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Refugee and Employer Perceptions of the Effects of Capital on Refugee Employability in Utah

Christian L. Fritz

Utah State University

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REFUGEE AND EMPLOYER PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTS OF CAPITAL ON
REFUGEE EMPLOYABILITY IN UTAH

by

Christian L. Fritz

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Sociology

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ABSTRACT

Refugee and Employer Perceptions of the Effects of Capital on Refugee Employability in Utah

by

Christian L. Fritz, Master of Science
Utah State University, 2016

Major Professor: Dr. Leon Anderson
Department of Sociology

Refugees are once again a major topic of international politics, but one that also reaches down to the local level of even some small, rural American towns. This study pulled data from a qualitative, statewide refugee needs assessment in Utah, funded by the Department of Workforce Services, in order to explore the perceptions of both refugees and refugee employers concerning the variables affecting refugee employability. The data was framed using the concepts of social, cultural, human, and financial capital. In many cases, the refugees and employers perceived the same deficits and stores of capital as important, but there was some disconnect over institutionalized cultural capital, financial capital in the form of government assistance, and external embodied cultural capital. These findings will help increase the sociological knowledge base regarding refugee issues and will lead to future research that can dive deeper into some of the issues that were uncovered.

(78 pages)
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Refugee and Employer Perceptions of the Effects of Capital on Refugee Employability in Utah

Christian L. Fritz

The Sociology, Social Work, and Anthropology Department at Utah State University conducted a state-wide needs assessment of refugees in Utah for the Utah Department of Workforce Services. Using the data collected for this project, I analyzed the interview transcripts of twenty-four participants in the study including eight employers of refugees, eight Iraqi refugees, and eight Burmese refugees. I looked at the skills, education, finances, personal connections, personal attitudes, and cultural knowledge of the refugees and compared those to the desires of the employers of refugees.

I found that the employers favored refugee employees because they work hard and do not cause problems, but the employers were concerned with the refugee’s general lack of English language skills. Many refugees worked in very difficult, low-wage, low-skill jobs because their lack of language skills kept them from obtaining better employment. Since the data already existed for the Department of Workforce Services’ needs assessment, the costs for this research were negligible.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to first thank my committee chair Dr. Leon Anderson for all of his assistance, hard work, and patience in guiding me through the process of completing this research. I also want to thank my two other committee members, Drs. Erin Hofmann and Stephen VanGeem, for their invaluable feedback and guidance throughout the process.

I also need to thank my colleagues, friends, and family that helped encourage me and provided much needed moral support. Megan Keller and Dr. Christy Glass both gave me excellent feedback on draft copies, and Shawn Heckman was always there to encourage me onward when I faltered. Thank you all for everything you have done to make this research possible.

Christian Fritz
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INTRODUCTION

Refugees are an important issue at the local, national, and global levels today. American fears of potential terrorists using refugee status to gain access to the United States are fueling hardline, anti-refugee stances among presidential candidates like Donald Trump. These fears have also caused several reactionary protests including one in front of a mosque in Texas that was holding a welcome event for Syrian refugees. Despite this growing climate of fear and mistrust, the United States government is committed to assisting refugees and continuing its leading role in refugee resettlement operations. Utah itself has seen around 10,000 refugees relocated to the state in the past 10 years and many more are expected to arrive in the future (ORR, 2012).

Despite the current national and local prominence of the issue, refugees remain the most “under-researched immigrant population in the United States” (Lee, 2014). Unlike other immigrants, refugees have been granted special status by the United Nations (UN) due to their extraordinary circumstances that afford them additional rights and protections under Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1951 UN convention on the Status of Refugees (UNHCR, 2016). The UN defines a refugee as a person that, “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that county” (The UN Refugee Agency, n.d.). These are people that have fled their homelands because of problems like warfare, political persecution, or ethnic cleansing, and in desperation, have thrown themselves on the mercy of the rest of the world.
Due to the exigent circumstances of their emigration from their home countries, refugees are faced with many of the difficulties of other immigrants – though they are often exacerbated – as well as some issues that are unique to their situation. Once refugees resettle in their new home countries, they are faced with a multitude of interrelated issues. They need to find jobs in order to survive; they need to create relationships to find a job; they need to learn the local language in order to create these relationships (Bates et al. 2012) and interface with the institutions of American life (Nawyn et al., 2012), and they need to acculturate in order to maintain these relationships (Berry, 1997). Furthermore, they are affected by their past experiences in a number of unpredictable ways including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that could make all the problems of integration even worse (Gordon, 2011).

In the United States, people that don’t deal with their problems on their own and make use of social welfare programs such as food stamps, housing assistance, and unemployment, are seen as “lazy” by many (De Sante, 2013). Some researchers have even gone so far as to posit that employment is not only negatively correlated with many social ills experienced in traditionally low-income neighborhoods, but that there is a causal relationship. Wilson specifies “crime, family dissolution, welfare, [and] low levels of social organization” as resulting from the disappearance of work (Wilson, 1999). So, employment being an American social norm, most government assistance for refugees, and even much from private organizations, is devoted to helping the refugee find employment, ostensibly so that they can become self-sufficient and contributing members of society (ORR, 2015). In reality, these programs often appear to be devoted
to finding any form of legal employment for the refugee in order to get them off their roles as a “success” with little consideration for the longevity, suitability, and sustainability of the employment (Lee, 2014). It is, therefore, important to delve into the many difficulties and opportunities refugees face in the realm of employment in order to understand how government and non-government organizations can better assist them in finding long-term solutions to their employment needs.

Fortuitously, Utah State University was recently contracted by the Utah Department of Workforce Services (DWS) to conduct a needs assessment of refugees in Utah, specifically targeting data regarding employment and educational needs. As part of the refugee needs assessment, the researchers interviewed refugees, refugee employers, and the service providers that work with the refugee populations (Daniels and Belton, 2015). This presents a great opportunity to explore the stumbling blocks that plague refugee employment efforts, as well as the roles that refugees can and do fill in the current job market. Hopefully this will allow for a better understanding of how refugee issues affect their employment and what service providers can do to address those issues.

To this end, my research will explore three primary questions regarding refugee and employer perceptions of the importance of various forms of refugee capital. The first question is “How do refugees perceive their various forms of capital playing a role in their employment?” The second question is “How do employers perceive refugee capital playing a role in employability?” The third question follows from the first two, “How do refugee and employer perceptions compare?” These questions will be answered by analyzing the transcripts from 16 of the refugee interviews and the 8 employer
interviews. I hope that the analysis will identify some themes within this small sample that can be used to inform the general sociologic knowledge base and lead to further research on the under-researched refugee subgroup of immigrants.
LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a large body of research on immigrant issues in general, but a surprising lack, especially from American scholars, specifically on refugees. While it is becoming increasingly passé to use a dichotomous relationship associating refugees with politically driven emigration and traditional immigrants with economically driven motives in favor of a more spectrum-based approach (Lee, 2014), the basic kernel of truth in this bi-polar relationship remains. Traditional immigrants generally move because of increased economic opportunities in a foreign country (UNHCR, n.d.). While an economically driven migrant may desire a rapid move, they generally have more time to gather resources and prepare themselves for their emigration. This ability to martial various forms of capital may at least partially explain why only 15% of traditional immigrants make use of welfare benefits (Census, 2012). Conversely, refugees are generally fleeing their homes with relatively little notice and amongst great turmoil and upheaval. This severely limits their ability to make use of their resources. Recognizing this truth is a primary reason that they receive added public assistance that traditional immigrants do not. Their lack of useable capital is reflected in the fact that 63% of refugees, within 5 years of their arrival, are at least making use of SNAP benefits (ORR, 2011).

Due to the United States’ relatively weak social welfare programs, employment is a near requisite for able-bodied adults to be able to pay for their living expenses. Because of this, the Office of Refugee Resettlement, as listed in their “Six Guiding Principles,” and most refugee assistance programs are keyed towards acquiring
employment for refugees. The idea being that once they are employed, they can obtain enough financial capital to become self-sufficient (UNHCR, 2016).

Refugee Capital

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Financial Capital</th>
<th>Social Capital</th>
<th>Human Capital</th>
<th>Cultural Capital</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Available financial resources</td>
<td>Resources accrued through social ties</td>
<td>Skills and knowledge applied for employment</td>
<td>Taste, tasteful objects, degrees and certifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subsections used</td>
<td>Government assistance, Savings</td>
<td>Co-ethnic, External, Organizational</td>
<td>Language, Previous employment, Education</td>
<td>Embodied: Internal and External, Institutionalized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operationalization</td>
<td>Government assistance, food stamps, housing assistance, personal finances</td>
<td>Information or assistance gained through family, friends, co-ethnics, or via contacts with organizations</td>
<td>Requisite English language skills for jobs; skills and knowledge gained from previous employment or education</td>
<td>Work ethic, attitude, knowledge of social norms, degrees and certifications</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Capital Definitions and Operationalization

In order to analyze the interview data and answer the research questions, the data was fit to a model of forms of capital. Using the well-established capital models allows for this research to be firmly anchored in the existing sociological literature. This has resulted in data that is more useable for this research and for use by future researchers as well.
There are many forms of capital, and unlike the traditional, simplistic view of human capital as the determinate force on employment and wages, the reality is that other forms of capital are important to obtaining and maintaining employment as well (Moss and Tilly, 2003; Bailey and Waldinger, 1991). Unfortunately, refugees generally have very limited access to the various forms of capital, such as social, cultural, financial, and human upon arrival to their country of resettlement. This lack of capital causes real problems in all facets of their lives, from buying food, to paying bills, to simply interacting with their new neighbors, but of particular interest for this study, is the effects of capital on refugee employment.

