

**“From Kathmandu to Clarkston: The Political Attitudes of
America’s Newest Immigrants”¹**

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The attitudes and opinions of immigrants are a valuable source of information, yet the dominant frame of those who study this topic is a focus on incorporation, assimilation, and acculturation. Refugees, in particular, are often reviewed as a subset of the larger immigrant population despite having radically different experiences as political “invitees” to the United States, as well as the legal right to live and work, at least initially accompanied by monetary assistance. Further, the resettlement process, though a federal procedure in conjunction with state and local governments and agencies, has barely been studied by political scientists. The focus of this project two-fold. First, we aim to contribute to the research on refugee political behavior through a study involving individual and group interviews with 18 Bhutanese refugees in the Atlanta area. Subjects were asked their opinions on a variety of topics, but our focus for this project is on their community concerns, in particular, suicide. Second, the experiences of these South Asian refugees lend support for a re-evaluation of the refugee resettlement process. I provide three policy recommendations that cover fundamentally shifts in the way we should view how we take care of refugees in the United States.

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“I’ve thought so much about suicide/ Parts of me have already died”
– The Old ‘97s

Mitra Misha. Dan Maya Gurung. Nirmala Niroula. Menuka Poudel. Bal Khulal. These five names are unlikely to mean much to most people, but they represent five of the estimated 55 suicides of Bhutanese refugees that have rippled across the United States since 2008 (Mishra 2014, Glionna 2014, Preiss 2013). While suicide is still a major cause of death in the United States, particularly among immigrants (Sher and Vilens 2011), the high incidence of Bhutanese suicides is shocking because this community represents one of the newest groups of refugees to be admitted to the United States, with the initial wave starting in 2008. In response, the CDC produced a report, identifying several key factors that all played a part in the Bhutanese suicides they investigated including lack of English fluency; family problems and separation; and “difficulty maintaining cultural and religious traditions” (Ao et al. 2012, 1). Kulman and Tsukii (2104) also noted that Bhutanese refugees face pressure from the moment of arrival including often times paying back loans given to them by the International Organization for Migration, and seeking employment immediately, despite having little or no knowledge of English.

While the United States resettles refugees from over 21 countries (Department of State 2014, 56), the country that currently leads in total number of refugees resettled per year is Bhutan. This is a unique scenario as well because many of the Bhutanese refugees are ethnically Nepali, but hold Bhutanese citizenship, or lived in refugee camps in Nepal after being displaced from Bhutan, before coming to the United States (Mishra 2014). While the Bhutanese are not the first group of immigrants to contend with the pressure to succeed in America, and they certainly won’t be the last, the issues of suicide and mental health provide a proxy for the larger discussion on refugee resettlement in the United States. Part of this discussion needs to be on how local, state, and federal governments coordinate their resources to provide the best possible new start

for these “new Americans.” But another topic of interest is seeking the opinions and attitudes of the refugees themselves. Too often, proposals concerning the welfare of refugees tend to be focused on the macro level and based on quantitative data that masks the underlining question over what refugees find to be problematic areas in their attempt at creating new lives in America.

The U.S. government has a rather myopic and simplified view of how resettlement should look. In the first step, the refugee arrives in America, and she and her family are taken care of initially by local volunteer agencies (volags) that work with various government entities. Second, the refugee is given, on average, six months of free housing and food stamps, and is expected to almost immediately find employment, regardless of English fluency. Lastly, through the simplified expectation of “making it” and achieving the American dream, the refugee “assimilates” and becomes American.

This scenario, however, is the stuff of movies. The refugee resettlement process is never this simple, nor obstacle free, and while many refugees, even within the Bhutanese community, have achieved a considerable degree of vertical mobility and economic success in less than six years, there is still widespread doubt and fear about the lack of success. The root of the problem, in our estimation, is the use of archaic theories on immigrant behavior, much of them derivatives of the assimilation argument. While there may have been a time when such theories worked, we suggest that time has passed, and newer theories need to be discussed on immigrant political behavior in America, which in turn should lay the groundwork for better policies.

Can models of European ethnic assimilation work for today’s immigrants or, according to Rumbaut and Portes (2001, 6), do we need to think about the current immigrants as “undergoing a process of *segmented assimilation* in which outcomes vary across immigrant minorities”? Lastly, can we reimagine and reinvent the process of refugee resettlement to take into account

“segmented assimilation” as well as a positive policy feedback loop that contributes towards better preparing refugees to life in the United States?

