped shape your experience here. We are going to go through a range of topics.

Schoo Culture in the US *(If they arrived before school age, can adapt)*
1. Tell me about what school was like for you when you got to the U.S.?
    a. If relevant, what was it like compared to your country of origin?
    b. Was it a difficult adjustment? How so?
2. Do you remember what your relationships were like with other students? With teachers?
    a. Did you like them? Have positive relationships?
3. Was there every a time when there was a gap in your schooling? A period of time when you did not attend school, either in your home country or here in the US? Why was that? What was that like?
4. How do you believe past schooling experiences in elementary and/or high school impacted your time in college?

Linguistic and Cultural Differences
1. What was your experience like learning English?
2. Do you think your English language skills (either having a lot or less than you would like) have impacted your college experience?
3. Do you feel culturally or religiously different on campus?
    a. If so, what has that been like?
4. Do you believe that the campus climate embraces your culture and/or cultural diversity in general?
5. Are you connected to any cultural/religious communities or organizations? How have they played a role in your college experience?
6. How do you think your cultural/religious identity has influenced your college experience?

Social Support and Belonging on Campus

1. You mentioned earlier _____who/what was really supportive/motivating/discouraging during your journey to college? Do you think that past experience impacted you here? Has the support or lack of it continued?
2. How have you felt about the classes you have taken at [NAME OF COLLEGE] so far? Can you tell me about some positive class experiences? Negative experiences?
3. Are there any particular instructors/TA's/advisors that have stood out to you during your time here? Can you recall the best/worst people you have dealt with here?
    a. What made them so great/awful?
4. Do you feel as if you fit in on campus?
5. Do you socialize with people from [NAME OF COLLEGE] much outside of class? Or are more of your friends from other parts of your life?
6. Do you like to spend time on campus?
    a. Do you feel comfortable here?
    b. Why? Why not?
7. Are you a member of any campus groups or organizations?
    a. If so how important is it to you?
    b. If not, is there any group you have thought about joining? Or any group you would join if it existed?
8. Do you regularly attend campus events? Like concerts or sporting events?
    a. Why? Why not?
9. If not already covered, have your friends (from outside of [NAME OF COLLEGE]) been supportive of you attending college?
    a. How so? Or why not?

Familial Influences
1. (If not already covered) Has your family been supportive of you attending college?
    a. How so? Or why not?
    b. Do you believe that your family understands why college is important to you? Understands what you work on?
2. Do you think they have expectations for you and your education? What are they?
3. Do members of your family have experiences with college?
    a. If so what kind/what was it like?
4. How do you believe your family has been most helpful to you while you have been a college student?
5. Have you ever received school-related help from your family?
6. Are there specific things you do to help out your family? Can you describe them?
    a. Errands/chores/childcare?
7. Has it ever been difficult to balance helping out at home with schoolwork?

Financial Factors
1. College can be financially difficulty for lots of people. Have finances been any trouble for you in college?
    a. If so, how?
    b. How have you dealt with that?
2. Have you used financial aid?
    a. What is that process like?
3. Do you have a job? Or avenues to make money?
    a. What do you do?
    b. Has it ever been difficult to balance having a job with schoolwork?

Mental Health and Help Seeking
1. Do you think there are any specific aspects of you as a person/your personality that have contributed to your success in college?
    a. i.e. strong motivation, good study skills, perseverance
2. Everyone experiences doubt in their abilities sometimes, has this every happened to you with regard to your path in college?
3. Has stress or any mental or physical health difficulties ever interfered with your life while in college? How so?
4. Who do you go to for emotional support or help when things get tough?
    a. Family/friends/therapist?
5. How has the current political climate impacted how you feel? Or how you feel you are perceived?
6. How does other aspects of the new impact you? Like media about war/persecution elsewhere or in your home country?

Prejudice and Discrimination
1. Have you ever been treated differently or experienced discrimination or prejudice because of your skin color, ethnicity, religion, or country of origin in an educational setting? Or seen someone else have this kind of experience?
    a. Any incidences like this during college? Or when you were younger?
    b. If so, can you tell me about what happened? How did that make you feel?
    c. Have thoughts, concerns, experiences related to discrimination impacted your experience in college? Your feelings about the campus? Relationships with faculty/classmates? Future goals?
2. Have you ever been treated differently or experienced discrimination or prejudice because of your refugee background in an educational setting? Or seen someone else have this kind of experience?
    a. Any incidences like this during college? Or when you were younger?
    b. If so, can you tell me about what happened? How did that make you feel?