Financial capital is traditionally defined as money that is accumulated in order for re-investment or to make a profit; however, this definition is very much an economics definition based on studying business owners and not the working poor. This research will adjust the term “financial capital” to mean accumulated money at the individual or family level that can be used not only to exchange for other forms of capital, but also to expend on living expenses when no income is present. This definitional change is essentially just a modification to the unit of analysis, but also includes the potential to use money as a stop-gap during periods of unemployment.

A reserve of financial capital is very useful when an applicant is looking for work as job seeking can drain economic resources (Sales, 1995). Financial capital allows the applicant to pay his living expenses while he is looking for employment, which in turn allows him to be more discerning in which jobs to apply for and accept. High levels of financial capital could also be used to hire services of professional resume writers or job
search coaches, or to increase human capital via education and training. It may also allow for more freedom to choose a neighborhood, or even move to a different neighborhood that is more conducive to acquiring a desired job. Enough savings might also allow a job seeker to be able to afford day-care for his children or a vehicle to transport them to a distant workplace.

While some refugees do enter the United States with relatively large stores of financial capital (Lee, 2014), most do not. This is the primary factor in refugee assistance programs focusing so intently on immediate employment of newly arrived refugees. Without stores of financial capital, they need to begin earning wages as soon as possible to cover their living expenses since assistance programs for refugees are of relatively short duration: eight months for assistance contracted through the ORR (ORR, 2013).

The second form of capital to be discussed is social capital, which Bourdieu described as an essentially economic based resource that is aggregated from the relationships in a durable network (1986). Portes and Landolt use a simpler definition stating that social capital is the resources that accrue to persons by virtue of their social ties (2000). Putnam, on the other hand, believes that social capital is a community level resource that should not necessarily be considered as an individual attribute because of the potential conflicts of interest between the community’s and the individual’s use of social capital (2001). Measurements of social capital are wide-ranging and, for in-depth studies, often include items like level of emotional support, comfort and understanding, and help and advice (Kikuchi and Coleman, 2012). Other measurements include more simple items such as the strength and number of social ties, and even language
acquisition as a form of social capital (Nawyn et al. 2012). For this research, I will use the Portes and Landolt formulation.

Social capital is incredibly important for immigrants in the job market (Portes, 1998; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003). Informal, co-ethnic social groups are a primary source of information regarding employment opportunities for refugees (Lee, 2014) and weaker social ties appear to be more important than strong ties in these networks (Granovetter, 1973). Bailey and Waldinger explain that once one ethnic group of immigrants has established a positive relationship with an employer, the employer will tell the refugees when there are other openings available so that they will pass the information along to their co-ethnic comrades. This allows the employer to continue hiring people with traits that he desires and refugees that already work for him can help train the new arrivals. While this use of social capital does tend to provide rapid employment, it also tends to happen in low-skill, low-pay, menial, and/or difficult jobs. Over the long term, this can result in refugees of certain ethnic groups becoming “stuck” or pigeon-holed into these industries (Bailey and Waldinger, 1991). According to Lee, the most successful strategy was for refugees to cultivate social capital with members of the dominant society in order to gain higher level employment (Lee, 2014).

Cultural capital is difficult to accurately and wholly define because it is a rather amorphous concept that encompasses such nebulous notions as aesthetic taste, manner of speech, works of art, and degrees and certifications (Bourdieu, 1984; 1986). In his work “The Forms of Capital,” Pierre Bourdieu further explained the theory of cultural capital as existing in three states; *embodied* in the mind, *objectified* in physical items, and
institutionalized through certifications made by organizations. Cultural capital is one of the most important, but often overlooked forms of capital necessary to achieve “good” work. As Moss and Tilly allude to in *Stories Employers Tell*, cultural capital and so-called “soft skills” are very often cited as more important than traditional human capital when looking at low-skill, entry level positions (Moss and Tilly, 2003). Cultural capital is comprised of cultural knowledge regarding appropriate dress, grooming, punctuality, attitude, and work ethic. While there are low-skill jobs that require a minimal amount of cultural capital, such as cleaning hotel rooms, many of the “better” entry-level jobs, such as sales, cashiering, and customer service see these cultural issues as paramount.

It is important to note that there is a clear division within this sub-type that needs to be explicated. The first type is “external” cultural capital. It is knowledge based and includes the embodied cultural capital that is focused on social interaction. Understanding social norms, expectations, nuanced speech, etc. that are all focused on communicating ones membership in a particular social group are all forms of external cultural capital. The second type is “internal” cultural capital. This form is focused on the self and is purely obtained through habitus. Being hard working, friendly, motivated, lazy, or a massive procrastinator are personal attributes of that make up a person’s character and are all examples of internal cultural capital. A person might utilize their external cultural capital to recognize a disparity between their internal cultural capital and some social norm, then mask that internal capital. An example of this would be a lazy person that works hard when their boss is around. Pretending to be hard working is actually external cultural capital masquerading as internal cultural capital.
Using Bourdieu’s definition, institutionalized capital, in the form of educational degrees and special certifications (Bourdieu, 1986), becomes particularly important for some refugees. As Alicia Lee discusses in her dissertation, there are many Iraqi refugees that were members of the middle or upper class in Iraq that held advanced degrees and certifications like medical doctorates. When these refugees arrive in the United States, they discover that despite maintaining the human capital, the knowledge required to work as a medical doctor, the institutionalized social capital that they built in Iraq is worthless in the United States. Instead of working in their high skill, high SES career fields, they are encouraged to take the first entry-level job that presents itself (Lee, 2014).

Finally, human capital, the theoretically most important form of capital in earnings and employability, is the aggregate of job related skills that a person can offer an employer (Becker, 1964). These are the normal skills related to work such as typing, using various tools, knowledge of machinery, sewing, etc.; these are the “hard” skills that employers want. While there is some overlap with cultural capital, the two forms of capital remain distinct. The knowledge gained during education versus the degrees and certifications imparted by the educator are the important consideration human capital. Likewise, the ability to communicate via written and spoken language is a human capital skill, while the eloquence with which this is done is a cultural capital skill.

Immigrant Employment

Since there is a lack of refugee specific literature regarding employment in the United States, literature addressing immigrant employment will be substituted. While this is a less than perfect solution, the information should still provide a sufficient base of
knowledge since refugees, as a subset of immigrants, do share many traits with the general immigrant population. This may even allow for the exploration of differences between “immigrants” and “refugees.”

One area of consistent debate within the immigrant employment literature is the validity of Portes and Jensen’s ethnic enclave theory (1987). According to this theory, ethnic enclaves allow for a “third alternative,” separate from skilled work in the primary sector, which is unobtainable by most immigrants, and unskilled work in the secondary labor market, for immigrants to achieve economic self-sufficiency (Xie and Gou 2011). Portes and Jensen studied Cuban immigrants in Florida and found that those immigrants that lived or worked in an ethnic enclave benefited from the tight social networks and saw greater economic mobility than those that were not associated with an ethnic enclave (1989). Their work was called into question, however, and Sanders and Nee revisited the study finding that the data did not support two of their hypotheses. First that ethnic enclaves had greater effects when defined by residence instead of workplace, and second, that no matter how the enclave was defined, they were associated with many negative factors including less education, lower English proficiency, lower earnings, and lower rates of citizenship (Sanders and Nee, 1992).

A decade later, two researchers at the University of Toronto addressed the issue of ethnic enclaves from a social consequence standpoint. They found that there was a high cost for immigrants participating in ethnic economies as it decreased their interactions with people outside of their co-ethnic networks (Fong and Ooka, 2002). They also linked this lack of out-group social capital to lower levels of education and English language
proficiency. While their work seems to presuppose a benefit to out-group social capital, that is not actually a foregone conclusion, and there is some research, presented later, that shows that this type of out-group social capital is important in job seeking.

A further 10 years after Fong and Ooka’s work, Xie and Gough addressed the issue of ethnic enclaves again and were unable to show that enclaves are better for immigrants. In fact, they found that for some immigrants, ethnic enclaves actually resulted in worse economic outcomes (Xie and Gough, 2011). A previous Swedish study may shed some light on Xie and Gough’s mixed findings. After researching the results of a Swedish program that intentionally resettled refugees in areas lacking ethnic enclaves, Eden, Fredriksson, and Aslund found that refugees with higher levels of human capital did better outside of ethnic enclaves, while those with less human capital did better within enclaves (Eden, et al. 2003). The result is a rather mixed review of immigrants entering ethnic enclaves, but a potentially fascinating discovery by Eden et al. regarding the effects of human capital.

As touched upon earlier, one consequence of ethnic enclaves is the tendency for social capital to be built only within the co-ethnic group. This has had a large effect on employment since dense, co-ethnic networks tend to limit information flow regarding jobs (Fong and Ooka, 2011). Since many immigrants find employment via their co-ethnic social networks (Bailey and Waldinger, 1991), and low-skill employers often prefer to hire through referrals (Waldinger, 2003), they often end up stuck in a system that only offers them low-skill, entry level jobs that are shunned by native workers.
Managers in industries such as meat packing, manufacturing, and cleaning services say they like to hire immigrants because they are “hard working” (Waldinger, 2003), but Bailey and Waldinger cynically claim that these managers are hiring immigrants because they are more “tractable” and do not question authority (Bailey and Waldinger, 1991). Munoz seconds this claim in her book *Transnational Tortillas*, where she asserts that managers in these low-skill industries use “hegemonic” control over their legal immigrant workers, requiring them to be complicit in their exploitation (Munoz, 2008). This desire for foreign workers in difficult, low-skill jobs is especially dangerous for refugees because the assistance programs intended to help them specifically state their intent to see them employed at the first opportunity that presents itself, no matter the pay, skill match, or conditions (Lee, 2014).