In order to examine these questions, and others, I conducted interviews with Bhutanese refugees in Atlanta in January, 2015. Clarkston, Ga. is the resettlement point for all refugees arriving in the state, and through past employment and associations as well as respondent-driven sampling (RDS), I was able to interview 18 adults, ranging in age from 19 to 81. The interviews were semi-structured and covered many topics; however, the focus for this paper will be on the subjects’ worries with what they deemed to be community-wide issues, among them depression, suicide, school dropouts, and gambling.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, I will lay out some basic information on refugees and the resettlement process. Second, I discuss the extant theories behind immigration and citizenship, as well as criticisms. Third, I present the findings from the interviews with the Bhutanese refugees. Lastly, I offer a series of policy recommendations on the refugee resettlement and assistance process to make the government’s response to crises, like the Bhutanese suicide one, more in line with prevention and not just intervention.

Immigrants vs. Refugees

If immigration is the concept that best represents America’s identity to the rest of the world, then her immigrants bear this responsibility as well. Yet, immigrants in America are an extremely diverse community, who represent the full spectrum of American achievement, but are often characterized by an image of successful “integration.” They are, according to Rumbaut and Portes (2001), “the most-educated *and* the least-educated group in the United States today,” which is “a reflection of polar-opposite types of migrations embedded in very different historical contexts” (6). They range from highly-skilled professionals and entrepreneurs like the Cubans,

Iranians and Russian refugees to those like the Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Laotian who came from agricultural backgrounds with much less education (Portes and Rumbaut 2014).

Asian immigrants and refugees are no less diverse. While some like the Filipinos came to the U.S. already proficient in English and customs (Esperitu and Wolf 2001), others, like the Hmong, encountered bewildering “climate, language, clothes, smells, food, and customs” (Vang 2008, 12). This “tidal wave of new immigrants and refugees” has, over the last five decades, radically changed the face of the Asian Pacific American community to one that is largely foreign-born (Chan 2001, 199).

The Bhutanese represent the most recent wave of Asian immigrants and refugees to come to the United States. They are also unique because though their birthplace or country of origin is Bhutan, most of the younger generations have never lived there; rather, they grew up in refugee camps in Nepal (Mishra 2014). Furthering complicating the situation is that the Bhutanese refugees are ethnically Nepali and are even referred to in Dzongkha (the Bhutanese language) as Lhotshampa or “People of the South” (MAR 2015, Ao et al. 2012, 2). The Bhutanese in this sample continue to grapple with questions of identity, and self-identify as “Nepali,” “Bhutanese,” “Bhutanese-Nepali,” and “Nepali-speaking Bhutanese American.”

Bohmer and Shuman (2008) suggest that “refugee” “is commonly used to describe anyone who has been forced to flee his or her country ... it refers to the legal status that someone receives which allows them to be brought into a country at government expense and to receive certain public benefits” (24). Farrier (2011) fine-tunes the definition and suggests that it should be “declaratory rather than constitutive (that is, a person is recognized *because* s/he is a refugee rather than becoming one because s/he is recognized” (153). Additionally, Meilaender (2001)

identified four characteristics of refugees based on the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and subsequent national and international policy and case law:

“1) They are outside their country of origin; (2) they are unable or unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country, or to return there; (3) such inability or unwillingness is attributable to a well-founded fear of being persecuted; and (4) the persecution is based on reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership or a particular social group, or political opinion” (175)

Martin (2005) also makes an important contribution by reminding us that refugees should not be viewed as “the Other,” since they are people, like anyone else, who have been thrust into a traumatizing position of migration and resettlement. In his opinion,

“Refugees are not a breed apart. Nearly all have had prior settled lives, often thriving existences as farmers, merchants, herders, teachers, business people, students, government officials. They are not just the passive objects of domestic or international policy, the helpless or inert victims often portrayed in the media” (2005, 3).

The trajectory of a refugee is never easy and usually involves a transition from an internally displaced person (IDP) to a refugee over many years, many of which are often spent in refugee camps, occasionally in a third country. It is important to also remember For the Bhutanese, most have lived in Bhutan and Nepal, or just Nepal, but were treated as second-class citizens in Bhutan, but never given citizenship or a good standard living in Nepal either. Bohmer and Shuman (2008, 25) have noted that “displaced people in refugee camps often wait many years for a country to accept them for resettlement.” This is certainly true for the Bhutanese refugees who sometimes lived in camps for over a decade before being accepted by a third country and being resettled.