General
1. How do you think your refugee background has influenced your college experience? Do you think non-refugee immigrants and/or U.S. born people have some differences in their college experiences? Why or why not?
2. Are you connected to any refugee serving organizations? How have they played a role in your college experience?
3. Like everyone, some refugee background people choose not to attend college or not to graduate? Do you know anyone who has had that experience? Why specifically do you think refugee-background people might make those choices?
4. What do you think has helped you succeed the most while in college?
5. What do you think has been the most challenging thing for you to deal with while in college?

Wrap Up/Looking to the future
1. What do you think will be important in helping you graduate?
2. Is there anything that you think would prevent you from graduating?
3. What could universities like [NAME OF COLLEGE] do to make college more accessible for people from a refugee background?
4. What could universities like [NAME OF COLLEGE] do to help people from a refugee background succeed while in college?
5. Are there any supports/services/organizations you wish you had had while you were in college?

6. If you were able to survey other refugee background college students what would you like to know? Or what do you think is most important for people from a non-refugee background to learn?
7. Do you have any post-graduation plans?
8. What do you plan to eventually do for a living?
9. Is there anything else you think I should know/ would like to share?

Appendix C Results

C.1 Sample Demographics

Table I.

Demographics

Demographic Factor	Frequency
Current Age	M = 21.4 years-old (Range = 18-26)
Reported Gender	Female = 9 Male = 6

Country of Origin	Africa (n = 3)
	    Democratic Republic of Congo (n = 1)
	    Ethiopia (n = 1)
	    Nigeria (n = 1)
	Asia (n = 2)
	    Myanmar (n = 1)
	    Sri Lanka (n = 1)
	Europe (n = 1)
	    Ukraine (n = 1)
	Latin America (n = 5)
	    Colombia (n = 1)
	    Guatemala (n = 1)
	    Mexico (n = 3)
	Middle East (n = 4)
	    Iraq (n = 1)
	    Syria (n = 2)
	    Yemen (n = 1)

Age of arrival to US	M = 10.7 years-old (Range = 1-23 years-old)
Time in US	M = 10.6 years (Range = 2-20 years)
Additional languages Spoken	Amharic, Arabic, Burmese, French, Karen, Lingala, Sinhalese, Spanish, Swahili, Q'eqchi, Russian, Tamil, Yoruba, Zulu
Race Descriptors Used	African, Asian, Arab, Black, Indigenous, Latino, Hispanic, White
Religious Descriptors volunteered	Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim
Current Undergraduate Institution	Harold Washington College (n = 1) Loyola University (n = 2) St. Augustine College (n = 1) Northeastern Illinois University (n = 2) Malcolm X College (n = 1) University of Illinois at Chicago (n = 9)
Transfer Status	Attended more than one college (n = 6) Attended only current college (n = 9)

Major	Biochemistry (n = 1)
	Biology (n = 2)
	Business (n = 2)
	Community Health (n = 1)
	Finance (n = 1)
	Math (n = 1)
	Neuroscience (n = 2)
	Nursing (n = 1)
	Political Science (n = 1)
	Psychology (n = 2)
	Physics (n = 1)
	Sociology (n = 1)
	Teaching of Spanish (n = 1)
Estimated Graduation Date	December 2018 – May 2024
Disclosed Past Personal or Familial Torture Experiences	Yes (n = 5) - Personal (n = 2), Familial (n = 4) No (n = 10)
Experienced Familial Separation	Yes = 11 No = 4

C.2 Abridged Participant Profiles

Table II.

Participant Profiles

Participant ID	Age	Age of Arrival	Gender	Country of Origin	Transfer History	Major
1	18	7	F	Nigeria	N	Business
2	22	6	F	Mexico	Y	Teaching of Spanish
3	20	16	F	Syria	N	Biochemistry
4	21	1	M	Ukraine	N	Psychology/Biology
5	21	3	M	Yemen	Y	Business
6	23	17	M	Mexico	Y	Finance
7	19	5	F	Colombia	N	Political Science
8	19	17	M	Syria	N	Neuroscience
9	20	12	F	Iraq	Y	Sociology
10	26	23	F	Democratic Republic of Congo	Y	Nursing
11	25	22	M	Ethiopia	Y	Math/Physics
12	23	5	F	Mexico	N	Psychology
13	24	13	M	Myanmar	N	Community Health
14	22	4	F	Guatemala	Y	Neuroscience
15	19	10	F	Sri Lanka	N	Biology

C.3 Principal Codes

Table III.