Refugees in Utah

The United States has welcomed an average of about 75,000 refugees annually into the country over the past 40 years (Refugee Processing Center, 2016). The Figure 2 paints an interesting picture of major world conflicts from the mid 70’s to the present starting with warfare, and genocide in Southeast Asia, then the unrest caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990’s, the genocide in the Balkans in the late 1990’s, and finally the wars in the Middle East (Near East on the chart). Between 2000 and 2015, 14,348 refugees have resettled in Utah at an average rate of approximately 900 per year (ORR, 2012), but as Figure 3 shows, the number has been trending upwards since the low in 2002. When combined with President Obama’s recent pledge to further increase overall U.S. refugee intake, this number is likely to continue climbing.
While refugees only represent about 1/3 of a percent of Utahns, it is an important enough population that the state government is starting to take notice. The Utah Department of Workforce Services (DWS) is very interested in improving assistance to refugees in Utah, especially on the education and employment fronts, as seen in their funding of the refugee needs assessment (Daniels and Belton, 2015). The refugee needs assessment funded by the DWS has provided a lot of data that needs to be fully researched to not only improve the lives of the refugees living in Utah, but to also add to the general body of literature on this under-researched migrant class. This research seeks to answer questions about the barriers and opportunities for employment that refugees in Utah currently face. Hopefully this thesis will help inform the DWS, state government, and refugee service providers with critical information that they can use to improve the employment opportunities for Utah’s refugee community.

Figure 2. Refugees Resettling in Utah
Figure 3. Refugee Admissions by Region
Department of State Office of Admissions- Refugee Processing Center, 2016
RESEARCH METHODS

This research used the 2014 state-wide refugee needs assessment that was commissioned by the Utah DWS. Utah State University’s Department of Sociology, Social Work and Anthropology was tasked with this project with Dr. Steven Daniels as the primary investigator. The project had three phases in which semi-structured interviews were conducted with refugee service providers, refugee employers, and finally refugees themselves. In total, approximately 150 interviews were conducted providing a huge source of qualitative data. For this research, I will focus primarily on the 8 employer interviews and the 16 interviews of refugees from Iraq and Myanmar/Burma. Burmese and Iraqi refugees are the 3rd and 5th largest refugee groups to resettle in Utah between 2000 and 2012 with 1,407 Burmese and 1,021 Iraqis resettling in Utah during that timeframe (ORR, 2012).

I chose to focus on these two groups of refugees because, from my previous experience with them during my past research, I have found that they have very different refugee experiences and portfolios of capital. The refugees from Burma have often spent decades in refugee camps in Thailand while the Iraqi refugees took a much shorter amount of time to make it to the United States. The differences in socio-economic situations between the two groups, Middle Eastern being more industrialized and Myanmar agrarian, may also lead to differences in the types and amounts of capital that each group brings.
Within these national groups are several different ethnic groups as well. Within the Iraqi group, there were 5 interviews with refugees that self-identified as Iraqi (Arab), and three interviews with refugees that self-identified as Kurdish. While Myanmar/Burma has a number of ethnic groups, in this research, I focused only the Karen.

I used all 8 employer interviews that were conducted as part of the needs assessment since the limited number allows for easy analysis of all the data. During the Refugee Needs Assessment, there was a concerted effort to identify employers that employed refugees. As well as consulting with DWS, the researchers, during interviews with service providers, asked for employers that the service providers knew hired refugees. Lastly, the researchers contacted a number of businesses in Utah that hired workers for the types of low-skill work that often employs refugees.

Data Collection

One of the challenges during this research project was finding potential interviewees. During the service provider phase, a list containing many refugee service providers in the state was provided by DWS. This list became the primary source of refugee service provider contact information which was then supplemented by contacts provided by consultants working on the project. Once a list of potential interviewees was complete, they were each contacted via phone and asked if they would be willing to participate in the study. A letter of information explaining the research and providing contact information was then mailed to the potential interviewees. Most were willing to be interviewed and their contact information was then given to one of several teams of
undergraduate researchers who then setup and conducted the interview, usually via telephone. Their notes were sent to a graduate researcher that input them into AtlasTi and qualitatively analyzed them.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
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<th>Origin SES</th>
<th>US SES</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
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<td>Umar</td>
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<td>4 years</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Mid</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>41-55</td>
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<td>Arab</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Mid</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>41-55</td>
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<td>Arab</td>
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<td>Mid/High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>55+</td>
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<td>Mid</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26-40</td>
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<td>Low</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>26-40</td>
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<td>Low/Mid</td>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rasul</td>
<td>Kurdish</td>
<td>18 years</td>
<td>Low/Mid</td>
<td>Mid/High</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>41-55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Burmese</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Kulap</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mali</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low/Mid</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18-25</td>
</tr>
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<td>Sunan</td>
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<td>5 years</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>41-55</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thaksin</td>
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<td>8 years</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>41-55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preecha</td>
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<td>5 months</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>18-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somboon</td>
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<td>1 year</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>41-55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prasert</td>
<td>Karen</td>
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<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>26-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ubon</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>41-55</td>
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Figure 4. Refugee Interviewees
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business Type</th>
<th>Refugee Employees</th>
<th>Percent of Workforce</th>
<th>Time hiring refugees</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deseret Inn</td>
<td>Hotel</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bountiful Cookies</td>
<td>Food Production</td>
<td>No Data</td>
<td>No Data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acme Meats</td>
<td>Food Production</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly’s Cleaners</td>
<td>Cleaners</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utah Healthcare</td>
<td>Health Care</td>
<td>No Data</td>
<td>No Data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul’s Pizza</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salt Lake Security</td>
<td>Security</td>
<td>No Data</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wasatch Healthcare</td>
<td>Health Care</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25%</td>
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Figure 5. Refugee Employer Interviewees

The list of 8 refugee employers was compiled from information gained during the service provider interviews and the experience of the project consultants. Again, each was contacted and asked to participate with those showing interest receiving letters of information. For these interviews, teams of two graduates would conduct in-person semi-structured interviews with representatives of the refugee employer. Some of the smaller companies would only have one participant, often the owner, while the larger employers would have a small team of people being interviewed jointly. These interviews were recorded, after permission was granted by the interviewees, and then transcribed at a later date. These transcripts were then loaded into AtlasTi and qualitatively analyzed.

The most difficult challenge was acquiring a sample of refugees as there was no pre-existing list of refugees currently in Utah. The exception to this was the list kept by
an assistance organization of refugees living in one of the northern counties. In this county, a randomized sample was possible, but in all other parts of Utah, the potential refugee interviewees were gathered in a snowball type sampling strategy. In many cases, a refugee community leader was identified through the previous research with service providers and this community leader was contacted to be interviewed and to suggest others that might be interested in helping with the study.

The refugees were interviewed by a team of two whenever possible and when an interpreter was necessary, the researchers used a family member or telephone interpretation service. Often times, the interview included family members of the primary interviewee. The interviews were semi-structured with a list of questions to be asked, but still giving the freedom to allow the interviewee to wander into other topics. This was intentionally done to allow the refugees to bring up topics that they felt were important that our interview instrument may have missed. Again, after receiving permission from the refugees, these interviews were recorded, transcribed at a later date, and analyzed in AtlasTi.

The initial qualitative analysis was accomplished using an emergent framework in which the transcripts were open coded, and were later placed in categories as themes emerged from the data during focused coding (Emerson et al., 2011). This inductive method helps to ensure that the analyst’s biases and preconceptions do not drive the results, instead allowing the patterns and frequencies in the data to speak for themselves (Lofland et al., 2006). Once the themes began to emerge, they were fitted to a framework of capital theory to allow for the conceptualization and operationalization of the results.
Units of Analysis

This research resulted in three units of analysis, co-ethnic level, general refugee level, and refugee employer level. The co-ethnic level explored similarities within the co-ethnic group and the general refugee level allowed for comparisons between co-ethnic groups to explore their differences and similarities. The refugee employer level will allow for comparisons between the various employers.

Concepts

The important concepts for this research are the barriers and opportunities, within the capital framework, for refugee employment. The refugee employers were specifically asked what they liked and disliked about refugee employees, so there should be a relatively clear picture of the obstacles and prospects for refugee employment from their perspective. For the refugee perspective, their interviews were coded to discover what their capital “portfolios” look like and how this may affect their employment in positive and negative ways. Another aspect that was investigated was their strategies for increasing capital in order to gain or change their employment.