Till 1980, the United States’ policy was to primarily grant refugee status or asylum (to those already here) for people trying to escape Communism and Communist governments. However, with the passage of the Refugee Act in 1980 by President Carter, the U.S. officially changed its criteria to be more in line with the United Nations’ definition (Rumbaut and Portes

2001). Since that time, the primary agency coordinating refugee resettlement has been the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) in the Department of Health and Human Services (Van 2008).

The ORR, in turn, partners with various state governments and agencies, who subsequently partner with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other voluntary associations (volags) to help refugees in different states not only get resettled, but get help in adapting to all the changes with living, working and hopefully, thriving, in the United States. These groups offer a range of services including “resettlement and housing assistance, social services (Medicare, Medicaid, TANF, SSI), help with status adjustment, and job placement assistance. They also offer classes in English, American history, and civics in preparation for the citizenship exam”

(95). Vietnamese refugees AFDC (now TANF), SSI, and Refugee Cash Assistance (Zhou 2001).

Vang (2008) has described the resettlement program as

“A public-private partnership with nongovernmental organizations participating in every step of the process. The national voluntary agency system works with local private agencies through which groups, congregations, and individuals agree to be sponsors and to provide initial food, clothing, housing, and employment to the refugees” (11)

It should be remembered that unlike most immigrants who choose to live with compatriots and in ethnic enclaves, refugees do not get to choose where they want to live in the United States (Waldinger 2001). While it seems logical that refugees should be resettled in cities with large existing refugee and immigrant populations, this procedure was only adopted in the last two decades. Prior to that, especially after the government was chastised for resettling most of the Cuban refugee Diaspora in Florida, many refugees, including large numbers of Vietnamese, were resettled in areas *without* large immigrant populations. In the words of Zhou (2001), “the official resettlement policy aimed at dispersing Southeast Asian refugees to minimize the impact on local receiving communities and to integrate refugees into the American society and society as quickly as possible” (191). This policy applied to all three waves of initial

Vietnamese resettlement in the United States (1975, 1975 – 1977, and 1978 – 1980) (Whorton 1997). Andersen, for example, has pointed to great success in the refugee resettlement process in Spokane, Washington and Lansing, Michigan – two sites that had the “organizational legacy ... to encourage and empower immigrant groups” (2008, 96).

According to Andersen (2008, 94), volags like World Relief and Catholic Charities are asked to provide help to refugees till they achieve “self-sufficiency,” which the ORR has estimated as approximately 135 days after arrival. Federal assistance for refugees often amounts to six months of free rent and food stamps, as well as other welfare programs including Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). After this time period of a little less than five months, refugees are expected to have achieved a certain standard of living, which while not comfortable, is adequate; ORR even provides worksheets for families to plan their self-sufficiency with checklists and goals (Office of Refugee Resettlement 2015).

Despite the apparent hardship for the refugee in even achieving some degree of stability in the United States, there are still critics of the current system because it is *too generous* for some immigrants, and not others. In her models of immigrant political incorporation, Bloemraad (2012) points to the considerable assistance that refugees receive from governments, specifically Canada and the United States; as such, she focus on “ordinary immigrants” and drops refugees from her discussion. Portes and Rumbaut (2014, 45) highlight “the distinct advantages conferred by refugees or asylee status include not only the right to stay and work but a package of *generous* resettlement and welfare assistance, health benefits, and the right to adjust to permanent legal residence in one year.” Their disagreement with federal policy is predicated on the favoritism of sorts that refugees receive, versus “traditional” American immigrants. They go on to say that refugees “arriving with little or no human capital have at least managed to survive under the

welfare provisions of the resettlement program,” which lead to vast resources in social capital for the children of refugees, as well as future generations (2014, 45). But are these criticisms misplaced? While recent refugees do receive placement, resettlement, and welfare assistance, does it advantage them more than other immigrants? Or, is it possible that due to the hardships suffered prior to arriving in the United States, refugees continue to struggle with coping and adapting to life in the United States? Only future research, including qualitative and quantitative work on the opinions, attitudes, standard of living, success, and measures of economic attainment, will be able to answer these pressing questions.

The Debate over Assimilation

Every immigrant group that has arrived in America has not only lent their cultural practices to this nation’s landscape, but they have also, in turn, been affected by the extant American traditions. This process of navigating the system – politically, geographically, culturally, and linguistically – and “becoming American” has been termed differently by competing theories and scholars. The dominant theory for the last 50 years, has been the theory of assimilation, and its salience can be felt in a thousand different policy considerations as “the” theory to explain immigration to the United States. Assimilationist theory formally owes its origins to the work of Gordon (1964), whose theories, according to Zhou (2001), were based

“[on a] normative expectation that diverse immigrant groups from underprivileged backgrounds should eventually abandon their old ways of life and become completely ‘melted’ into the mainstream culture as indistinguishable nonethnics, or ‘Americans,’ through residential integration and occupational achievement in a sequence of succeeding generations” (198).

The assimilationist framework is predicated on the notion of political incorporation and presumes that immigrants will experience greater ease over time “as they become an indistinguishable part of the host society” as their ethnic traits including identity and language

fade away (Zhou 2001, 203). This has also been titled acculturation as the native tongue and traditions are replaced with English and a new identity (Zhou 2001). For Waldinger (2001), the idea of assimilation “implies a convergence between immigrant and host country expectations: over time, immigrants, and certainly their children, are increasingly likely to aspire to the conditions enjoyed by the average resident of the United States” (12). “In abstract terms,” writes Minnite (2009, 53), “political incorporation is a classical liberal trope descended from the traditions of the French Revolution. *To incorporate* means to unite into one body, to mix thoroughly together ... To join the polity, individuals give up some autonomy in return for greater protection.” However, “On the other hand, the merging is never complete, nor should it be” (Minnite 2009, 53).

The most notable critique of assimilationist theory is that it does not count for cultural differences among groups. For Crul and Mollenkopf (2012), forcing immigrants, and particularly children, to “become similar” can lead to a blowback and resentment towards the host society and a de-emphasis of American identity, which was identified as early as 1975 by Hechter who termed the phenomenon “reactive ethnicity.” Waldinger’s (2001) problem with the assimilation way of thinking is that it masks diversity and “hides the degree to which crucial differences are created through the process of migration and by members of the host group” (11). As such,

“‘Assimilation’ is surely a peculiar scholarly concept, resonating with that normative version of national life that prescribes a direct relationship between the individual and the nation, unmediated by ties of an ethnic type. Not surprisingly, it sets up an artificial contrast between immigrants depicted as distinctive from the start and a national self, imagined in homogenous terms – that is, as mainstream – whereas in fact it is riven by all sorts of divisions” (2001, 11).

The Bhutanese, in Their Own Words

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2011), the State of Georgia has the fourth highest Bhutanese and Nepalese refugee resettlement population. As a former faculty member at Georgia Perimeter College whose Clarkston campus serves a commuter student population east of Atlanta, I was able to tap into the refugee community in the City of Clarkston, which since the 1980s has also coincidentally served as the resettlement point for all refugees arriving in Georgia. Respondent-driven sampling (RDS) was used to locate members of the Bhutanese refugee community who would be willing to participate in interviews. I identified a former student, Ram², to locate interview subjects and help translate (my Hindi is marginal at best and I do not speak Nepali). Interviews were conducted in the homes of several families on January 3rd and 4th, 2015, in Stone Mountain, Lilburn, and Grayson, Georgia and consisted of four group interviews (ranging from two to seven subjects) and one, individual interview. Ram participated as a subject in the first interview since that group consisted of young adults who all spoke English well enough to participate in that language.

The interviews themselves ranged from 40 to 90 minutes and varied based on the number and age of the participants, as well as the amount of translation and explanation that was needed for particular respondents. All in all, I interviewed 18 refugees with the majority male (15) and ranging in age from 19 to 81. All had arrived in the United States between 2008 and 2009. The interviews were semi-structured and covered a wide range of topics including opinions on local government; the police; President Obama; interactions with other ethnic groups; community concerns; and questions about religiosity and perceptions of Hindu candidates. For reasons of space, I will only discuss the findings related to this project's focus.

² All names have been changed to protect identities.

One final note about the interviews: though the younger participants did not need the help of the translator, none of the interviewees spoke English fluently, and while transcribing the recordings, I noted a lot of their hesitation while speaking. So for sake of brevity and clarity, I modified their language for this paper. For example: “Here, I feel comfortable ... like I feel comfort ... I am comfortably ... enjoying my religion,” became “Here, I feel comfortable enjoying my religion.”

a) Concern #1: Lack of English Fluency

All of the subjects described the “language gap” as the most pressing and immediate concern for the community. This, in turn, has created a rift between parents and children. According to Ram, a 31-year old male (and the interpreter), 50 percent of the parents are educated, and 50 percent are not. This leads to a problem where the parents don’t speak English “and they don’t know anything that is happening to their children. The children take advantage of their parents and they do things outside, and the parents never know. And they do not even know that their children are not in school, or taking drugs outside.” Sumesh, Ram’s 23-year old brother, said, “There are a lot of problems. The kids are coming out from high school, and there are so many problems at home. The dad, you know, doesn’t speak English and his moms got the same problem. Job, then bad economy, no job. They [kids] have to work because no one else is paying the rent. There are a lot of them.” 81-year old Madhav Prasad, a venerated figure in the community who Ram described as “the living history of Bhutan,” also believed that the lack of English fluency was detrimental to the community. When I asked him about his own attempts to learn, he said that he believed he was too old to learn, but that other, older refugees did not want to learn because they felt it would take away from their potential to work and help pay rent.

When asked whose responsibility it was to teach the Bhutanese English, Kanchha, a 22-year old male, responded that the lack of English fluency was not the government's problem because the underlying issue was a general lack of family literacy. In his words, "I think what is happening is that our parents, they grow up illiterate, they never have any school, they never know anything of [the] outside world. They [government] is giving facilities [to learn English], but our people, they don't want to go. They don't want to take it." 35-year old Prabhat, though a younger man, had become a community leader through his education and success. He is also Ram's brother-in-law. He had a different perspective on English education, believing that the government had provided English classes and ESL tutoring to the refugees when they lived in Clarkston, but those resources had evaporated once community members had moved to the suburbs. He also strongly believed that the impetus for change, particularly on this issue, had to come from *within* the community. "I think this is the responsibility for the educated people like me, to connect to the local government," he said. "I have already started thinking about the need for helping parents to learn English." Prabhat went on to say that he was working with local leaders to arrange free English classes, particularly for the elderly.

b) Concern #2: Family Divisions

The lack of English fluency has also contributed partly to major family conflicts in the Bhutanese community. When subjects were asked why some community members were more successful than others, they often pointed to a strong and caring family structure, headed by firm parents focused on discipline. According to Ram, his mother is always concerned where her children are, even though all are adults. "She calls us whenever we go outside," said Ram, "and asks 'What are you doing? Where are you? Why aren't you coming back home?'" But those

people [those without education], they do not even know how to dial a phone. That's why their kids are running wild." The elderly Madhav Prasad believed that children were now in control of their parents, and not the other way around. "If the parents try and control the children," he chimed, "they will call the government and get them in trouble." Swayambhu, an elder statesman in the community whom I learned has also been the *de facto* adjudicator and conflict resolution person in the refugee camps, believed the same. He believed that "because of the law, they [parents] cannot even scold their children, and because they cannot scold their children, they have to be staying in fear because their children might fight back and call the authorities."

Ram's mother, 50-year old Sita, reiterated her son's stance about the role of parents, adding that change had to come from the community to fix, and if that didn't work, police would be the next step, particularly with school truancy. She said, "All the elders are working and the children are doing whatever ... the parents cannot control their kids." 40-year old Jung Bahadur believed that Bhutanese parents were actually neglecting their kids, but were between a rock and a hard place. Accordingly, "They have freedom, what can they do? They give the children freedom, they just say nothing. But the children, after a couple of years, the children go on to the wrong track. They don't know how to raise their kids."

One surprising issue that came up as either a cause for the lack of family cohesion, or a symptom of it, was a spike in youth marriage, which based on my observations, was particularly hard for this community to stomach since parents were not consulted before the children married. Bindeshwar, a 24-year old male and community activist who worked with youth, mentioned a 17-year old Bhutanese woman who had already been married four times! As he tersely put it, "We are free, racing bulls. We have no direction." He also suggested that the diminished family bonds in the community were also responsible for a rise in domestic violence and divorce. Dhan

Bahadur, a 21-year old male, believed that marriage had become an issue because Bhutanese youth want to marry people from outside the community. Knowing that the parents will object, they just elope. According to Kanchha,

“We can say whatever we want to our parents. You know if it was in the back country, we would never say we wanted to get married at a young age. I would never say that. But right here? We got a freedom of speech. When you cross 16, 17, even though you are not mentally prepared – you don’t even know how to run the house – and you say, ‘I want to get married.’ What is wrong and what is right – even *you* don’t know, because you’ve got freedom.”

c) Concern #3: Freedom in America versus Bhutan/ Nepal

While most of the interviewees were happy to be in the United States – some expressed an interest in moving overseas, particularly to Australia - there was also a feeling that the amount of freedom and liberty in America was almost *too much* freedom for many of the refugees.

According to Bindeshwar, “When we first came here, we were a limited group, small group, and we didn’t know outside concept of all those outside things. So we didn’t go towards it. But right now, these folks, they are very open. They know where to go, what to do.” Kanchha used the ideology of prison to compare it to life in the refugee camps. He believed that the Bhutanese had such restrictive lives before coming to the United States that the freedom and lack of authoritarian government made them want to experience everything, good and bad, the country had to offer. His brother, 23-year old Mukti, said that the Bhutanese were “uncivilized, uneducated people. In back country, we had nothing like we have here, so most people think we are in heaven.”

For Ram,

“I think the problem is like in camps, the parents used to rule their children. Here the children are ruling the parents because the parents do not speak language, they do not understand what is going beyond their house walls. The children are ruling their parents, getting married early, doing whatever they want to do.

d) Concern #4: School Truancy, Alcohol, Crime, Drugs, and Gambling

It is disheartening in many ways that a community that has for the most part been in the United States for less than seven years is already grappling with crime, school truancy, alcoholism, drug abuse, and gambling addiction. Komal, Ram's sister, a 24-year old woman, recalled that some of her friends "dropped out of school, stopped coming to school, started using drugs. I know they drink a lot." Chameli, a 27-year old woman, and Ram's wife, was first resettled in Texas and moved after marriage. She said that many of the problems in Georgia happened among the Bhutanese in Texas, but that high school dropouts was a particular concern. Bindeshwar recalled a situation where "these three guys at Montreal Road where I work, they have never been to school this semester. They are in 9th grade." He went on to discuss the growing issue of refugees robbing others. He said, "Where I work it's an apartment complex. People know it is robbed by Nepalese. They have taken TVs, computers, bikes, and gold chains and everything. One lady was robbed, and her house was robbed. \$12,000 in cash." Dev, a 19-year old male, talked openly about his uncle's gambling addiction. Said Dev,

"My uncle he used to go gambling, and I every time, I see him go to Food Mart playing the game. We tried to tell him that playing the game, he keep wasting the money. He has a job, but he doesn't have the income to pay the rent. He used to live in a home, but now he's in an apartment. "

One issue that was not discussed that much was bullying. Not surprising, Bindeshwar, the community activist, believed the underlying reason for the high rate of dropouts. Instead of being bullied, a lot of Bhutanese youth started skipping class to hang out with their friends, and that lead to drugs and "smoking things." The same thought was echoed by Madhav Prasad who said that "because of the freedom, people are doing whatever they want to do. They are drinking, they are gambling. They lost everything they get." His 32-year old son, Gopi Prasad, had similar

feelings, and said, “When they drink, when they are gambling, they are losing their ability to function; they don’t have any money to pay rent.”

e) Concern #5: Depression and Suicide

My observation was that the high suicide rate among the Bhutanese had greatly affected morale. Most of the interviewees believed that the aforementioned issues – lack of English fluency, parental control, alcohol, drugs, gambling, and “excessive” freedoms – had created a perfect storm that laid the groundwork for depression. Mukti had this story:

“There was one guy who worked at the chicken factory, and whatever he earned he just spent it at the gaming show [gaming machine]. And one day, he hanged himself ... and recently, there was one [Bhutanese] guy from South Dakota who wants to help committing suicide, and it’s good for our Nepali people. Probably gaming machine is one of the most problematic things for our community.”

For Ram, the main reason is the gap between parents and children: “children are not following what the parents are saying, and the parents are depressed and they kill themselves. They think their childrens [sic] are gone that’s why.” 19-year old Suraj, who, like Ram, was my former student, mentioned three or four cases of suicide in the community where he believed that alcohol and gaming machines were the obvious culprits.

60-year old Bijay was first unable to understand my question about suicide. Ram, who was translating, said, “He [Bijay] is unable to understand why this is happening because he can’t even comprehend suicide. He believes it is because there is a ridge between parents, and the boy and girl, and anyone can participate whenever they want.” Sitting next to Bijay was Swayambhu who shared a particularly heartbreaking story about a family where many of its members had converted from Hinduism to Christianity. This, according to him, had left only the father still Hindu and he [Swayambhu] felt that this man might commit suicide because his family was

destroyed. 75-year old Dipendra, a former Hindu priest and also Ram's grandfather, also believed that conversions to Christianity were destroying and dividing the community.