Overarching and Balance Related Codes

Theoretical Codes	Definition	Focused Codes	Definition
1. Visibility	This code engages with the tensions surrounding the complexity of when refugee background students are visible, and when they desire to be visible. .	1.1 Engaging with visibly in school	This code is used to describe circumstances where a student felt visible or invisible (personally, socially, or academically) in school (at any point in their life). It often involved standing out or being ignored because of linguistic, cultural, and or racial differences. Yet it could also have involved being seen for who they were and the reality of their circumstances, and helped by a teacher or school staff member. For example, a teacher could have noticed that a student's parents could not assist with helping the child read English, so therefore she went out of her way to assist.
		1.2 Engaging with ethnic/cultural visibility	This code revolves around a range of experiences related to having personal cultural or ethnic identities be visible or not. A student could describe not visually meeting cultural expectations (either American or that of country of origin), or experiencing racism or discrimination as a result of this visibility (or choosing invisibility to avoid these situations).
		1.21 Seeing culture/country portrayed in the US	This code delves into how students see their culture, religion, or country of origin portrayed in the US (in the media, books, etc). This often includes feelings of misrepresentation or as if their heritage is irrelevant or invisible in this country.
		1.3 Engaging with refugee (in)visibility	This code describes tensions surrounding refugee (in)visibility. It can range from wanting to be more visible for personal or political reasons and even create community with other refugees, to describing the challenges of being "out" to others about this identity.
2. Harnessing power of refugee experience	This code engages with the strength students derived from their	2.1 Managing doubt	This code involves descriptions of student's feelings of doubt surrounding their intelligence, ability to learn/do the work necessary for college, ability to graduate from college, etc, and whatever they might do to manage this doubt.

		2.2 Reflecting on self-talk	This code involves students' reflecting on how they talk to themselves. They may describe the negative ways they might internally talk to themselves: "I am not good enough", "I can't do this", "I do not belong here." It also involves how they manage to insert positive self-talk in and stay motivated and focused.
	refugee background, and their desire to use that strength to help others.	2.3 Feeling motivated by refugee background	For this code, students described ways in which their refugee background served as motivation to push past obstacles, doubt and negative self-talk. For example, knowing all they had already been through and accomplished allowed them to put the stress of college in context next to much worse experiences.
		2.4 Feeling motivated by refugee community	For this code, students described ways in which other refugees (family, friends, community members, mentors, and strangers) served as motivation to push past obstacles, doubt and negative self-talk. This could involve having roll models that were able to go to college, graduate, and/or accomplish big goals. It could also involve feeling motivated by other refugees (often family) who did not/will have the same educational opportunities that they have, and therefore they need to push forward on behalf others as well as themselves.
		2.5 Wanting to give back	This code involves students desires to be helpful to others (either financially or with time/skills), including family, other refugees, community here in the US, and community in country of origin. This desire is often described as a result of wanting to help other people in need (as they once were) and to pay it forward/ or repay sacrifices made and help they received from family, friends, lawyers, teachers, religious leaders, community members, etc. This may also involve students' desire to become role models someday for others in similar situations, and or make meaning from/find good in their difficult pasts.
3. Reinterpreting success as Balance	This code encompasses how participants discussed different views of success.	3.1 Describing Success	This code describes when students detailed their thoughts on success. These thoughts could be more in the abstract, concerning what success means to them broadly as a construct or it could involve explicit descriptions of moments and examples of when and where students felt successful or unsuccessful

	Overall stereotypical views on success were only one small part of their experience. Instead they reclaimed the concept and defined it as achieving balance.	3.2 Interpreting success traditionally	This code relates to when students describe their personal moments of success and opinions on success as aligning with the traditional college success literature. This includes seeing success as related to good grades/GPA, broader academic achievements (eg. being in the honors college or getting an award), learning classroom material, persisting until graduation, and/or getting into graduate school or getting an particular job post graduation.
		3.3 Interpreting success non-traditionally	This code relates to when students describe their personal moments of success and opinions on success as NOT aligning with the traditional college success literature. This includes seeing success as a fluid idea related to developing desired personal relationships and community, being safe, having stable finances, not worrying about deportation, being mentally and physically healthy, being able to manage their time demands, and seeking out and finding a desirable persona identity. This code can also involve receiving push back from students about my use of the term success and the baggage that this term brings to the conversation.
		3.4 Interpreting success as balance	This code involves seeing success as a positive holistic view of their lives as whole. They view success as 'keeping it all together' (work, school, family, friends) or keeping everything in life appropriately juggled so nothing falls through the cracks and disrupts the system they are trying to manage. They have their needs met and are surviving. This does not mean doing a perfect job in all of these areas of their lives, but rather doing a good enough job at everything to keep it all moving.
3A Traditional Academic Success	This code encompasses one need students worked to balance. Specifically it was the need to achieve stereotypical indicators of college success.	3A.1 Considering Importance of grades/test scores	This code is useful or when students debate and discuss how important them (and/or reflective of success) grades/GPA/scores are for them or others. This could range from students who value them a lot in their view of school and themselves, to those who acknowledge that it is a necessary evil, to those who do not value them at all.
		3A.2 Considering Importance of learning	This code involves students discussing how learning the information in their college classes is an important component of success. This often (but not always) involves generally valuing learning often above and beyond the grade achieved.