Operationalization

In order to measure these concepts, they were operationalized into useful data for exploring the various factors influencing refugee employment opportunities. Once the open coding of all the interviews was completed, the codes were organized into one of the four forms of capital being addressed in this research. Any mention of savings, money, or government assistance used for living expenses or the acquisition of other capital was coded as “financial capital.” References to friends, family, and social
networks were coded as “social capital” and were further broken down into “co-ethnic,” “external,” and “organizational” categories as appropriate. Comments were parsed into the “cultural capital” category when the interviewee discusses “soft-skills,” licensing and diplomas, expressly cultural issues, or language issues beyond basic usage. The “human capital” section was purely work related skills such as mechanical aptitude, health (as it

Strengths

This primary strength of this research is the vast amount of data available from the state-wide refugee needs assessment. The available data is so large that, for this research, it was narrowed down to only 16 Asian refugee interviews. Even narrowed down, this still allowed for some comparisons between co-ethnic groups, as well as within these groups. The depth of many of the interviews allow for great stories and vignettes that help tell the story of refugees in Utah. While 24 total interviews, 16 refugee interviews and 8 employers, is considered a small size for statistical analysis, it is a rather large size for a qualitative study.

The fact that this data was collected across the entire state of Utah also allows for some generalization, at least across the Karen Burmese and Iraqi refugee communities in Utah. This makes it suitable for informing state-wide policy decisions by government and non-governmental organizations that deal with these populations. It will also allow future researchers to qualitatively compare these communities with those in other states in order to develop a fuller picture of their regional and national situations.

While the snowball/convenience sampling method used by the state-wide needs assessment is slightly problematic, they did make an effort to reach people that did not have strong co-ethnic ties. In the case of the Iraqis, two of the eight interviewees
reported very low co-ethnic ties. None within the Burmese group reported low co-ethnic ties, but half of the Burmese refugees were randomly selected from a list of refugees within a large, developing enclave that was provided by a refugee service provider from that area. There was also an effort to ensure that refugees were interviewed that lived in some of the outlying areas resulting in, at worst, an oversampling of these populations in order to ensure the breadth of the Utah refugee experience was captured.

Finally, this research adds to the general sociological knowledge base on refugees and their employers. As a qualitative study, it serves as an exploratory foray into the world of Utah’s refugees that uncovers new problems and new areas of interest for future researchers. The final section of this paper includes several recommendations for future research based off of my findings.

Ethical Concerns

Since this research dealt specifically with a sensitive population, extra safeguards were needed to ensure the protection of everyone involved. The first safeguard was seeking permission from a potential informant before starting an interview and recording, and ensuring that they know that they can end the interview at any time. This was important since some of the topics discussed, especially in the semi-structured interviews could have brought up painful memories for the refugees. Likewise, the needs assessment team offered counseling for interviewers that had a difficult time with some of the things they heard. Interviewers were also allowed to either end an interview or step away if they became emotionally overwhelmed.
Lastly, all interviewers, researchers, and interpreters had at least a CITI certification. The interpretations were conducted via telephone adding another layer of security since the interviewees will never be seen by the interpreters. The interpreting service that was used required all of their interpreters to be HIPPA certified in order for them to be able to handle calls regarding medical issues. While this service was more expensive than having interpreters physically present for the interviews, the benefits of ensuring the security of the refugees outweighed the potential cost savings.

Limitations

There are however, some weaknesses to this proposed research such as the small sample size. As stated earlier, between 2000 and 2011, 10,000 refugees resettled in Utah, so the sample size of 36 is so miniscule that statistical analysis is useless. Therefore, this research must be exploratory in nature and will inform future research by attempting to uncover themes that require further investigation.

Another limitation of this research is with the method used to find refugee interviewees. Instead of using a randomized sampling method, the needs assessment mostly relied on a convenience sampling through the snowball method and recommendations from key leaders within co-ethnic groups. This naturally selects against refugees with little or no social capital within their co-ethnic groups, though an effort was made, successfully with the Iraqis, to reach some refugees without strong co-ethnic ties. It may also skew results because the reliance on key leaders opens the possibility that the interviewees that they referred were chosen based on criteria the key
leader wanted. A randomized sampling would have allowed for a statistically better sampling, but the lack of a master list of refugees in Utah made this implausible.

The employers were chosen for the state-wide needs assessment because they employ refugees in Utah, but they do not specifically employ the refugee populations that this research investigated. Because of this, the refugee employers were making comments about all refugees they hired, including those from Africa, Central Asia and Southeast Asia, and not just about Iraqi or Burmese refugees. That being said, three of the employers Acme Meats, Molly’s Cleaners, and Paul’s Pizza primarily hired Burmese, and Salt Lake Security hired a large proportion of Iraqis, so they were still represented in the data.
REFUGEE FINDINGS

The first research question, “How do refugees perceive their various forms of capital playing a role in their employment?” was answered by analyzing the transcripts of 16 refugee interviews; 8 Iraqi and 8 Burmese refugees. The refugee interviews did not contain questions specifically asking for this information, but their answers to other questions allowed for this data to be teased out. The comments were ordered into their respective forms of capital for analysis.

Looking at two very different refugee populations allows for some interesting analysis between the two groups. The Iraqi refugees had much shorter times between fleeing their home country and their resettlement in the U.S. than the Burmese. Many of the Burmese spent upwards of 20 years in refugee camps between fleeing Burma and arriving in the United States. These differences contributed to the amounts and types of capital that each refugee group brought with them to the United States. Amongst the Iraqi refugees, three had been in the country since the mid-1990’s, and five had arrived within the previous four years. The Burmese refugees had all arrived within the previous eight years. Additionally, most of the Burmese interviews were very short, possibly because the linguistic barrier, even with the use of interpreters, made it more difficult to convey the meaning of the questions. Each group will be discussed separately in the following sections to highlight the variations within the “refugee” group.

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital covers a lot of ground including personal attributes, knowledge, objects, and titles and certifications. In a work context, this consists of the “soft skills”
that are seen as especially important to customer service jobs such as manner of speech
and demeanor, as well as internalized social norms that result in a strong motivation and
good work ethic. Another very important aspect of cultural capital in the employment
realm is the degrees and certifications bestowed by organizations attesting to a person’s
abilities or knowledge. A job that requires a bachelor’s degree from an accredited
university is requiring cultural capital.

Iraqi Refugees

Among the Iraqi refugees, cultural capital, specifically institutional cultural
capital, was one of the most frustrating issues. Most of the Iraqi refugees had completed
at least a bachelor’s degree in Iraq, and several had completed graduate work as well.
Unfortunately, these degrees were bestowed by schools in Iraq and the institutionalized
cultural capital that the actual degrees represent did not translate to the American
workplace. Qasim was a medical doctor in Iraq, but in the United States he has had to
become an entrepreneur since his medical license and medical doctor’s degree are not
recognized by American healthcare institutions.

I am first a doctor and second a businessman. Here, I cannot practice
medicine...I talked to the doctors there and they were nice, but they said they
could not let me work because of this insurance. It is the same everywhere here.
I have been to all the medical places here and they all say the same thing. I
cannot work in medicine because of the insurance.

Zakaria completed a master’s degree in engineering in Iraq, but on arrival in the United
States, could not get a job because his degree did not translate.
I see people get jobs in hotels, bakeries, and those types of jobs. They get entry-level work even though they were doctors, engineers, and those types of things. They cannot work in these jobs here. They have qualifications, but they cannot work their degree. I have known doctors who work as interpreters here.

Khalil also had a master’s degree from an Iraqi university but had to start washing dishes and working at a factory when he arrived in order to pay his bills.

I started working as a dishwasher in one month. I worked at the factory at night. So I was working two jobs and going to school (English classes).

Almost all of Iraqi refugees that were interviewed demonstrated that they were very hardworking, dedicated individuals. Despite their very advanced human capital and relatively high socio-economic status in Iraq, most of them were willing to start out in very menial, entry level jobs. Some of the refugees that were in the United States the longest, approximately 18 years each, had advanced their education and careers to levels at least on par with their success in Iraq before they were forced to leave. Rasul said,

One of my friends said, “I’m doing a masters at the Phoenix.” So I said that’s fine so I just did it there. But for our PhD, the military paid for Argosy, so that’s what we did. We did Argosy University.

While Khalil echoed this sentiment

You know, first time I came, I took a class here and class there, but it was not meant to be. Until recently, I studied the MBA at the University of Phoenix. I got my master’s in business.
Of the eight Iraqis interviewed, only two did not have a job when they were interviewed. Mariam had been in the United States for two years and was just starting her first job at the time of the interview. She was a single mother and said that she had taken several months of English language classes, but no other schooling since her arrival. She had faced many difficulties and reported several symptoms of depression which may account for her unemployed status for so long. Zakaria had been seriously wounded during an armed conflict and could not work due to his rather severe injury.

**Burmese Refugees**

Since none of the Burmese refugees interviewed had any education beyond high school from their time pre-arrival to the United States, institutional cultural capital was a non-issue for them. The only type of cultural capital they did discuss was their attitude towards work. All of the Burmese interviewees were employed in low skill, low paying jobs. Several of them complained about the physical difficulty of their work, some suffering chronic pain. In one interview, the interviewer asks if the interviewee has back and shoulder pain because she works so hard. The woman replies,

Yeah. So hard. Very, very hard work.

Sunan and his wife said,

*It is very difficult. My fingers hurt every night. His nails fell out and they regrew in again. Just from the work.*

Despite a desire for better jobs, they were resigned to their difficult jobs in order to allow for their children to become better educated and successful.
There are no other jobs. Everyone wants a better job. Even though we don’t like it, we have to like it because we have no choice. If we were educated, being a writer would be easier. I don’t know. I go to work. After children graduated, I want to go back to my country.

Despite these very difficult and physically challenging work conditions, they still persevered and continued to work hard.