Prabhat believed that the community was struggling with five dominant issues: dropouts, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, "gaming machines" (computerized gambling, not video games), and suicide. Accordingly,

"First of all, there is a type of people that commit suicide because of language barrier. They see everywhere opportunity, but they cannot bring progress on that particular opportunity ... The person cannot speak, cannot communicate. Another one [reason] I think is because of conversion from Hinduism to Christianity. And all this they do because of some selfishness ... You know that Hindu community is divided by caste system. And now when the young people get education, they feel that the caste system is another barrier. Now parents they are still reserved in the caste system, but the educated and the children they want to be free from this, and inter-marry outside the caste system. And I have also seen this in cases of suicide that could be because of caste system. When I hear about the back story, I hear about this inter-caste marriage and negligence from the parents or the family. This might have given frustration and that caused the suicide."

Policy Recommendations

The Bhutanese refugee community is grappling with many concerns, but there is still a strong sense of optimism among those that I interviewed. After one interview listed off the whole gamut of issues facing his group, he ended by saying that these problems might continue for one or two decades, but that "things will change because our people are very hard working." While his people are a hard-working group who have sacrificed much of themselves to come to America and succeed as best as possible here, we cannot wait one or two decades for change. The Bhutanese in America need help now. To address this, I have provided policy recommendations broadly focused on three topics: the Southeast Asian refugee experience in the United States as a template for the Bhutanese; disrupting the current thinking about assimilation in favor of an emphasis on native values *and* American values; and the need for greater cooperation on issues of refugee support.

1. Learning from Southeast Asian Refugees.

The standard for long-standing refugee resettlement in America is the story of the Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong in the United States. This large and diverse community has come to represent the good and the bad of U.S. foreign and domestic policy, and their successes have allowed them to represent a vision of resettlement and communal integration that should be aspired to by other refugees. While many Southeast Asians continue to struggle, particularly the Hmong, there is no need to reinvent the wheel, so to say, when it comes to ameliorating current policy regarding Bhutanese resettlement; this critical juncture in history can allow us to craft new policies while looking backward at what worked and did not for Southeast Asian refugees.

Portes and Zhou (1993) created a framework of immigrant arrival in the United States based on government policy (receptive, indifferent, or hostile); societal reception (prejudiced or non-prejudiced), and existence of co-ethnic community (weak or strong). Using this framework, the Bhutanese-Nepalese would fit in the same path as the Cambodian and Hmong refugees in 1975 (receptive government policy + prejudiced social reception + weak co-ethnic community). Chan (2001) has echoed a similar idea:

“Unlike immigrants, these Americans from Southeast Asia share the refugee experience – they were not voluntary immigrants to the United States ... Furthermore, Southeast Asian refugees, who were among the first to arrive in the United States, have had to establish new social networks and organizations to support community and economic development rather than benefit from networks established by previous immigrants. Broadly conceived, the Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian communities in the United States will serve here as a proxy for refugee-impacted communities” (201)

The government needs to foster dialogue between the Bhutanese and these Southeast Asian communities so that the former may learn from the latter, especially with regards to the creation

of social networks and community organizations. Such a move may go a long way in creating a sense of unity and purpose among the Bhutanese.

2. Ethnogenesis, English Education, and Family Structure

Ethnicity, even if a social construct, still matters. While race and ethnicity cannot be easily defined, the take away from the discussion, at least for Hochschild, Weaver, and Burch (2012), is that “immigration is making Americans more heterogeneous in ways that challenge the settled understandings of the meaning of race” (31). Rumbaut and Portes (2001) have noted the same in their work on the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS)³, mentioning that ethnicity was “a strong and significant predictor of virtually every adaptation outcome” (xvii). Their work yields support for the theory of American ethnogenesis or the creation of a unique American identity. According to Rumbaut and Portes,

“We newish Americans leapfrog from world to world, reinventing ourselves en route ... We wonder who we are – what does it mean to be Irish-American, Cuban-American, Armenian-American? – and are amazed to discover that others wonder, too. Indeed, nothing seems more typically American than to obsess about identity” (2001, 3).