		3A.3 Considering importance of attending/graduating	For this code, students reflect on the mere ability to make it to college and/or graduate with a degree, as success in it's own right. This does not take into account what college, or how things go when the student is in college. The important part here is the ability to have access to and hit these milestones.
		3A.4 Considering importance of future employment	In this code, students discuss the importance of finding a good (often well paying) job post graduation as an indicator that they succeeded. This could also hold true for students getting into their desired graduate school, if that is the student's goal.
3B Safe and Comfortable Environment	This code encompasses one need students worked to balance. Specifically it was the need to feel safe and secure across different areas of their lives. It also involved moving past bare bones safety to experiencing positive feelings of comfort.	3B.1 Considering importance of physical safety	This code describes the importance of both physical and psychological safety in their environments. Students may describe feeling like they have "made it" as a result of being somewhere safe where they can go on with their lives and worry about other things. It can involve a discussion revolving around the differences between safety in the US and their countries of origin, fears surrounding physical safety, and feeling emotionally and psychologically safe or unsafe in different environments.
		3B.2 Considering importance of finances	This code involves discussing the importance of and often anxiety surrounding financial needs. Students may describe feeling held back from their goals and/or stunted as a result of financial insecurity. Students may discuss fears related to possible future (and past experiences of) homelessness and poverty, having to drop out because of not having enough money, needing to work too hard/too many hours to stay financially afloat, not understanding financial aid system, or seeing the need to spend so much money on college as an incredibly daunting obstacle.
		3B.3 Considering importance of documentation status	This code involves discussing the importance of and often anxiety surrounding documentation status (or lack their of). Students may describe feeling held back from their goals and/or stunted as a result of their documentation (this is often very closely tied to financial insecurity that is linked with documentation). Students may discuss the fears related to and realties of personal or familial deportation back to somewhere that is possibly still unsafe. They also may discuss discomfort, embarrassment, confusion, and frustration surrounding documentation status and/or the

			process of achieving it.
		3B.4 Considering importance of comfort and emotional safety	This code involves seeing success as the subjective experience of having fun, being happy, and/or comfortable. The descriptions push past not just avoiding aversive and stressful experiences. It moves beyond neutrality and implies thriving above surviving.
3C Community and Human Connections	This code encompasses one need students worked to balance. Specifically it was the need to create human connections and/or find belonging and support in meaningful communities.	3C.1 Valuing community	The code involves discussions relating to the benefits of (and/or desires for) community; and can involve tangible supports (help with school, money, etc.), emotional support, and/ or identity development. This can also include when certain communities are avoided, including how some refugees are uncomfortable in co-ethnic or co-national communties.
		3C.2 Considering success as interpersonal	This code relates to students discussing success as defined by being able to acquire or maintain positive relationships in their lives (anywhere from close relationships to acquaintances), whether that is with friends, family, colleagues, instructors, or relative strangers. Also, relevant are descriptions of not having support/positive relationships feeling uncomfortable forming social bonds.
3D Health	This code encompasses one need students worked to balance. Specifically it was the need to be physically and psychologically healthy and the work they put into staying well.	3D.1 Considering impact of physical health challenges	This code involves students describing any physical health challenges they have faced or currently do face (regardless of the perceived source of the problem) and how it has impacted them generally in life and/or in school specifically. It may or may not overlap with psychological problems but the main point is the physical problem. It can also include what students have done/or currently do to try to manage this problem.
		3D.2 Considering impact of mental health challenges	This code involves students describing any mental health challenges they have faced or currently do face (regardless of the perceived source of the problem) and how it has impacted them generally in life and/or in school specifically. It may or may not overlap with physical problems but the main point is the mental health problem. It can also include what students have done/or currently do to try to manage this problem.
		3D.3 Striving for good health	This code involves the habits/actions that students do to try to attain or maintain their good health; this can include eating well, getting enough sleep, exercising, or anything in the realm of intentional self-care.