Human Capital

Human capital is the skills and experiences that directly relate to the performance of work, usually for pay. This includes skills for manual “blue collar” labor, knowing how to use tools, fix cars, or operate specialized machinery, as well as more cerebral “white collar” labor such as being able to interpret one language into another, perform mathematical calculations, or write reports. Human capital is essentially rented by an employer in exchange for pay and the amount of pay is based on the value of the specific human capital being utilized.

Iraqi Refugees

The Iraqi refugees generally had very high amounts of human capital in the form of education and previous work experiences in Iraq. Sometimes this human capital allowed them to find employment more easily, but other times it did not. Interestingly, there seemed to be a U-shaped pattern to the importance of human capital in employability in the United States based on the socio-economic status of the human capital retained. One Iraqi interviewed had a purely blue collar human capital portfolio having worked on a farm and obtaining a high school education in Iraq. He now works a
difficult job in manufacturing, his human capital providing little benefit to his employability. A female Iraqi refugee had done fashion and costume design in the Iraqi entertainment industry and had used those skills to find work as a seamstress that – while not nearly at the same high level she had attained in Iraq – was at least using her human capital. Two of the Iraqis had worked with United States government entities providing translation and cultural navigation support. Both now worked for the United States military as civilian language instructors. And on the opposite side of the “U,” the medical doctor and the engineer that, despite their extensive training, have been unable to make use of his skills because of the institutional cultural capital not translating to American organizations.

English language skills were mentioned by almost all of the Iraqi refugees as an important factor in obtaining employment in the United States. When asked what kind of program he would institute to help newly arrived refugees, Faizel said,

*Give the refugees six months to teach them things they will need to know. They need time to learn English. While they learn English for six months, they should have rent and food and clothing covered so they can survive.*

While some of the Iraqi refugees arrived in the United States with at least a basic grasp of English, others did not. Those that did not speak English, and even some who did, lamented the lack of opportunities for learning English after they arrived. One of the younger refugees, Fahima, now attending university said,
I think if my dad knew more English, he wouldn’t be working at hard jobs. I think he may have gone to school and would be doing something different today. At the same time, he didn’t have the option, so he had to work.

Mariam did manage to attend 11 months of English language training before starting work and she said,

*When I first came first time, I see Mahmood [DWS employee]. Mahmood said, you have to go to work. And I said, no, no, no, I can’t go to work. He said you have to go to work. He said, you don’t have any problem. I said, are you sure? He said, yes. So I said, you have to find me a job with Arabic people. He said, what? You are American. I said, yes. I am an Arab. I don’t speak English. I said, I have hard time when I do homework with my son. I talk with other people, I’m sorry, I can’t.*

After English language training and volunteering to help others with English literacy, she got back in touch with Mahmood,

“*Yes, you remember first time when I talked with you?*” I told him, “*I need find job right now.*”

This allowed her to ensure that she could find a job in a field that was of interest to her and allowed her to make use of her human capital earned in Iraq.

Another frequent complaint about the English language programs was their “one-size-fits-all” approach to the various linguistic groups in each class. Having a teacher that only speaks English teach a class of students that do not speak any, or at most, very little English, was seen as less than optimal. Passim stated,
They need to change ESL programs in schools. It is very important for schools and programs to Arabic teachers who also speak English to teach English.

While another, Zakary, concurred with this sentiment by saying,

There needs to be more opportunities to learn English from people who speak our language too.

While this is a valid concern, it is also a very difficult one to address since there are so many linguistic groups among the refugee population and many of the English language programs are staffed by volunteers.

Burmese Refugees

The Burmese refugees, in contrast with the Iraqis, had very low levels of human capital upon arrival in the United States. Having spent upwards of 20 years in a refugee camp where they were unable to work a job beyond helping local farmers and perhaps running small shops in the camp, the Burmese refugees all lacked work experience. Only three of the eight Burmese refugees interviewed had an education beyond elementary school, one of which was a younger refugee that finished high school in the United States and was attending college at the time of the interview. All of the Burmese refugees were working difficult, low-skill jobs as dry cleaners or factory workers.

Similar to the Iraqi refugees, the Burmese believed that English was important for obtaining employment, but were often more specific in saying that they could obtain “better” employment with English language skills.

The hard thing is, because of the language, you cannot lift yourself up. You can stay at the same place and that’s all you’re going to end up. Like my brother
right now, he is working at the university, so his status is high and I cannot reach

(that) because he knows language and I don’t.

Many of the Burmese refugees complained that they were pressured into taking a job as soon as they were offered one, which precluded them from being able to take English language courses because of scheduling conflicts between their new job and the available class times. From the interviews, it seems that the Burmese were not having problems finding jobs that did not require English language skills, but the quality of the jobs they were getting were not very high. Thaksin’s daughter said,

My dad is just going to stick with the plant. My dad thinks there isn’t a place where can work except the plant. For people who can’t speak English, the plant is the best place to work.

Social Capital

Social capital consists of the benefits derived from ones social network. There are three important social networks in this research, the co-ethnic network, the network with people outside the co-ethnic community we will call the “external-network,” and the connections to various institutions like the Latter Day Saints (LDS), DWS, or refugee support groups. As discussed previously, many immigrants make use of co-ethnic social capital in order to find work when they arrive in the United States. This makes sense because building social capital in external-networks is more difficult and usually requires at least some degree of English language proficiency. This reliance on co-ethnic social capital tends to focus ethnic groups into certain areas and industries.

Iraqi Refugees
The Iraqis were rather varied in their use of and focus on their social capital. Within the realm of employment there was an interesting divide in job seeking networks along ethnic lines and time of arrival. Three of the five Arab Iraqis gained their employment through DWS while one was self-employed, and the last found his job using his co-ethnic social network. Conversely, the Kurdish Iraqi’s, with the exception of the very first to arrive, back in 1992, all used their co-ethnic social capital to find employment when they arrived. One of them said,

*Here, the first steps, you have to know some people to [provide a] reference for you.*

Some of the Kurds have since used other means, such as external social capital, to find employment, but this seems to have taken a long time.

While not directly related to employment, half of the Iraqi refugees mentioned members of their co-ethnic community that provided them assistance when they arrived. These were generally people that had arrived previously and/or spoke better English. These co-ethnic community helpers provided assistance with navigating cultural, institutional, and linguistic problems that cropped up. Mariam, an Arab Iraqi said,

*First time I knew a woman here. She’s from Iraq....She’s helped me a lot. (She’s been here for) 36 years. So she’s been here for a really long time. She does everything for the Iraqi people. For everybody when they come first time here.*

One of the Kurdish interviewees, Fahima, said she did not have this help herself, but claimed it was now available for others.
They have been here long enough (to apply for citizenship) and also even the ones who are new to the country, they have other Kurdish people who can help them with the process. We had so many problems with the process because we didn’t have any help to even start the process. Now we have a family helping another family and they have their citizenship in no time because their paperwork is in order and their information is filled out correctly and submitted correctly.

While these community helpers may not have helped them find jobs specifically, they gave them assistance which made it possible for them to continue working without interruption.

Two of the Iraqi’s said that they believed that connecting with external networks was very important. Mariam said,

Well, you know, I’m not very well connected here [in the Iraqi community]. I know some people here, but you know, I don’t communicate much with them because I want to learn and I want to learn fast. Just communicating with Iraqi community is not going to take me anywhere. It’s not going to help me much.

Burmese Refugees

While there did not appear to be much focusing of Iraqis into specific areas and industries, among the Burmese, this seems to be much more common. For the Burmese refugees, co-ethnic social capital was the most important form of social capital in acquiring work. Six of the eight Burmese refugees that were interviewed found their jobs through co-ethnic social networks. Somboon said,
My friend told me about the job. So I got the job. I did an interview. It was my first time for an interview. Someone, a friend, helped fill out the form and interpreted the interview.

Ubon was lead to a job by an LDS missionary that knew of an opening, and the last Burmese refugee was told about her job by an external network friend from school.

The Burmese refugees did not mention co-ethnic community helpers as often as the Iraqi refugees. In fact, only two Burmese refugees said that they regularly had assistance from a co-ethnic helper regarding cultural, institutional, or linguistic problems. Preecha lamented this lack of co-ethnic helpers saying,

We need to work together. Arrange something for those with a language barrier.

The one who has more knowledge and experience should reach out to the others.

This lower instance of co-ethnic helpers may be, at least in part, to the fact that there are fewer Burmese refugees with the cultural, institutional, and linguistic experience required to assist the others. This could be, at least partly, due to their overall lower levels of human capital, and the fact that there haven’t been Burmese refugees for a long enough period of time for some of them to accrue these skills.

Financial Capital

Financial capital for the purposes of this research is essentially money, be it savings, earned income, or government assistance that allows refugees to acquire other forms of capital or pay their living expenses. Financial capital is involved in employment because it is used to acquire human capital, and some forms of cultural capital. The refugees were not specifically asked about finances, but it was relatively easy to discern
based on context clues throughout the interviews; for example, discussing problems getting by during the first few months.

Financial capital appears to be the most heterogeneously distributed form of capital amongst all of the refugees. Aside from one Arab Iraqi, it seems that all of the other refugees arrived with very little financial capital. One reason for this, at least amongst the Iraqi refugees, was that the instability caused people to dip into their savings to try to ride out the conflict. When that became untenable, they were forced to flee with what little they had left. Fahima explained how this was happening to some of her family in Iraq.