Portes and Zhou (1993, 96) have also mentioned that assimilation can be catastrophic for certain immigrant youth, but the opposing reference to cling to their ethnic communities is also problematic. Rather, they suggest a slow process of segmented assimilation which has its limitations, but may be “the best strategy for capitalizing on otherwise unavailable material and moral resources” (1993, 96). Chan (2001) also points to the “subtractive” nature of bilingual education that force English fluency only “devalue the home language and diminish a student’s language proficiency in that language” (221). Lastly, Chan believes that any and all policies must be holistic and aim at creating stronger families, and not furthering the dissent between the being-educated refugee children, and their poorly-educated parents.

If, as Rumbaut and Portes (2001, 10) believe, that we need to focus on the children of immigrants who will be “a generation oriented not to their parents’ immigrant pasts, but to their

³ The authors interviewed immigrant children from the Mexican, Cuban, Nicaraguan, Filipino, Vietnamese, Haitian, Jamaican, and West Indian communities.

own American futures” than we should use this nascent discussion on the theory of ethnogenesis to begin challenging, and possibly correcting, the theoretical bases for our current policy, and moving away from traditional assimilationist theory.

3. Clarifying Government Roles

As early as 1975, the federal government recognized that handling the refugees from Southeast Asia (then termed “Indochina”) would require extraordinary government corporation; to that end, President Gerald Ford created the Interagency Task Force on Refugees to examine the problem. By 1976, Congress and the task force were already arguing over the best way to handle the crisis, as well as questions over what refugees needed to survive in America. The transcript from one congressional subcommittee hearing on the Interagency Task Force is telling in its honesty and clairvoyance: “Efforts to deal with the psychological and emotional dimensions of the refugees’ resettlement are likely to fail unless they reflect a knowledge of the unique culture of the people” (Whorton 1997, 108). Unfortunately, this was met with disagreement by Ms. Taft, the task force representative who, in response, said, “I do not believe they face unusual mental health problems.”⁴

Other early reports and studies of refugee resettlement point to problems and discrepancies in resettlement programs across the states, but nothing is mentioned of how these seemingly administrative and bureaucratic issues could be detrimental to the health of the refugees. Further, many of these reports read like they were written by authors with very little direct contact with the actual refugees. A 1982 report by Kogan et al. noted “structural issues affect the program staff’s abilities to carry out several important functions, such as making

⁴ Her first name was not mentioned in the hearing excerpt.

timely decisions and following through” (27). Their section, “Variations in State Refugee Resettlement Philosophies,” shows how a state’s philosophy on the refugee resettlement can fundamentally alter the goals they [states] have for their new refugee immigrant populations. When one state’s philosophy is “to protect community and refugee health” while another’s is “to ensure a smooth transition of refugees into the state’s culture, avoiding negative public impacts or exploitation of the refugee,” there is cause for concern (1982).

Martin’s (2005) detailed report on the state of the United States Refugee Program (USRP) is comprehensive, but also frustrating to read, because it does not focus on the well-being and mental, physical, and emotional health of the actual refugees, but on national and international policy. For Martin (2005), the debates at the time focused on a variety of issues including who and how many people should be designated as refugees; the American government choice to either provide resettlement or financial assistance overseas to those in need; the role of NGOs; and ending a post-9/11 policy of only allowing 35 refugees per plane.

While the CDC report offers several ideas to ameliorating the mental health of Bhutanese refugees, Ao et al. do offer a concrete policy suggestion:

“Facilitate connections between suicide prevention programs and refugee resettlement communities/ networks” and “strengthen community structures and expand programs for newly arrived persons that address post-resettlement isolation, non-clinical interventions in the context of Bhutanese culture, vocational training, and community engagement” (2012, 1).

Aoki and Takeda (2008) argue that many Southeast Asian refugees arrived in the United States struggling with “psychological trauma, culture shock, and poverty” (86). The Bhutanese have had similar experiences, but it is important to remember that though these groups have had similar experiences, my suggestions that the federal government provide, to the best of its ability, culturally sensitive and relevant assistance to these different communities. By working with Bhutanese stakeholders and community activists, as well as psychologists and mental health

professionals, the United States government can craft a suicide prevention program for the Bhutanese refugee community to give them the mental strength needed to survive in America. Just as the experiences of the Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian refugees have served as a tutorial for later groups, this present challenge with the Bhutanese can affect a newer government policy of prevention, which will find its use again with the next wave of refugee resettlement.

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