3E Obligation management	This code encompasses one need students worked to balance. Specifically it was the need to manage their time effectively given many demands.	3E.1 Feeling overextended	This code is used to highlight when students are feeling overextended, overwhelmed, burned out, run down, etc as a result of not being able to manage the different demands on their time. They have too many things to attend to and the need to or attempts to attend to them leave no time for the student to care for themselves. The student may end up feeling bad, anxious, and/or depleted. They may suffer physically and mentally and contemplate dropping out of school.
		3E.2 Managing competing demands	This code involves students' discussions surrounding how students deal with or manage the many demands on their time and energy. This can involve students discussing tangible ways in which they make it work (take time of from part time job during finals, prioritize family needs over friends etc.). It can also involve frank discussions of extreme discipline and self-restraint (only sleeping 5 hours a night, never socializing, going from one job to school then to a second job with no breaks). Or discussions about how they do not feel as if they are managing or have any good strategies in place, and instead they are just getting by.
3F Identity	This code encompasses one need students worked to balance. Specifically it was the need to be comfortable with their identity.	3F.1 Finding identity	This code involves any description of a student's attempt to find, shape, or regain specific aspects of their identity. This can involve seeking out people who share this desirable identity, engaging in a culturally relevant activity (cooking, dance, language…), etc. It can also include the conscious desire to reject parts of their identity as well.
		3F.2 Interacting with religious identity	This code can reference ways religious identities have shaped students experiences. For example, such identities can be a potent source of strength, pride, motivation, gratitude, and community. Students may also describe pain when they notice a loss of connection to an important cultural or religious identity.
		3F.3 Interacting with cultural identity	This code can reference ways cultural identities have shaped students experiences. For example, such identities can be a potent source of strength, pride, motivation, gratitude, and community.
		3F.4 Interacting with refugee identity	This code involves tensions surrounding students' refugee identity. It could involve the process of coming to terms with this identity, a desire to embrace and connect with others who share this identity, the process of sharing this identity with non-refugees, the desire to abandon the identity,

			or not wanting to be essentialized to this identity. Although it is often seen as an important part of who they are, it is only one part of many and they do not want it to overshadow their many facets.

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VITA

EMILY M. BRAY M.A.

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Education

2012 – Present	**Ph.D. Candidate, University of Illinois at Chicago**, Chicago, IL, Community and Prevention Research Ph.D. Program, Working with Amanda Roy, Ph.D. and Dina Birman, Ph.D
	MA Thesis, "Activism Among Survivors of Torture"
2009 – 2012	**MA**, **New York University**, New York, NY, General Psychology
	MA Thesis, "Activism as a protective factor for survivors of torture: Can advocating a cause act as an insulator against trauma?"
2003 – 2007	**BA, Vassar College**, Poughkeepsie, NY, Psychology, correlate in Hispanic Studies

Research Positions

2013 – 2019   Independent Contractor/ Research Associate   Heartland Alliance Marjorie Kovler Center

Survivor Voice Group Facilitator
- Supervisor: Mary Lynn Everson, MS LCPC, Senior Director
- Helped address Kovler strategic goal of creating group able to put a face to torture by supporting survivors who wish to participate in telling their story, advocating for survivors, and engaging in public speaking.

Community Advisory Council (CAC) Facilitator
- Supervisor: Marianne Joyce, MA LCSM, Social Services Manager
- Assisted in reinstatement of the Kovler CAC to enable a space where clients can be heard and help shape Kovler processes

Program Progress Evaluation
- Supervisor: Martin Hill, Ph.D., Associate Director, Research and Evaluation
- Conducted follow-up interviews with program clients to get information on their mental health and quality of life
- Created summaries of interviews to help inform program service providers
- Assisted with creating Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) reports

2015 – 2018   Student Collaborator   University of Illinois at Chicago

Understanding the Impact of Evaluation
- Supervisor: Yolanda Suarez-Balcazar, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Occupational Therapy
- Worked to create project aimed at understanding collaborative evaluation process

- Will follow-up with community partners who have worked with graduate students in UIC's Program Evaluation Course in the past to see how they have used their collaboratively made evaluation plans in their organizations

2015 – 2016   Research Assistant   University of Illinois at Chicago

Noise Exposure, Daily Mood, and Executive Function
- Supervisor: Amanda Roy, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology
- Launched and implemented project assessing the impact of daily noise exposure on the mood and executive functioning of 18-19 year old college students
- Engaged with noise meters, actigraphs, and mobile ecological momentary assessment (EMA) applications to collect relevant data

Dynamic Risk Exposure and Adolescents' Daily Mood and Risk-taking Behavior
- Supervisor: Amanda Roy, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology
- Launched and implemented project assessing adolescent environmental risk and its relationship to mood and behavior
- Conducted home visits to walk the adolescents and their parents through the study procedures and technology troubleshooting
- Utilized EMA and GPS technology data collection methods

2013- 2014   Student Coordinator   University of Illinois at Chicago

Little Village Community Health Assessment
- Supervisor: Jennifer Hebert-Beirne Ph.D. MPH, Assistant Professor, School of Public Health
- Member of Qualitative Data Analysis Team
- Coordinator of immigration research sub-group

2010 – 2012   Research Assistant   Program for Survivors of Torture, Bellevue Hospital/NYU

MA Thesis, Activism as a protective factor for survivors of torture: Can advocating a cause act as an insulator against trauma?
- Advisor: Research Director, Andrew Rasmussen Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Department of Medicine
- Project hypothesizes that tortured activists will have fewer depressive and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Symptoms upon intake into the program as compared to tortured non-activists.