*Right now with what is going on with ISIS, my aunts and uncles, who are teachers and professors, they haven’t had paychecks since July (5 month prior). They just go into their savings. You prepare for the worst. You always have to have some sort of money.*

Whatever the reason, it seems that arriving in the United States with little to no financial capital was a fairly universal experience among the refugees.

*Iraqi Refugees*

Qasim seems to have arrived with a decent amount of financial capital because he was able to start several businesses including one in which he flipped houses and cars. This higher level of financial capital resulted in a different arrival experience for him compared with other refugee stories. In his case, he said,

*When my family first moved here, there was no one to support us, to tell us where to move. We did not know if California was good for business or Utah. We don’t*
know any of these things and there was no one to inform us about where to go. It was also very expensive here, but it is important for me- the most important thing for me is to make my family happy.

So he is describing his distress at not knowing the best places to start a business and the expenses of making his family happy. Compare this to, Khalil, one of the Kurdish refugees

_I was 22 to 23. Single. We are like six single individuals and they dump us in (downtown Salt Lake City location). They dump us there as single individuals in the middle of those old prostitutions and those...I never forget. They dump us for a week... I remember it was like $350, $400. There was no way we could pay for it. For a week, nobody even came to bring anything. Not even cash. I didn’t even have a penny in my pocket. They put some food in the fridge and that’s it._

Obviously a huge difference in arrival experiences due, at least in part, to differences in financial capital available to the refugees.

_Burmese Refugees_

None of the Burmese refugees arrived with much financial capital and were all dependent on government assistance until they found jobs. Unfortunately, the assistance programs only provide the highest levels of assistance for a very short time and end some of the assistance when the refugee successfully acquires a job. This results in refugees being pushed to take jobs as soon as possible instead of taking the time to gain useful capital like human and cultural. As discussed earlier, low human and cultural capital result in their becoming stuck in “bad” jobs and may contribute to their long-term use of
other benefits like food stamps and housing assistance. Mali’s experience summed this up well,

*Okay, so they received help from the IRC for 3 months. They paid for the rent and everything else...So after that my dad found a job here but they keep giving us the food stamp and other things [but ended rent and utilities assistance].*

And,

*Yes, there is like a program. It's like three days a week program. Yes English training, job training. So there was a program but my dad didn’t go because he already got a job.*

With more financial capital on arrival, these refugees might be able to focus on obtaining the skills they need to get better employment that would, in turn, free them from the need for government assistance.
EMPLOYER FINDINGS

To answer the second research question, “How do employers perceive refugee capital playing a role in employability?” the employer interview transcriptions were analyzed to determine what factors employers saw as helpful to refugees obtaining employment such as attributes employers liked about refugees they hire. The transcripts were also analyzed for things that employers said were detriments to refugee employees. These results were then organized into the forms of capital that they represented.

The major theme to come out of this was the importance of embodied cultural capital, human capital, usually in the form of basic English skills, and social capital in co-ethnic and organization level networks through which many employers find new refugee applicants. The interviewee from the Deseret Inn, when asked how they would design a refugee training program, said,

Well I’d break it off into a couple of pieces. I’d teach the softer skills, and then I’d teach the technical skills.

This demonstrates the importance of cultural capital over human capital, with the exception of basic English language skills, for many of these employers.

Beneficial Refugee Capital

Cultural Capital

Embodied cultural capital, and more specifically “internal” cultural capital, was the most salient theme to come through in the employer interviews. These are the attitudes that have become internalized via the habitus, or life experiences, of the refugee. The top two things that employers claimed they liked about hiring refugees were their
attitudes and adaptability. The first making them ideal workers, hardworking and pliable, while the last means that they do not require much investment in training and integrating with the rest of the workforce. One interviewee at Acme Meats summed this up well saying,

\[I've \text{ been really happy that I've found them because it makes hiring, my job, easier because they're incredibly hard workers, they're always here on time, and they are fast learners who get the job done, and they seem to be really happy.}\]

Every single employer mentioned the attitude of their refugee employees as a positive attribute, many saying it was the most important. Phrases that were coded as “attitude” were those that denoted the refugees’ attitude towards work and the employers. This included phrases like “Hard working,” “Willingness to do hard jobs,” “eager,” “No sense of entitlement,” “happy workers,” and “easy to get along with.” This ideal attitude allows the supervisors and managers to easily control the refugees in the workplace. Employers always want to maximize their profits by getting the most out of their workers, so having a hard working workforce, especially in physical, fast paced jobs, is incredibly attractive. According to these interviews, hiring refugees can provide that workforce. At Acme Meats they said,

\[The \text{ first things, as a general rule, they’re willing to do the work and they’re capable of doing the work. You know, the work here is hard, physical labor, and so you have to have a little bit of desire to work and most of the refugees we deal with have that.}\]
Workers with “good attitudes” require less time expenditure by managers allowing them to oversee more workers or focus their attention elsewhere making this a very important attribute. An Acme Meats manager said,

*Supervisors are very eager when they see a Burmese coming, and it’s bad to be stereotypical like that, but you know that they’re going to work hard. They’ve very easy to get along with, they’re very happy to be with, and they’ve very eager as far as an employee goes.*

Another, from the Deseret Inn, commented that,

*We have to take quarterly tests and everything on that is in English, As supervisors, we’re encouraged to hire people who can pass those tests....But I’m sometimes willing to look past that a little bit if they have a good attitude.*

The last attribute mentioned by more than half of the employers was the adaptability of their refugee workers. Phrases were coded as “adaptable” when the employer spoke about the refugees’ ability to integrate and learn new things quickly. The representative from the Deseret Inn stated,

*Most of them are more adaptable than our current employees. It might have to do with the fact that, you know, they’ve already had to make several changes, so they’re a little more open to it than others.*

The refugees’ ability to integrate with the rest of the workforce also allows them to more quickly obtain consciously acquired cultural capital, such as learning workplace social norms and navigating the bureaucracy. One way in which many employers discussed
speeding this process up was by using co-ethnic mentors that have been working the job. The interviewee from Wasatch Healthcare said,

*He’s actually kind of the leader here. He makes sure the others know how to log into their emails and how to look up their benefits. They all know how to look up their vacation time because he shows them. He makes sure they know how to do certain thing...I would recommend having mentors.*

This method of using co-ethnic mentors serves as a way to bypass many of the issues caused by most refugees’ poor English skills and allowing them use the adaptability that these employers prize.

**Human Capital**

Human capital did not seem to be something employers saw a lot of in refugee employees, but three of them did find that the human capital possessed by some of the refugees they hired was a benefit to them. An employer in the security industry found that some of the Iraqi refugees had prior security experience or served as interpreters in Iraq. They even found that some of their refugee employees had college degrees. Unfortunately, the degrees were not recognized, losing the refugees the institutionalized cultural capital, but they still retained the human capital, skills and knowledge, obtained while acquiring the degrees. The employer at Salt Lake Security said,

*It’s going to sound selfish on my part, but it’s amazing some of the ones we get. These guys have multiple degrees from the universities in their home countries, they speak wonderful English, they write it well. But no one wants to hire them...*
because they don’t have the degree from the right school. I love those guys. I’m getting a great deal. It’s selfish, but it’s a great deal.

The two employers in the healthcare industry also mentioned human capital in some of their employees as being beneficial. One provides cleaning services in hospitals and found that some of their Nepali employees had previous experience working in hospitals in Nepal, so they were able to start them at a higher rate of pay because of their existing human capital. The other, Utah Healthcare, spoke about some of their employees coming with previous healthcare experience:

And what we find is...not a lot, but some of these refugees are coming over and they already have a tremendous skill set. They’re very educated and very well spoken so we try to get them into more of, like, translation services, or more, if they need to start their licenses all over again, we tell them, “Hey, this how you get your CNA”.

From the interviews, it seems that refugees coming with useable human capital were the exception, not the rule, but when they did bring prior experience, it was greatly appreciated by the employers.

Social Capital

While social capital was not something that the employers explicitly stated they liked to see in their refugee employees, it was never the less an important factor in many of them hiring refugees. This social capital was divided into two distinct groups, one being the co-ethnic networks that many refugees use to tap into information regarding job openings. The other was the social capital built between organizations such as that
between employers and the DWS. This social capital was often instrumental in employers learning about and beginning to hire refugees in the first place.

Several of the refugee employers had a large percentage of refugees from one ethnic or nativity group, and a few even said they had a preference for certain groups of refugees because of traits they have found these refugees to often possess. One employer, Utah Healthcare, even stated that they are explicitly trying to build a hiring pipeline within refugee communities.

One of the best success stories, and its natural recruitment, where someone comes into our environment, does well, buys into our mission, vision, and values, and they go back to their community and they say, “This is a great place to work!” So there is no better marketing than that. And that’s where we find the value...I think we’re in our infancy stage when we’re building pipelines for refugees, and I’d love to see a lot more engagement from us.”

This helps the company gain access to workers with attributes they like as well as allows them to “build their brand” reputation within the refugee community.

The second type of social capital, that between organizations, was very prevalent as one question asked how the employers first learned about employing refugees. While some of the employers said that it was more happenstance, DWS personnel eating at a restaurant and pitching the idea to the owner, most of employers heard about hiring refugees at organized events designed to build these kinds of connections. Employers met people from DWS or refugee assistance organizations at events such as job fairs and
then used these initial introductions to increase their refugee centric networks. The manager at the Deseret Inn said,

*DWS especially had a strong presence, and what we started seeing a lot of value in was developing those relationships directly with those resettlement agencies...we’ve been able to work off of those and build momentum off of those relationships and those have been ongoing for about the past 2-3 years.*

While this primarily shows the importance of this high-level social capital between organizations, it does also show the importance of refugees connecting and maintaining contact with these assistance organizations.

**Refugee Capital Deficiencies**

*Cultural Capital*

Two areas of cultural capital were discussed by most of the refugee employers, "workplace expectations" and “attitude.” Workplace expectations includes a broad range of cultural norms expected in an American workplace. Several employers stated that at least some of their refugee employees were having problems with recognizing the authority of supervisors and this problem was compounded when the supervisors were women. Some refugees also reportedly had a difficult time with conflict management. An interviewee at Acme Meats said,

*Some of the African or Middle Eastern countries, if there’s conflict, I mean, they’re ready to fight. They’ve ready and that creates some difficult situations, especially when people have knives in their hands...weapons or whatever, so*
when you have this hot, fiery temperament...they’re accustomed to, if you have an
issue, you don’t even worry about stepping outside to deal with it.

Not all of these workplace expectations are as potentially dangerous though. Many times
the employers said that refugees simply needed to learn what kind of work tempo was
expected of them.

Another common issue in workplace expectations revolved around issues not
directly related to the work. Hygiene was often mentioned as problematic with some
refugees. A manager at Molly’s Cleaners, in one of the more rural areas stated that,

I’ve worked with some refugees who have just moved here who have thought that
is was appropriate to shower or bathe in rivers. We had to show them what
brushing their teeth was and wearing deodorant too.

The same employer had to explain the work tempo and proper lunch etiquette:

I think from there I would probably move into what a work environment is. Like,
you work, you take a break, you work some more, and then you have a lunch.
Also, that lunch is something you bring from home, not something you cook over a
fire at work...The same boy also asked if he could hunt the cows he saw in the
area!

While that is a very extreme case, it illustrates the fact that some of these refugees are
completely oblivious to the norms of American society that employers take for granted
their workers will know.

Strangely, “attitude” was mentioned not only as a positive, but also as a negative
attribute of the refugee workforce, sometimes by the same employer. At times the
difference would be explained as one ethnic group having a “good” attitude and another having a “bad” attitude. Other times, it was within the same ethnic group, but some of the members did not have the same good attitude as the others.

*Human Capital*

Not unexpectedly, English language skill was the most often cited downside to hiring refugees. In most cases, the employers were talking about refugees needing bare minimum English skills of speaking, listening, writing, and reading necessary to conduct their work in a productive and safe manner making it a human capital skill. Basic English skills were preferred, and sometimes required, throughout the hiring, training, and working process. A manager at Acme Meats said that English skills, or an interpreter was required for their hiring process because,

*We started having some struggles with the hiring process because of communication and language barriers. So we need them to speak a little English to pass some of the physical tests [a medical exam].*

Another employer, Salt Lake Security, also saw problems in the hiring process due to language deficiencies.

*The hardest part is we get a lot of people who come in, awesome, they’re great, but their English isn’t good enough to do what we need them to do….Because there is a lot of reading and writing involved (in required state licensing test) and again that’s where the English skills come in.*

These two companies have had to turn down good candidates because they could not get through the hiring process without better English language skills.
Refugees that had English language skills were highly valued by employers because they were not only easier to communicate with but also able to interpret and transmit information to co-linguistic refugees. Several refugee employers used refugees with good English language skills as mentors to other refugees in order to speed up their human and cultural capital acquisition. The owner of Paul’s Pizza stated,

Yeah, you’ve either gotta have a lot of time and a lot of patience, or you’ve gotta have a mentor.

This was echoed by an interviewee at the Deseret Inn who claimed that after they had some refugees in mentor roles,

...The new guys would come in and the learning curve was a little bit shorter because there was a general acceptance and they acclimated a little bit quicker and the more we brought in the more they saw mentors...I used to struggle a little bit with some of them early on with keeping up with the volume and I don’t struggle with it as much anymore. I think it is just good mentors that have been here for a while.

The ability of these refugees to bridge the communications gap between their co-ethnic co-workers and supervisors makes them incredibly valuable to refugee employers.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Employers</th>
<th>Iraqi</th>
<th>Burmese</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial Capital</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 refugee arrived with substantial savings and had less problems landing on his feet</td>
<td>Some gov’t assistance ends with employment causing problems of under employment and under education</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gov’t assistance on arrival is not adequate to allow refugees to prepare for good US employment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Capital</td>
<td>Pros: Co-ethnic networks allow employers to easily access pools of workers with preferred qualities</td>
<td>Some use of co-ethnic community helpers</td>
<td>Need co-ethnic community helpers</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kurds: Heavy use of co-ethnic network</td>
<td>Heavy use of co-ethnic networks</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Arabs: More likely to use ties to organizations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Human Capital</td>
<td>Pros: Some have previous education and work experience that is beneficial Cons: Poor English language skills was the number one complaint by employers</td>
<td>Importance of English language skills</td>
<td>Importance of English language skills.</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Education and work experience negated by lacking institutional cultural capital</td>
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<td>Cultural Capital</td>
<td>Pros: Most refugees have a good attitude Cons: Some refugees have “bad” attitudes</td>
<td>Internal embodied: Hard working</td>
<td>Internal embodied: Hard working</td>
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REFUGEE VERSUS EMPLOYER PERCEPTIONS

The final research question seeks to compare the perceptions of employers’ and refugees’ perceptions of the importance of various forms of capital on refugee employability with the intent of discovering commonalities and differences. There were many commonalities in their perceptions such as the importance of English language learning and a good work ethic, but also some stark contrasts. These contrasts are particularly interesting because they show where there are unaddressed areas of in refugees’ capital portfolios in need of improvement.

Human Capital

The most central theme to come from these interviews, was the importance of English language skills. Many of the employers that were interviewed hired refugees despite them not having this skill set, but they all also told of the problems this caused them. A worker lacking English language skills causes the employer problems with training, interviewing, testing, and directing, as well as the potential for safety issues due to miscommunications. Several employers mentioned that, while they will hire refugees that do not speak English, they cannot promote them beyond entry level positions until they acquire English proficiency.

The refugees recognized that English language skills might not be requisite for obtaining these low-skill, low-pay jobs, but that learning English would allow them to find “better” jobs. Many refugees said that they longed for jobs that were not so hard and physically intensive, but their lack of language ability prevented them from pursuing anything else. They complained that they did not have time for English lessons after
arriving in Utah because they got jobs and had no time. The refugees also had issues outside of the employment realm due to their lack of English language abilities that could also have secondary impacts on their employability like the ability to read mail, use public transportation, and deal with medical problems.

Since most of the employers were hiring for low-skill, low-pay, entry-level jobs, they were not particularly concerned with the refugees not having job skills or work experience. Only two of the eight refugee employers said that they counted their refugees’ foreign work experience during the hiring process, but some of the other employers did talk about appreciating the previous work experience and education of their refugee employees. One even encouraged and helped their refugee employees with the most human capital, to obtain the institutional cultural capital required for them to use their skills in the United States.

Job skills and experience were not perceived as important by most of the refugees since they either lacked the institutional cultural capital to use them, or they did not have the English language skills to obtain a job where their skills might be useful. Instead, the refugees generally accepted the fact that they would have to start out in entry level positions no matter their previous skillsets. Some of the refugees that had been in the United States the longest were able to eventually move past these entry level positions and had found work in fields they had prior experience with, though they often had to retrain in the United States in order to acquire the necessary institutional cultural capital. Overall, it appears that the lack of institutional cultural capital negates much of the usefulness of non-language related human capital.
Social Capital

There were a number of similarities between the refugees and employers regarding the importance of social capital at the co-ethnic and organizational levels. The employers often tapped into, and even actively built connections with, refugee co-ethnic networks in order to keep themselves supplied with workers possessing attributes they favored. Refugees not tapped into these co-ethnic networks would have a much harder time finding these jobs, so this form of social capital is very important for a refugee looking to work for one of these employers. Several employers singled out an English speaking member of a co-linguistic community and used this person to mentor others and help bring in new workers.

Most of the refugees echoed the employers regarding the importance of co-ethnic social capital. Co-ethnic networks, often made up of familial relations, were used very heavily by the refugees to find jobs. These co-ethnic networks not only allowed for rapid job acquisition, they also enabled the co-ethnic network members to share resources such as housing, transportation, and linguistic abilities that were important for continuing their employment. This seems to be the most abundant form of capital that the refugees possess, and they generally seem to make good use of it.

Organizational level social capital may not be as important at the individual level for the refugees, but it is through this mechanism that employers learn about the benefits of hiring refugees and find an initial cadre of refugees to hire. The employers often learned about refugees available to hire through connections with DWS or refugee assistance organizations; sometimes through personal contacts and chance meetings and
sometimes through professional contacts at planned events. Many of these organizations would help one of their “superstar” refugees find a job with an employer, then the employer could make use of the refugee’s co-ethnic network to bring in more workers that he could then mentor.

This model of finding and hiring refugees via organizational level social capital only works if the organizations have connections with refugees. For this reason, it is important for refugees to maintain contact with DWS and other refugee assistance organizations. It is equally important for these organizations to continue making new connections with employers and each other in order to capitalize on every available opportunity.

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital, especially embodied cultural capital, was the most important factor in employers hiring refugees. The fact that so many employers were willing to go to great lengths, finding housing, arranging interpreters, providing extra training, etc. for their refugees, demonstrates their strong preference for these refugee workers and the most oft cited reason the employers gave for hiring refugees was their attitude towards work. The employers loved the strong work ethic of their refugee employees. The employers called them “hard working,” “motivated,” “dedicated,” and “easy to get along with,” and compared them favorably to the attitudes of native workers that they have hired. While some of the employers did say that not all of the refugees had this cultural capital, they also said that the majority of their refugee employees did.
Among the refugees, several explicitly stated that they believed it was important for them to work hard at their jobs. The refugees’ understanding of the importance of this embodied cultural capital was very apparent in many of the interviews. Refugees working multiple jobs while going to school and Burmese refugees continuing to work despite physical pains are both examples of this. These refugees showed that they knew they needed to work hard and have a good attitude in order for them, or their children, to be able to get ahead.

The employers rarely mentioned institutional cultural capital, the exceptions being when they lamented the fact that some of their employees were vastly overqualified for their current positions. For the Iraqi refugees, however, institutional cultural capital was a very big deal. Despite many of the Iraqis holding huge amounts of human capital, they were unable to make use them because they held degrees or certifications that were not recognized in the United States. This resulted in several of the refugees that were interviewed having to take entry level, low-skill, low-pay jobs despite holding bachelor’s and master’s degrees. A few of the refugees said that this institutional cultural capital not transferring caused serious problems with other Iraqi refugees they knew.

On the other hand, the refugees did not discuss having problems with understanding workplace social norms, but it was one of the major problems that the employers had with hiring refugees. The employers often criticized the refugees’ lack of cultural capital when it came to workplace norms such as personal hygiene, work output expectations, and listening to and respecting management. Many of the employers said
that working through this lack of cultural capital only required patience and understanding, but it was still an issue.

Financial Capital

The primary financial capital issue surrounded government benefits and their availability to the refugees. A large number of refugees said that they did not receive enough assistance on arrival. They said that this caused problems with their ability to learn English, find good jobs, and pursue their education. One refugee said that he had a friend that resettled in California that was able to focus on English language training and going to college, and that this friend was able to attain a better outcome because of this.
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Much of the refugee and employer findings are very consistent with the literature on immigrant employment covered previously. The employers’ preference for embodied cultural capital in the form of “hard working” refugees whose pliant nature makes them easily controlled, clearly resonated with the work of Bailey, Waldinger, and Munoz. Some employers even went so far as to describe certain refugee groups as being more desirable than others because they did not cause problems and worked hard.

Just as Lee (2014) noted in her dissertation, institutionalized cultural capital is keeping some refugees from making use of their human capital. While the scope of this problem is indeterminate from this small dataset, it at least affects some of the Iraqi refugees in Utah. Several of the Iraqi refugees reported that this issue caused distress in themselves or in other Iraqi refugees they know. It seems to cause a psychological challenge as the refugee is forced to reconcile themselves as the high SES professional that they were with the ostensibly low-skill, low SES worker that they have suddenly become.

Social capital was shown to be a keystone of the refugee job seeking market with a clear emphasis, among most refugees, on co-ethnic networks as suggested by Portes and Jensen (1987), Waldinger and Lichter (2003), and Lee (2014). The research also shows many of the effects predicted by Baily and Waldinger’s (1991) work on immigrant social capital. The refugees that used co-ethnic networks to find work were able to find jobs quickly, but the jobs they found were “bad” jobs in low-skill, low-pay industries.
This reliance on co-ethnic networks also led to certain jobs being dominated by particular ethnic groups.

While some jobs are being held predominately by one ethnic group, this has not yet led to full on ethnic enclaves as are seen in other parts of the country, but they are well on their way to developing in some areas. Some of the refugees interviewed displayed very high levels of co-ethnic social capital, but extremely limited external social capital. This further limits their access to information about jobs that are outside their co-ethnic network as Fong and Ooka suggested (2011).

However, contrary to Granovetter (1973), the refugees’ usually found jobs through strong connections in their co-ethnic networks, often from close family members. This may be explained by the refugees’ lack of weak social ties, especially when they first arrive and begin looking for work. There were some notable exceptions to this, like the woman that found her job through an LDS missionary that happened to know of a job opening.

For the Burmese refugees, who had the lowest amount of human capital, those tight co-ethnic network connections were very important. They not only used them for finding jobs, but also made use of connections with co-ethnic community members to obtain assistance with problems in their everyday life whenever possible. These co-ethnic helpers provided assistance with interpretation, navigating American institutions, emergency aid, and transportation. Those that did not have access to co-ethnic community helpers lamented the fact in their interviews. The Iraqi refugees also made use of co-ethnic community helpers in their own community, but their reliance on the
network seemed to be lower, especially over time. The difference between these two
groups reliance on their co-ethnic networks may dovetail with the Eden, et al. (2003)
report that found some evidence that low human capital refugees did better in enclaves,
with their tight social networks, and refugees with higher human capital did better outside
of enclaves.

Social network connections with organizations was important for both refugees
and refugee employers. Through these connections, refugee employers were often first
introduced to the possibility of tapping into the refugee workforce. Refugees themselves
were sometime able to find employment through organizations such as DWS or other
assistance organizations, but the largest benefit to refugees seems to be when a business
hires one refugee based on their contact with another organization, then the company
proceeds to hire other refugees through their co-ethnic social network.

The one area of human capital that refugee employers did care about was English
language skills. The importance of dominant language abilities is well established in
immigrant literature (Nawyn et al., 2012), so this finding was expected. That being said,
the refugees’ general lack of human capital was, not surprisingly a non-issue for the
employers. As they were primarily hiring for low-skill, low-pay positions, they were
much more focused on the embodied cultural capital found in many of their refugee
employees. Prior skills and education were secondary to a willingness to work and take
direction from supervisors. When the refugees did have human capital, they were usually
unable to make use of it because of their poor English language skills or their lack of the
proper institutionalize cultural capital.
As previously discussed, there seems to be an inverted U-shaped pattern to the usefulness of human capital in employability. On one side of the U are the low human capital refugees that can only find work in low-paying, “bad” jobs that require them to work in highly physical or menial tasks. On the other side of the U are the refugees with a lot of human capital that run into the problem of not having their institutional cultural capital translate to American institutions. This puts them almost on level with the low human capital refugees. In the middle are refugees with middling amounts of human capital from previous work experience or education. These people either work in fields that do not require institutional cultural capital, or the institutional cultural capital they need is relatively easy to get if one already has the human capital.

The most interesting finding in this research is the relationship between what the refugees want and what the employers want. The employers depend on the refugees’ lack of capital, and therefore options, to push them into these physically difficult, low skill, low pay jobs. The number one complaint from refugee employers was the refugees’ lack of English language skills, but many of the refugees working for those employers said that if they spoke English, they would find better jobs. Even the Iraqi refugees, who had an abundance of human capital, were forced into these “bad” jobs because they lacked the institutional cultural capital to have their education recognized. This creates a windfall for refugee employers who are able to hire very talented, highly educated workers for extremely low wages.

This in turn sets up a largely unacknowledged, and maybe even unrecognized paradox for the employers. While the employers want refugees that speak English in
order to make them easier to train, manage, and be safer, the refugees recognized English as the primary piece of human capital that would enable them to move out of these low-end jobs. As long as the current status quo is maintained, the potential conflict this creates is not likely to surface, but if policies were implemented to improve refugee’s human capital, this may well negatively impact the hiring pool for these employers. It is beyond the scope of this research to prognosticate in detail, potential results from this paradox, but it should certainly be a consideration for those making policy decisions in the future.
FUTURE RESEARCH

Refugee issues being so under-researched, there are a plethora of future research topics stemming from this paper. Additionally, since refugees continue to be a hot button issue in politics at the local, national, and international levels, these future research topics could not only add to the sociological knowledge base, but also make an impact on government policies.

My first recommendation for future research is a quantitative analysis comparing the short term and long term costs of continuing the current refugee assistance programs, with their focus on immediate employment, versus a program that seeks to meaningfully enhance newly arrived refugees’ human and cultural capital before requiring them to be self-sufficient. As seen in this paper, many refugees arrive with very little human and cultural capital, and forcing them to find immediate employment encourages their accepting difficult, low-paying jobs with little opportunity for them to progress. This results in refugees’ long term use of government assistance programs like food stamps. Would the government actually save money in the long term by spending more on newly arrived refugees’ human and cultural capital, allowing them to obtain employment that allows them to be truly self-sufficient?

By looking at two different refugee groups, this paper also shows some of the massive variation within the “refugee” category. I recommend study that explores these differences further by looking at the relationships between refugees’ nativity, the life strategies they employ, and the outcomes they experience. This may shed some light on
the effects of culture and different pre-resettlement refugee experiences on their post resettlement life and overall outcomes.

One problem with this research design is that the employers were primarily hiring refugees for entry-level, low SES positions. Future research should explore companies that hire, or would hire, refugees for higher SES jobs to determine what they are looking for in their employees. This could help inform future refugee programs about the kinds of training and services they can provide to refugees in order to help them acquire higher SES.

Finally, one of the fascinating things I discovered in this research was the different strategies that companies use to cope with problems specific to refugees. Among the coping strategies in this research were finding and cultivating co-ethnic mentors, providing or securing housing, holding English language classes at work, and even helping refugees navigate the institutions of American life outside of work. I would recommend future research into these coping strategies across the United States. This research could help prepare companies that are considering starting to hire refugees, as well as providing new ideas to those that already employ refugees.
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