Group treatment with French-speaking African survivors of torture and its effects on clinical engagement: Can hope be operationalized?
- Supervisor: Clinical Director, Hawthorne Smith, Ph.D.
- Aided in the development and implementation of a research study examining the program services utilized by participants and non-participants in a French-language therapy group.
- Created Excel and SPSS databases and performed statistical analyses on client data.

2009 – 2010   Research Intern   NYU Child Study Center

Predictors of chronicity and remission for individuals with PTSD
- Supervisor: Marylene Cloitre Ph.D., Professor of Psychiatry, Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Trauma and Resilience Research Department
- Conducted in depth literature search on predictors of chronicity and remission for people with PTSD
- Participated in a weekly journal club to read and discuss the current literature on PTSD.
- Delivered presentations and led discussion on different aspects of PTSD for journal club members.

2007 – 2009   Research Assistant   Butler Hospital, Providence, RI

Supervisor: Ana Abrantes Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Addictions Research Department, Alpert Medical School of Brown University
- Served as Primary Research Assistant for HIQS (Health Intervention for Quitting Smoking) Study, which investigated the effectiveness of an aerobic exercise intervention in helping smoking cessation.
- Assisted in the LPA Study, which examined the efficacy of a pedometer based exercise intervention for individuals in early recovery from drug dependence.
- Implemented Project ACT, a clinical study funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse using the medication Fluoxetine to measure the effects of Fluoxetine versus a placebo in individual smokers who have depressive symptoms.
- Helped facilitate Project RAD (Rethinking Alcohol and Drugs), a study examining the effects of brief Motivational Interviewing on adolescent substance use.
- Administered assessment protocol including psychological measures, (the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV, baseline assessments, weekly group assessments, and follow-up assessments) and physiological measures (Functional Exercise Tests, Treadmill Walk Tests, carbon monoxide breath assessments, skin-fold body fat assessments, and assessments of vital signs).

Honors and Awards
- 2017-2018   SCRA/CERA Mini-Grant Award
- 2017   Chancellors Student Service Award
- 2017   SCRA Biennial Student Travel Award
- 2017   Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) Policy Workshop and Advocacy Day Travel Award
- 2016 – 2017   University Fellowship Recipient, Renewal Year, University of Illinois at Chicago
- 2015   Department of Psychology Travel Award, University of Illinois at Chicago
- 2014   The President's Volunteer Service Award (Bronze), Heartland Alliance's   Marjorie Kovler Center

- 2014   Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) Travel Award, University of Illinois at Chicago
- 2014   Graduate Student Council Travel Award, University of Illinois at Chicago
- 2014   Graduate College Student Presenter Award, University of Illinois at Chicago
- 2014   Department of Psychology Travel Award, University of Illinois at Chicago
- 2012 – 2013   University Fellowship Recipient, University of Illinois at Chicago
- 2012   Annual GPA Award, for Graduating Masters Student with highest GPA, New York University Psychology Department
- 2012   Finalist in The 2nd Annual Threesis Academic Challenge, New York University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
- 2012   Certificate of Merit, New York University 16th Annual Master's Research Conference
- 2010   Certificate of Merit, New York University 14th Annual Master's Research Conference
- 2010   United Hospital Fund's Volunteer Service Award, Bellevue Hospital, New York University Medical Center
- 2009   MA Scholar, New York University

Publications

Salo, C. D., & **Bray, E. M**. (2016). Empirically tested interventions for torture survivors: A systematic review through an ecological lens. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science, 2*(4), 449-463. doi:10.1037/tps0000097

Birman, D. & **Bray, E. M.** (2016). Immigration, migration, and community psychology. In M. Bond, C. Keys & Serrano Garcia, I. (Eds) *APA handbook of community psychology.* (pp. 313-326). Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Manuscripts in Progress

Bray, E. M., Birman, D., Keatley, E., & Rasmussen, A. (in progress). Activism Among Survivors of Torture.

Bray, E.M. & Birman, D. (in progress). Participatory Research with Forced Migrants: What Does Participation Look Like?

Invited Colloquia and Poster Presentations

Bray, E.M. (2019, June). An investigation of strength: Refugee Students' Success in Higher Education. Colloquia presented at 16th Society for Community Research and Action Biennial Conference, Chicago, IL.

Roy, A. & **Bray, E.M. (**2019, June). Conceptualizing Neighborhood Organizational Resources and Testing Relationships with Adult Health. Colloquia presented at 16th Society for Community Research and Action Biennial Conference, Chicago, IL.

Bray, E.M. (2019, April). Contemplating Success: Refugee Students' Experiences in Higher Education. Colloquia presented at 2017 Midwest Psychological Association Annual Meeting. Chicago, IL.

Bray, E.M. (2018, October). Contemplating Success: Refugee Students' Experiences in Higher Education. Colloquia presented at the 2018 Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice Coming Together for Action. Denver, CO.

Bray, E.M. (2018, October). Contemplating Success: Refugee Students' Experiences in Higher Education. Colloquia presented at the 40th Midwest Ecological Community Psychology Conference, University of Illinois at Chicago Psychology Department. Chicago, IL.

Bray, E.M. (2017, June). An investigation of strength: Refugee Students' Success in Higher Education. Colloquia presented at 16th Society for Community Research and Action Biennial Conference, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

Bray, E. M., Esposito, F., Bianco, M. E., Ferreira, K., Balcazar, F., & Langhout, R. (2017, June). Detention and Deportation: Seeking Justice for Migrants, Asylum Seekers, and their Children. Roundtable presented at 16th Society for Community Research and Action Biennial Conference, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

Hernandez, S., Suarez-Balcazar, Y., **Bray, E. M.,** & Kraft, A. (2017, June). Understanding the Impact of Evaluation for both Community Partners and Community Psychology Students. Poster presented at 16th Society for Community Research and Action Biennial Conference, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Bray, E. M. (2017, April). Participatory Research With Refugees: What does Participation Look Like? Colloquia presented at 2017 Midwest Psychological Association Annual Meeting. Chicago, IL.

Bray, E.M. (2017, January). My week in "baby jail": A community psychology take on our refugee detention crisis. Colloquia presented at Community and Prevention Research Brown Bag, University of Illinois at Chicago Department of Psychology, Chicago, IL.

Suarez-Balcazar, Y., Hernandez, S. G., **Bray, E.,** Kraft, A. N., & Gomez, L. (2016, October). Incorporating the voices of diverse stakeholders to conduct culturally-anchored evaluations through mutually beneficial partnerships. Colloquia presented at the 40th Midwest Ecological Community Psychology Conference,

DePaul University Psychology Department. Chicago, IL.

Bray, E.M. (2015, November). Participatory research: What does participation look like among forced migrants? Colloquia presented during Community and Prevention Research Brown Bag, University of Illinois at Chicago Department of Psychology, Chicago, IL.

Balcazar, Y., Gomes, L, Hernandez, S., & **Bray, E.** (2015, November). Building the capacity of students and community stakeholders to conduct culturally-anchored evaluations through mutual partnerships and immersion experiences. In Taylor-Ritzler, T. (Chair), Culturally anchored evaluations: Win-win opportunities for students, evaluators, and community stakeholders. Symposium conducted at the meeting of American Evaluation Association, Chicago.

Bray, E.M. (2015, October) Participatory Research Among Refugees and Asylum Seekers: What does Participation Look Like? Colloquia presented at the 39th Midwest Ecological Community Psychology Conference, University of Wisconsin Madison Department of Human Ecology. Madison, WI.

Birman, D., **Bray, E. M.,** & Beehler, S. (2015, June) Challenges of assessing the effectiveness of mental health interventions with refugee and immigrant youth: Some examples and lessons learned. Colloquia presented as part of a symposia at the 15th Society for Community Research and Action Biennial Conference, Lowell, MA.

Bray, E.M., & Birman, D. (2014, November) Improving Quality of Life in Refugee Youth: A Collaborative Study of the International Family, Adult, and Child Enhancement Services (IFACES) Program. Colloquia presented as part of a symposia at the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies 30th Annual Meeting. Miami, FL.

Schwiesow, J., Castaneda, Y., **Bray, E.M**., Mayer, A., & Hebert-Beirne, J. (2014, October) Building health equity through participatory health assessment. Poster presented at Building Health Equity Throughout Chicago Through Community Engaged Research Symposium. Chicago, IL.

Bray, E.M., & Birman, D. (2014, September) Mental Health Among Refugee Youth: A Discussion of the International Family, Adult, and Child Enhancement Services (IFACES) Program. Colloquia presented as part of a roundtable at the 5th International Conference on Community Psychology. Fortaleza, Brazil.

Bray, E.M., Birman, D., Keatley, E., & Rasmussen, A. (2014, May) Survivors of torture, mental health, and the role of activism. Poster presented at the 2014 Midwest Psychological Association Annual Meeting. Chicago, IL

Bray, E.M., & Birman, D. (2014, March) Mental Health Among Survivors of Torture: Does Activism Matter? Colloquia presented during Community and Prevention Research Brown Bag, University of Illinois at Chicago Department of Psychology, Chicago, IL.

Bray, E.M., Birman, D., Keatley, E., & Rasmussen, A. (2013, November) Mental Health Among Survivors of Torture: Does Activism Matter? Colloquia presented at the 37th Midwest Ecological Community Psychology Conference, University of Illinois at Chicago Department of Psychology. Chicago, IL.

Bray, E.M., Keatley, E., Swee, M., & Rasmussen, A. (2012, April). Activism as a protective factor for survivors of torture: Can advocating a cause act as an insulator against trauma? Poster presented at the 16th Annual MA Research Conference, New York University Department of Psychology. New York, NY.

Bray, E. M., Cloitre, M., & Charuvastra, A. (2010, April). Can a social life predict recovery? Interpersonal functioning and PTSD. Poster presented at the 14th Annual MA Research Conference, New York University Department of Psychology. New York, NY.

Abrantes, A.M, Brown, R.A., Strong, D.R., Pou, C., **Bray, E**. & Evenski, S. (2009, February). Exercise preferences of patients in substance abuse treatment. Poster presented at the 13th Annual Research Symposium on Mental Heath Sciences, Brown University Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior. Providence, RI.

Tugade, M. M., O'Haire, M., Greene, J., & **Bray, E**. (2008, February). Paying attention to how you feel and what you do: Examining links to psychological well-being and dialectical thinking. Poster presented at the annual conference of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Albuquerque, NM.

Professional Activities

Professional Affiliations
- 2009   Psi Chi, Psychology Honors Society
- 2010 – Present. Student member of the American Psychological Association (APA)
- 2013 – Present. Student member of Society of Community Research and Action (SCRA), Division #27 of the APA
- 2013 – Present. Student member of the Midwest Psychological Association (MPA)
- 2014 – Present. Student member of International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS)

Ad Hoc Reviewer
- 2015- Present International Journal of Intercultural Relations

Skills

Data Analysis Software – R, SPSS, and ATLAS.ti
Statistical Methods – Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), Regression (Multiple, Logistic, etc.), Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM)
Languages – English (Native), Spanish (Conversational)

Service

Committee Member
- 2017 – 2018, Founder, **Psychology Department Refugee Support Fundraiser Series**, University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology.
- 2012 – 2017, **Diversity Advancement Committee Student Advisory Board**, University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology.
- 2012 – 2017, **Prospective Student Visiting Day Planning Committee**, University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology.
- 2014 – 2016, **Annual Cross Program Conference Planning Committee**, Hosted at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology
- 2013, **Midwest Ecological Community Psychology Conference Planning Committee**, Hosted at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology

Invited Panelist
- 2016, **Panelist for Maximizing Access to Research Careers (MARC) Students**, University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology
- 2016, **Panelist for 1st Year Graduate Student Orientation**, University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology

Teaching Experience

Instructor of Record
- **Community Psychology - PSCH 231**, Summer 2016, University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology
- **Introduction to Research Methods and Design - PSCH 242**, Spring 2016, University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology

Teaching Assistant
- **Community Psychology - PSCH 231**, (Fall 2012, Spring 2013, Summer 2013, Summer 2014, Spring 2015), With Instructors Omar Jamil Ph.D & Edison Trickett Ph.D, University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology

- **Introduction to Research Methods and Design - PSCH 242**, (Fall 2013, Spring 2014, Fall 2014), With Instructors Tomas Stahl Ph.D. & David McKirnan Ph.D, University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology
- **Developmental Psychology - PSCH 320**, (Fall 2015), With Instructor Christopher Baker Ph.D., University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology

Guest Lecturer
- Spring 2018, and Fall 2018, **Lecture on Human Diversity in Community Psychology**
    - Community Psychology – PSCH 231, With Instructor Amanda Roy, University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology
- Summer 2017, **Lecture Community Psychology Graduate Students**
    - Community Psychology – PSCH 231, With Instructor Bibiana Adames, University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology
- Spring 2017, **Lecture on Community Psychology Implications of Refugee Detention Crisis**
    - Community Psychology – PSCH 231, With Instructor Christopher Baker, University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology
- Fall 2016, **Lecture on Community Engagement**
    - Laboratory in Community and Prevention Research - PSCH 331, With Instructor Hillary Rowe, University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology
- Fall 2016, **Lecture on Interventions from a Community Psychology Perspective**
    - Psychological Interventions, With Instructor Alexander Jendrusina, University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology
- Fall 2015, **Lecture on Low Constraint Research Methods**
    - Introduction to Research Methods and Design - PSCH 242, With Instructor Tomas Stahl Ph.D., University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology
- Fall 2014, **Lecture on Acculturation and Mental Health**
    - Sophomore Seminar on Multiculturalism: The Immigrant Experience in America - LSP 200, With Instructor DePaul University, Department of Psychology
- Summer 2014, **Lecture on Social Network Mapping**
    - Community Psychology PSCH 231, With Instructor Edison Trickett Ph.D., University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology