POWER & POLITICS IN RESETTLEMENT: A CASE STUDY OF BHUTANESE REFUGEES

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

POWER & POLITICS IN RESETTLEMENT:
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This thesis examines the complexities in the resettlement of Bhutanese refugees. Using anthropological ethnographic field methods, this thesis explores the power dynamics between the employees of a resettlement organization and the refugees and the intricate webs of power within different institutions, such as local NGOs and healthcare institutions. The study argues that humanitarian actions and interventions are often driven by bureaucratic politics and policies that contradict what humanitarianism stands for as apolitical and value-neutral. These contradictions or paradoxes in humanitarianism also are also present in refugee resettlement. Analyzing these paradoxes that characterize resettlement, this thesis illuminates structural discontinuities or gaps that result from differences in expectations between the refugees and the employees of resettlement organization. Drawing on analyses of the paradoxes and complexities in resettlement, the study concludes that bureaucratic management of refugees reinforces social inequalities and hierarchies of power that masks state’s responsibility towards both the refugees and local NGOs making resettlement an unsettling process.

KEYWORDS: Humanitarianism, Refugee Resettlement, Integration, Non-governmental Organization, and Bureaucracy.

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POWER & POLITICS IN RESETTLEMENT: A CASE STUDY OF BHUTANESE REFUGEES

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THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Kentucky

By

Christie Shrestha

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION: AN ODYSSEY OF BHUTANESE REFUGEES

One Friday morning in January of 2009, I received a phone call from Anne, a mid-20s perky young woman who worked at a local refugee resettlement organization, Kentucky Refugee Ministries (KRM). She had called to let me know that Lexington’s first Bhutanese refugee family would be arriving that afternoon; she asked me if I would be able to accompany her to the airport to pick them up. A week prior a mutual friend who worked at the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government had contacted me to ask if I would like to volunteer as an interpreter for the family who spoke Nepali. Reminiscing about my family’s experience of immigrating to the United States, I jumped at this opportunity to help a newly arriving family.

I met Anne at the airport that afternoon. After exchanging greetings and introductions, we waited anxiously for the family’s arrival. A few minutes later, the family came down the escalator to the baggage claim area. As they came down, I noticed that each of the family members was holding an oversized white plastic bag that had large signs of International Organization for Migration (IOM) written on it. An IOM plastic identification badge hung on each of their necks like a marker of their difference. Markers of difference have followed the Bhutanese refugees like a shadow throughout their lives—as part of their identity in Bhutan, as refugees in Nepal, and now this label of difference had followed them to the resettled state. Large white bags and badges of IOM indicated the family’s difference and marginal status as refugees from the other

1 With the exception of the organization, KRM, all of the names of people and places are pseudonyms.
2 IOM is responsible for the transport of refugees from the refugee camps to the designated resettlement area.
passengers. Even the youngest of the family members, a small girl of about seven years of age, had the IOM badge around her neck that seemed too big for her tiny body.

As the family stepped off the escalator and into the baggage claim area, Anne greeted them loudly saying “Hello! And Welcome!” She enunciated each word loudly and slowly assuming, perhaps, that the family did not speak English; after all, I was there as an interpreter. By raising her voice and speaking slowly, it was as though she was trying to compensate for the supposed lack of the family’s English language skills. Taking the father’s hand, Anne shook it and repeated, “Welcome” in the same manner and pitch. Looking back at me, she asked, “It is Namaste right?” Barely waiting for my nod, she turned to the family and with her palms clasped together in front of her, she bowed and said “Namasté.” The family gave an awkward smile and an acknowledging nod. Continuing with introductions, Anne asked for each of their names. In barely audible voices, each of the family members gave their names as Anne tried hard to remember them diligently. Unlike Anne who was very excited about their resettlement and eager to help the family, the family showed little enthusiasm. In fact, each member had somewhat of a lost expression that highlighted his or her confusion and tiredness.

Anne started to bombard them with a variety of questions such as: How was their flight? Did they get to sleep during the flight? Did they encounter any problems when taking the connecting flight from New York? I began translating back and forth Anne’s questions and the family’s answers. Although Anne’s intent was well meaning and she was curious to know the answers, the question and answer session of the family nonetheless established a tone of boundary that separated “them” (refugees) and “us” (Anne and I). This boundary seemed to reinforce Anne’s authority and that of the NGO
implying that we (including I) were entitled to knowing (and obtaining) answers to those questions, although the questions struck me as arbitrary. I realized that I was also participating in reinforcing the divide between them and us. Was the family not entitled to knowing who we were and with what authority we were asking them? Interrupting the question and answer session, I suggested to Anne that we introduce ourselves. I introduced myself as a Nepali volunteer interpreter and a graduate student studying at the University of Kentucky; then, I turned towards Anne. Taking my cue, she, likewise, introduced herself. I then suggested to Anne that we continue our conversation at the family’s new home – a three-bedroom apartment that had been furnished by the KRM. She acquiesced. Loading the family’s luggage into the van, we left the airport.

**Historical Background of Bhutanese refugees**

The ethnographic vignette depicts a glimpse of a long and arduous exodus of Bhutanese refugees since their exile in the 1990s. Bhutanese refugees are ethnic Nepalese whose origins trace to the eastern part of Nepal. Their odyssey from “home” began when the Bhutanese government deported them by the thousands into the northern border of India. Not permitting the refugees to set up permanent refugee camps, the Indian government transferred them by truckloads to Nepal, where they spread out over 7 UNHCR-administered camps in Jhapa and Ilam districts in the southeastern region in Nepal (Figure1).
The journey of Nepali-Bhutanese can be traced in the early nineteenth century when they migrated to the southern part of Bhutan (Hutt 2003). Bhutan is a small landlocked kingdom bordered by China to the north and India to the west, east, and south (Figure 2). A sparsely populated country with estimated population of 680,000, it self-advertises as a “fairy tale land.” Bhutan is also known as the “Druk Yul” or Land of the Thunder Dragon. It became a unified polity in 1950 when King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk brought the country under a single administrative system and established Thimpu as its capital (Hutt 1996). An ethnically diverse nation, Bhutan officially recognizes four main ethnicities: Ngalong in the west, the “central Bhutanese,” the Sharchop in the east, and the Lhotshampas or Nepali Bhutanese in the south. The Ngalong’s language, Dzongkha, was established as the national language in 1961. The Bhutanese commonly distinguish between the Buddhist Drukpas of the north and the Hindu Nepali-speaking Lhotshampas of the south (Hutt 2005).

Figure 2: Map of South Asia

The Nepali-Bhutanese, who are ethnicized as Lhotshampas, predominantly lived in the southern region. In 1958, the Bhutanese government granted citizenship to ethnic Nepalese under the Nationality Law (HRW 2003). However, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW), Bhutan began to perceive the growing numbers and formation of political parties of ethnic Nepalese as a threat to their cultural and political order. This perceived threat multiplied when, in 1975, the growing Nepali population in the neighboring Sikkim region (see Figure 2) supported a merger with India. Fearing a similar occurrence in Bhutan, the government introduced a series of repressive citizenship laws and “Bhutanization” policies in the late 70s and 80s, which led to the political, economic, and cultural exclusion of the Nepali-Bhutanese people (Frelick 2007; Hutt 2003). The denationalization of ethnic Nepalese began with the Citizenship Acts of

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6 Lhotshampa is a problematic term that Drukpas use to refer to the Nepali-Bhutanese. Based on conversations with Bhutanese refugees, they prefer to be recognized as either Nepali-Bhutanese or Bhutanese.

7 Under the Nationality law, an adult may obtain citizenship by owning land, residing in Bhutan for ten years, and taking an oath of loyalty to the King.
1977 and 1985 that tightened the requirements for obtaining and retaining citizenship. These acts allowed the Bhutanese government to revoke their citizenship (HRW 2003).

In 1989, the government introduced a “one nation, one people” policy that forced the practice of the Drukpa culture. It required all Bhutanese to observe the national dress code of Drukpa culture and to terminate the use of Nepali language instructions in schools. Before this policy, the ethnic Nepalese were allowed to wear their ethnic clothes: women wore sari and men wore daura suruwal. In addition to this cultural prohibition, during the 1988 census the Bhutanese government required the Nepali-Bhutanese to produce a 1958 tax receipt, as proof of their Bhutanese citizenship in order to register for the census. This invalidated Bhutanese citizenship cards acquired after 1958 and leading up to 1988 (Hutt 2005:46).

When the Nepali-Bhutanese revolted against the government for such encroachments on their civil rights, the government responded violently. The Bhutanese police and army perpetrated numerous human rights violations. For instance, in 1990, the government crushed protests and public demonstrations, closed down schools, and suspended health services in the southern region. By 1992, a majority of Nepali-Bhutanese fled Bhutan and thousands were forcibly deported (HRW 2003). Before crossing the border into India, the Bhutanese government forced many to sign “voluntary migration certificates,” thus, surrendering their rights to Bhutanese citizenship.

Because neither Nepal nor Bhutan was unwilling to give citizenship to this population, the refugees had been living in a state of liminality for over two decades. The revocation of citizenship by the Bhutanese government, the subsequent construction of

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8 The sari and daura suruwal are traditional Nepali dresses.
9 1958 is the same year as when the Bhutanese government granted citizenship under the Nationality Law.
their illegality through a series of denationalization processes, and the refusal of refuge and of civil rights by the host states of Nepal and India have rendered this group disposable. The disposability and the social construction of citizenship are illustrative of the delicate relationship that often exists between a state and its citizens. The history of this population’s marginalization and rendering them disposable non-citizens at every junctures of their lives: from the government of Bhutan exiling the group to Indian government’s refusal to allow them to set up settlement camps in Bhutan-India border to Nepal government’s denial to grant asylum to this population, are indicative of Bhutanese refugees’ marked status as the “other.” This thesis traces the continuance of this population’s othering in the U.S. through mechanisms that attempt to transfer them from non-citizens to citizens and subjects of a state.

**Resettlement of Bhutanese Refugees**

The exiled group has been given an opportunity to rebuild their lives through third country resettlement programs. In 2006, the US government offered to resettle 60,000 of the estimated 107,000 refugees (Frelick 2007). Other nations such as Australia, Canada, Norway, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Denmark, and the United Kingdom, have also offered to resettle some of the refugees (UNHCR 2010). Third country resettlement is often understood as a process that begins with refugees applying for resettlement and ends with their arrival to a host nation. However, I argue in this thesis that resettlement does not end with refugees’ arrival to a host nation, e.g., to the U.S. Resettlement is a process that continues in the host state as refugees rebuild their lives, familiarize, and adapt to the dynamic social, economic, and political environment in their new place.
The first wave of resettlement to the US began in early 2008. The US government has identified ten Voluntary Agencies to implement the resettlement program. These agencies have their own branch offices or sub-working partner agencies in different cities/states (Bhutanese Refugees: The Story of a Forgotten People). In Kentucky, where refugees began arriving in January 2009, a local non-profit organization, Kentucky Refugee Ministries (KRM), is responsible for resettling the Bhutanese families. KRM is a part of two of the ten Voluntary Agencies: The Episcopal Migration Ministries and Church World Service; KRM’s main head office is located in Louisville with a branch office in Lexington.

According to Nancy, a KRM staff member, the U.S. State Department gives a one-time resettlement grant of $450 per person for resettlement. This modest support places the bulk of the resettlement burden on KRM to find funding sources from private donors. For the first three months, following arrival, KRM supports refugees financially by paying housing rent, providing small stipends for food and bus passes, and other services. Refugees are also enrolled in Federal and State welfare programs such as Food Stamps, Wilson-Fish Program, and Kentucky Temporary Assistance Program. Although Federal welfare grants continue to support refugees anywhere from a year to 5 years, it is a very modest monetary support. Therefore, KRM tells refugees that the organization expects them to be self-sufficient and independent (i.e. find a job and support themselves financially) by the end of the third month. This expectation to find a job is a source of constant pressure for both refugees and KRM staff members. The limited funding sources and meager support that the organization receives from the Federal government amplify the stress and pressure.
The continual financial burden impacts how refugees and employees of KRM perceive and understand these pressures and expectations of one another as refugees integrate into the new society. Examining these issues of resettlement is important for identifying challenges and barriers in the integration of refugees. In particular, these pressures reproduce asymmetrical power relations between the donors and the recipients. Specifically, the organization is placed in a paradoxical position wherein as a resettlement organization, the agency has a moral obligation to support refugees; however, at the same time, as an organization that is dependent on the state and private donors for financial support, it acts as a regulatory body that monitors and controls refugees’ behaviors.

This research is based on 9-weeks of ethnographic study conducted in Lexington in the summer of 2009. Prior to launching my research, I volunteered for six months at KRM. My experience and role as a volunteer and an interpreter raised numerous questions of power and privilege, which are also the driving force behind this research. The questions are: What are the structural discontinuities in resettlement? Are the expectations and ambitions of KRM different from those of the Bhutanese refugees? If so, how are refugees impacted by these differences?

Humanitarian projects, such as resettlement, are based on bureaucratic structures’ specific assumptions and understandings about notions of humanitarianism. My research questions attempt to understand how those assumptions have unintentional impacts on refugees. More specifically, questioning the value neutrality of humanitarian work, this study analyzes the mechanisms through which humanitarian organizations control and regulate refugees’ everyday lives. Generally, humanitarianism is understood as assisting
people in need of help—an action based on notions of saving humans and humanity from real and perceived danger. Since post-WWII, the number of humanitarian organizations has grown exponentially (Black 2001). From rescuing people from natural and human-made disasters, war zones, and conflicts to assisting and rescuing people suffering from economic degradation, poverty, malaise, and epidemics, humanitarian organizations are at the forefront tackling these crises.

In addition to assisting in crises, humanitarian organizations also manage refugee camps, provide security and support for them, and help in the resolution processes of either repatriation or third country resettlement. This last process focuses on rehabilitating or integrating refugees into permanent settlements. Despite the benevolence and well-intended motives behind resettlement efforts, humanitarian acts are often shaped by a victim-savior mentality reifying asymmetrical social hierarchy between refugees and humanitarian workers (Harrell-Bond 2002). Highlighting the reification of unequal power hierarchy evident through the KRM workers’ micro-management and surveillance of Bhutanese refugees, this study examines the complexities and paradoxes present in resettlement. The study ultimately asks what is the responsibility of a state in helping NGOs in resettling refugees. Anthropological analyses of resettlement open up a space to examine bureaucratic management of resettled refugees by different institutions and reveal social inequalities and politics of power in humanitarian work.

**Literature Review of Refugee Studies**

The UNHCR estimates that over 16 million people worldwide are refugees, while an additional 51 million are internally displaced due to both conflicts and natural
disasters (UNHCR 2008). The urgency to assess impacts of displacement has led to an emergence of the field of refugee studies. Richard Black’s (2001) review of the anthropological studies of refugees shows the development of the field since the early 1940s post-WWII. Likewise, Harrell-Bond and Voutira’s (1992) review of anthropological studies on refugees of the 1970s and 1980s examine a number of themes that anthropologists have explored. These themes include political and historical consciousness of refugees, ethos of humanitarian work, legal issues, psychological issues, and notions of uprootedness. Other themes that anthropological studies have also investigated include policy development, psychological impacts, politics of humanitarianism, social and political implications of displacement and resettlement, examination of roles of nation-states, and refugees’ experiences in refugee camps and host communities.

For instance, Holtzman’s (2008) ethnographic study traces the experiences of resettled Sudanese youth in Minnesota. Examining the cultural differences and barriers, Holtzman illuminates the complex process in third country resettlement as Sudanese refugees learn about American way of life from schools, employment, food, and other cultural practices. Peteet (2005) and Malkkii (1995) focus on the experiences of Palestinian refugees and self-settled Hutu refugees, respectively. Looking at the historical context of the regions and the populations, both scholars examine the everyday living conditions and circumstances that refugees face. Their works reveal the issues surrounding identities (ethnic, national, as well as political identities) and offer insights about how refugees are coping with their situation and persevering as they keep hope in

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10 Refugees are defined as those who have crossed international borders, while IDPs are individuals who do not cross international borders.
times of despair. Peteet demonstrates mechanisms through which the humanitarian aid regime continues to surveille and control Palestinian refugees. She asserts that refugee bodies are constituted, regulated, and legitimized as objects of intervention (2005).

Tracing the history of the field of refugee studies illuminates that scholars from diverse disciplines have focused on a variety of issues related to displacement. The exponential growth of the field has ushered in debates and discrepancies among scholars. Some of the current debates include definition and conceptualization of the term refugee (Harrell-Bond and Voutira 1992), issues of power hierarchies in refugee camps (Hinton 1996), examination of the politics of humanitarianism (Fassin 2001; Ticktin 2006; Hyndman 2000) and the dialectical discourse on the politicization of humanitarianism (DeTorrente 2004; DeChaine 2002).

Humanitarian actions and interventions are often driven by bureaucratic politics and policies that negate what humanitarianism stands for as apolitical and value-neutral. The contradictions in what humanitarian organizations do and what the organizations stand for are what scholars have termed “the politics of humanitarianism” (DeTorrente 2004). This does not imply that humanitarian organizations have ulterior motives other than helping those in need. However, even well intentioned humanitarian projects at times resemble forms of surveillance mechanisms to control refugees. The opening vignette is iconic of paradoxes that are characteristic of resettlement process. Anne’s assumptions about the refugee family and her obliviousness of her power and privilege that are embedded in her assumptions and actions towards refugees illustrate the irony of humanitarianism. Although Anne is deeply invested in helping the refugees, she is unaware that her actions, such as the way she welcomed and questioned the refugee
family, are patronizing. The apparent contradiction in Anne’s actions and her intentions in humanitarian work are best explored through the theoretical framework of the politics of humanitarianism. Such contradictions go well beyond the sphere of intervention of humanitarian organizations; they characterize a political disorder of the world and reveal forms of social inequalities.

These contradictions also reveal that humanitarian projects are often driven by specific policies and political agendas that go beyond the mission of doing good. For instance, Fassin’s (2001) and Ticktin’s (2006) works on the ramifications of the French illness clause are exemplary of the politics of humanitarianism. They demonstrate that the illness clause pushes asylum seekers to self-inflict illness in order to escape deportation. In doing so, the illness clause that was introduced as a humanitarian intervention became the French state’s tool of surveillance and perpetuated the construction of marking certain asylees as legal or illegal (Fassin and D’Halluin 2005 and Ticktin 2006). On the one hand, complexities and paradoxes that characterize displacement disclose unequal power relation between refugees and NGO workers; on the other hand, humanitarian organizations’ over-use of terms such as empowerment, equal participation, independence and self-sufficiency demonstrate their loftiness; and instead, the terms merely become rhetoric to obscure perpetuation of dependencies and sense of powerlessness among refugees (Hinton 1996).

Paradoxes and politics in humanitarian work reveal deep ambivalences and asymmetries at micro levels. Foucault’s (1980) theory of the micro-politics of power is useful to interrogate how institutional power operates and impacts at the microcosms in the everyday lives of refugees. Foucault argues that power is not only manifested in overt
forms as in the state, but it “passes through finer channels, and is much more ambiguous, since each individual has at his disposal a certain power and for that very reason can also act as the vehicle for transmitting a wider power” (1980:72). Power operates through smaller institutions, such as local NGOs. To be sure, larger structural and institutional forces, such as the US state or multilateral agencies, place restrictions and mandates on local NGOs.

Despite the ironies and politics in humanitarian work, it is also important to recognize that larger political, economic, and global powers place restrictions and mandates on local NGOs. The theoretical framework of the politicization of humanitarianism allows us to assess and highlight unintended consequences and impacts of these restrictions and makes visible mechanisms of how larger institutional forces subjectify smaller local NGOs. The theory investigates appropriation of humanitarianism for political agenda by larger structures of power. Both theoretical frameworks of the politics of humanitarianism and the politicization of humanitarianism offer a constructive way to analyze critical questions such as: Who benefits from humanitarian interventions? In managing resettlement, how do refugees’ everyday lives become a domain where social hierarchies and unequal power relations are reified? What mechanisms perpetuate this asymmetrical power of humanitarian organization? Without undermining the efforts of humanitarian organizations, the theory allows for an examination of the mechanisms that perpetuate institutional and systemic power of humanitarian organizations. These theories also allow for an assessment of hierarchical power relation within larger forces of institutional power and make visible the impacts on refugees. The frameworks are
useful for studying ethics and humanity and the unintentional and intentional ramifications that often result from humanitarian work.

Recently, anthropologists have examined the vulnerabilities of refugees that often arise in the fragile relationship between state and its citizens or non-citizens (Bloemraad 2006; Ong 2003; Fassin and D’Halluin’s 2005). Refugees’ vulnerabilities are perpetuated through different subjectivities of refugee bodies – i.e. the suffering body and racialized body of asylum seekers in France that Fassin (2001) and Ticktin (2006) examine; the immigrant body and the social construction of illegal bodies in Ireland that Lubheid (2002) examines; the gendered bodies that Baines (2004) analyzes; and the political bodies of Bosnian refugees that Keles (2009) investigates. Examination of these subjectivities reveals social inequalities that resettled refugees often encounter. Social inequalities are also explored via anthropological studies of socio-cultural barriers that refugees face in host communities, such as issues of language, religious practices, and cultural differences (Holtzman 2008; Haines 1997; Fadiman 1997; Shandy 2002). These barriers illuminate larger structural issues of the politics of identity and belonging and issues related to assimilation and integration (Holman 1996; Zucker 1983; and McKinnon 2008). Refugee resettlement studies have explored these structural issues of identity and assimilation politics by examining forms of governance and surveillance that legitimize institutional and structural power and sustain notions of deservingness and demarcate who belongs and who does not (Keles 2008; Harrell-Bond 1992; and Loescher and Scanlan 1986).

Politics of belonging and deservingness, specifically in the context of the U.S. policies on immigration and refugee integration, interweave through the politics of
citizenship and Americanization (Ong 2003). Americanization is a process in which one learns to incorporate certain norms and behaviors (often norms of dominant culture) that he/she perceives as American in order to assimilate and belong to American culture. Many studies on integration and assimilation of immigrants have interrogated this process of Americanization and questioned its implication as a hegemonic dominant imposition that forces immigrants (and refugees) to assimilate –i.e. to incorporate dominant culture (Ager and Strang 2008; Phillimore and Goodson 2008; Brettell and Sargent 2006; Warriner 2007; and Abu-Lughod 1991). These studies examined here are merely vignettes of anthropological studies on refugees and do not reflect the totality of research that exists within the field of refugee studies. They, nonetheless, contribute significantly to our understanding of how larger structures and institutions of power reify hegemony of a dominant culture and shape refugees’ understanding of what it means to belong and become American. These understandings of power dynamics and complexities in resettlement are made visible only through anthropology’s unique methodologies of ethnography, participant-observation, and interviews that are able to grasp the nuances of resettlement and integration.

Anthropological studies of refugees reveal the complexities and paradoxes that characterize humanitarian projects. Although these bodies of literature contribute to our understanding of displacement, humanitarianism, and resettlement, there is a gap in the literature on refugee resettlement. Only few studies have examined how larger structures of power work at individual levels and how these structures affect relationships between employees of resettlement organization and refugees. This study contributes to the literature gap by examining the impacts of larger structures of power. Focusing at
individual level of KRM workers and refugees’ relation, this study particularly investigates how humanitarian work is marked by paradoxes. Situated in the middle between a larger institutional force that restrict and constraint KRM workers’ actions and their position as humanitarian workers, KRM workers’ actions are often contradictory and ambiguous. Highlighting the paradoxes and complexities in resettlement, this study aims to examine mechanisms that perpetuate unequal power dynamics between KRM workers and refugees and to understand how this asymmetrical relationship between the two informs and shapes Bhutanese refugees’ understanding of American-ness.

**Methodology**

Research methods consisted of participant-observation, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews. My interaction with the Bhutanese refugees and KRM staff members as a volunteer and an interpreter prior to the beginning of my fieldwork helped establish a rapport and build a relationship of mutual trust and respect. As a volunteer, I provided transportation for refugees to the welfare office, the Social Security Administration office, health departments, and grocery shopping. In addition, I interpreted for the refugees at the cultural orientation course.

KRM offers cultural orientation course as part of the resettlement process. A collection of 8-9 sessions offered on a weekly basis, each session lasts about an hour and half and has a different theme every week. Topics range from legal rights and civil rights, U.S. federal and state laws to banking information. Each course is designed to provide refugees with an opportunity to hear from professionals in the community speak on a variety of subjects about American culture. As one KRM staff member explained, “the
cultural orientation course is offered to refugees to provide information on the American way of life and in hopes of making the transition smooth.”

To understand the significance of the course in resettlement process and integration of refugees, I observed 9 consecutive weeks of the cultural orientation sessions. In retrospect, these courses were not like a typical classroom. The courses were held in a large hall in the basement of a church that was located across the KRM office. In comparison to the resettlement office, the church was quite massive in structure and seems fairly new with its red brick and dark tinted glasses on the side that gave an impression of a modern business office than a church. Behind this large structure was a small playground. On the back, numerous parking spaces were available. Iron bars surrounded the building and separated the compound from the public sidewalk. There was a side entrance beside the playground with a set of tinted double doors where one would enter the church. This side entrance led not to the main chapel but to the administration offices of the building. An intercom next to the double doors on the wall controlled and monitored the side entrance of the building. Next to this side entrance was another door that led to the basement, where there was a large hall. The hall reminded me of school cafeteria for it was quite large with many large round tables and about 8-10 chairs per table. Refugees from many parts of world, such as Iraq, Congo, Somalia, Rwanda, and Bhutan, would sit with their respective interpreters at a table. Each group occupied one to two of the large tables. As a volunteer/translator, I, too, would sit among the Bhutanese refugee group at one of those tables. In this hall, I observed the cultural orientation sessions every Friday morning at 10 a.m. for 9 consecutive sessions. These observations allowed me to perceive and understand the interactions of refugees and
session facilitator. I was able to observe refugees’ reactions and notice minute details as they listened to the facilitator.

Interpretations of their reactions were followed with semi-structured interviews that allowed me to gain deeper understanding of refugees’ perception of the course and their understanding of American-ness. Therefore, I interviewed only those refugees who had completed all of the required 8-9 sessions. In addition, I observed the interactions of KRM staff members and refugees at the KRM office every Mondays for few hours and for an hour or so on some Fridays after the cultural orientation course. I do not know what a typical day in KRM looks like as I only observed mostly on Mondays for few hours. Per KRM staff members, Monday mornings are the busiest days as I also observed the hustle and bustle inside the KRM office. The waiting room in the first floor would be full of people. There were only four office spaces, where two staff members shared each office; and they all shared a small conference/utility room. At any given time, in every office, there might be a refugee or two or a whole family waiting to talk to one of the staff members, to either fill out forms, get assistance on something, talk about an issue, or just hanging out. From outside, KRM was an ordinary tan colored two-storey brick house had a small sign on one of its front porch pillars indicating that this house was not a residential home but a resettlement office.

Throughout my fieldwork, I continued to volunteer with the organization, which allowed me to visit refugees’ homes on a regular basis. I used this opportunity to conduct participant-observation of refugees’ lives outside of the KRM office and cultural orientation course. In total, I conducted 40 participant observations at the KRM office, refugee home visits, and the cultural orientation sessions, and 12 semi-structured
interviews: four KRM staff members and eight Bhutanese refugees—four males and four females—of diverse age groups and education levels. The interviews attempted to understand KRM staff members’ and refugees’ thoughts and opinions about the cultural orientation course, how the course helps in integration into the American culture, and their understanding of what it means to be an American.

To protect my informants’ identities and maintain confidentiality, I provided pseudonyms for all of my informants and assigned each interviewee an identification code and a number. All of the interviews with the refugees were conducted in Nepali and with the KRM staff members in English. I transcribed all of the interviews. For the Nepali interviews, I translated and transcribed to the best of my ability by interpreting what I believed the refugees were communicating. Therefore, I would caution to readers that some of the concepts were not easily translatable due to difficulty in interpreting cultural contexts. Moreover, I have limited vocabulary of Nepali words, although it is my native language. This posed a difficulty in transcribing and interpreting the interviews verbatim. However, I used a standard Nepali-English dictionary to find the closest words possible to ensure accuracy of my translations.

Issues Encountered in the Field: Examining My Multiple Positions

Because I had gained the trust of both refugees and KRM staff members through my role as a volunteer, I held multiple positions: a volunteer/interpreter for KRM, a Nepali contact person/friend for Bhutanese refugees in a foreign land, and a researcher. Transitioning within these positionalities was difficult and often full of dilemmas because some times they would overlap and pose conflicts of interests. The overlapping of my positions obscured the boundary of insider/outsider. The contradictions at times were
posed a barrier for me and at other times facilitated in obtaining valuable information. Despite the difficulties in navigating the hybrid identities and multiple positions, I strategically essentialized certain identities to solicit information.

**Brief Overview of Chapters**

My study contributes to the emerging field of the anthropology of refugee studies and examines the paradoxes and complexities in third country resettlement. Specifically, the study documents unsettling issues for both the refugees and resettlement organization and illustrates how issues of power and politics impact resettlement. Highlighting the differences in refugees’ and KRM workers’ expectations, the study illustrates the role of structural power and show how the politics within and outside of institutions complicate resettlement. The differences in expectations reveal a disjuncture between theory and praxis in KRM’s everyday bureaucratic management of refugees. The disjuncture highlights the micro-politics of power that maintain asymmetrical hierarchies within the “humanitarian industry” (Pandolfi 2003). The micro-dynamics of power at miniscule levels also illuminates the modes of power, constant surveillance and control of refugees that further exacerbate the challenges and barriers that refugees experience in resettlement. Refugees’ anxiety and worry about the future, their feelings of exclusion (alienation) in the community, their mistrust of KRM and institutions, and the difficulty in navigating bureaucracies expose the complexities in resettlement.

Contextualizing the micro-politics of power within larger webs of global forces, I argue that the KRM employees’ actions highlight their paradoxical position where on one hand their actions reveal modes of power and asymmetrical relations; on the other hand, their actions obscure their role as a humanitarian organization and instead facilitate
mistrust among refugees. The financial pressure, the limited budget that the KRM workers experience and their frustrations with the bureaucratic structure of the organization illustrate the intricate web of power dynamics wherein local NGO acts as quasi-state through forms of surveillance, though at the same time the NGO is also subject to the state. This contradiction in KRM’s role reveals the structural discontinuities.

Analyses of inconsistencies and ambiguities in resettlement contribute to the structural dissonances and shape how refugees embody and conceptualize American culture. Ethnographic data show that specific forms of regulating refugees’ behaviors influence how refugees conceptualize what it means to be an American and what it entails to integrate into American culture. Critically assessing forms of regulation and control of refugees’ behaviors, I show that the KRM workers’ conception of Americanization (i.e. what it means to be an American) through integration is embedded in neoliberal understanding that urges refugees to become self-sufficient and independent.

The social theory of neoliberalism is based on the argument that everyone has the potential to benefit from capitalism and that poverty exists because of poor people’s inherent inability to take advantage of open-market system (Harvey 2007).11 This line of

11 The concept of neoliberalism arises from the economic liberalization policies and recommendations for developing nations that resulted from Bretton Woods conference of 1944 and the “Washington consensus” that came in 80s. The Washington consensus arises from the displacement of Keynesianism of the 70s of the downward trend in hopes of “developing” the “East” (Taylor 1997). Coming out of the recent WWII, the world leaders and the economic and political pundits were ready to have a “laisser-faire” or free of state intervention style of economic system and initiated a list of ten specific policy reforms –that included privatization, deregulation, trade liberalization, and tax reforms among other recommendations for the developing nations (Williamson 2004). At the same time in late 70s, World Bank’s then President McNamara institutionalized development and poverty by focusing rural development and agriculture under the banner of neoliberalism. This opened the door for policies that ended welfare programs and blamed
reasoning has been used to hold marginalized groups accountable for social issues rendering them as undeserving of welfare grants. Although the notion of undeserving subjects has not been directly used in reference to refugees, it has been implied through the discourse of personal accountability and responsibility in KRM workers’ daily usage of the phrases “self-sufficiency” and “independence.” I use the term neoliberalism to explain the ways in which the KRM workers expectations of refugees to become independent and self-sufficient are linked with the KRM workers’ understanding of what it means to become Americans. This expectation reflects a neoliberal logic in that it holds the refugees accountable for successfully integrating into American culture rather than the onus of integration lying on institutional structures.

Using ethnographic data, I examine humanitarian approaches to resettlement and argue that the actions of the resettlement organization are contradictory and inconsistent. Driven by a moral obligation to help, the organization acts as a patron to the refugees and keeps a strict surveillance on them. Such monitoring and regulation of refugees blurs the organization’s role as a value-neutral and apolitical humanitarian entity—which is a telltale sign of deeper structural and institutional issues. One of the paradoxes of resettlement is that it is a “calculated kindness,” (Loescher and Scanlan 1986). Although resettlement as a humanitarian effort is an act of benevolence, there are conditions to this benevolent act; those conditions are characterized by notions of integration that are fostered through learning to belong and become “citizen-subjects”

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poor people for their poverty because the theory of neoliberalism assumes that “market-friendly” policies will allow capital to trickle-down through the social hierarchy and eventually to the poor people. If people are poor then it is their fault rather than the result of political, socio-cultural, and economic factors.  

12 Loescher and Scanlan’s (1986) use of the term calculated kindness opens a space to examine possible political agenda of a state or government, i.e., the US state, behind acts of benevolence as humanitarian projects.
(Ong 2003). The term citizen-subject denotes the dual role of refugees who are expected to maintain their status as (potential) citizen and as subjects of a state. As would-be citizens, refugees are given certain privileges and rights by a state; at the same time, because of the uncertainty of citizenship status, they are also subject to scrutiny by that state. I conclude that resettlement is an on-going process that does not end with refugees’ arrival to the host country. It is a complicated and unsettling process for all of the stakeholders, i.e. refugees, KRM employees, and institutions. In highlighting the structural discontinuities, this study questions a state’s role and responsibility towards the refugees and the over-burdened staff members of local NGOs.
CHAPTER TWO
PARADOXES AND STRUCTURAL DISCONTINUITIES IN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

Sometimes, KRM does not help the way we expect them to and at times put us in anyol (dilemma/perplexity). For example, I had a medical appointment. I have never been to that hospital and I do not have a car or any way of getting there. They told us that I could go by myself because I have been here [US] for a while [at the time of interview, Gopal had been in the US for little over three months]… At least they should help us get there [to the hospital] once or twice to a new place [if] we have never been [there]. Even if we have been there once, it does not mean that the second time we will know how to get there because everything is new and they take us in their cars.13

~ Gopal (Bhutanese refugee, June 23, 2009)

I think there is such a build up of what it’s going to be like to live in the United States and that while nobody thinks that money grows on trees and success is…you know, just reach out and grab it. I think that the US is still built up. [A] lot of times, the difficulties of what is going to be like to make a life here are not grasped and to see that come crashing down when you have been here four, five or six months and you are not working and it’s hard. I think that’s the hardest part seeing those kinds of dreams and hopes kind of come crashing in.

~ Anne (KRM case-worker, June 22, 2009)

Gopal’s anyol (perplexity) expressed in the interview excerpt is emblematic of many Bhutanese refugees’ experiences and expectations of KRM. He believed that KRM did not provide adequate support to refugees; and instead, Gopal perceived that KRM had high expectations from refugees to become independent quickly – e.g. he believed that KRM expected him to go to the hospital on his own the second time. In contrast, Anne perceived that refugees had too many expectations of resettlement and living in the U.S. Although I did not follow-up what she meant by “The U.S. is built up,” clearly, there was no indication in Gopal’s or any other refugees’ narrative that the refugees expected life to be easier in the U.S. KRM staff members’ perception of refugees as having high expectations was often translated as refugees’ neediness. This perception was evident in KRM workers’ actions and informal conversations with the refugees. The differences in

13 All quotations of refugees are my translations from Nepali to English.
the perception and expectations between refugees’ assumptions about KRM and the KRM employees’ responses and actions towards the refugees are illustrative of "structural discontinuities" (Ong 2003). Structural discontinuities are disjunctions at structural or institutional levels in the refugee-citizen continuum. As refugees integrate into the community and learn to become citizens, certain gaps due to inconsistencies and ambiguities at structural or institutional level become barriers to refugees’ successful integration.

I continually observed differences in the expectations between the Bhutanese refugees and KRM staff members over the course of my fieldwork. The stark contrast in the two groups’ expectations became a source of disconnect revealing institutional gaps. Ethnographic examples highlight these structural gaps and expose unequal power hierarchy between the two groups that reinforce the politics of humanitarianism. Politics of humanitarianism is a theoretical framework that is useful for analyzing how humanitarian actions and interventions that are driven and shaped by bureaucratic politics and policies impact refugees. As the two interview excerpts illustrate, differences in expectations and perceptions expose paradoxes in humanitarian work and contextualizes structural discontinuities.

In my observation of the KRM employees, I noticed many inconsistencies and irregularities in their levels of commitment and support towards the refugees. KRM’s commitment depended upon how long a refugee had lived in the U.S. Due to this variation, Gopal and other refugees often perceived KRM’s support as inadequate. However, further examination of the variation in the commitment demonstrate that KRM
workers’ actions must be analyzed within the context of the state’s policies and budgetary restrictions placed on them that constrain and limit their services and commitments.

This chapter examines the ways in which structural discontinuities are reproduced and maintained. These discontinuities usually result from differences in the expectations between refugees and KRM employees, lack of clear and inconsistent information, contradictions in KRM employees’ approaches, and other complexities of structural bureaucracies of power that contribute to ambiguities in KRM’s role as a humanitarian organization. Ethnographic data show that these discontinuities not only highlight the politics in humanitarian work, but also have many implications for resettlement. First, differences and inconsistencies facilitate mistrust between the two groups creating tension and stress. Second, ambiguities in KRM worker’s actions, such as constant surveillance and regulation of refugees’ behaviors, perpetuate unequal hierarchy of power between refugees and KRM employees. The asymmetrical relation also contributes to antagonization between the two. Finally, institutional bureaucracies of power complicate resettlement. In sum, this chapter argues that structural discontinuities obscure larger webs of power and politics of humanitarianism within which both refugees and KRM employees are caught-up.

“They do not find jobs for us”: Uncertainties and Differences in Expectations

Surya is a single male in his late 20s who arrived in January of 2009. Like all of my informants, I met Surya at the cultural orientation course while volunteering as an interpreter. Through weekly meetings at the sessions, we established a bond of friendship and trust allowing me to interview him. One of the interview questions I asked my refugee informants was their perception of KRM employees’ levels of commitment. I
asked Surya if he had found any difference in KRM workers’ interactions and responses to refugees’ requests from when he had first arrived in the United States to the present. He responded that he expected the employees to continue their support with the same level of dedication and enthusiasm as they had shown when he first arrived. He explained, “At the beginning [when he first came to the US], if we needed help or any type of assistance, even if it was in the middle of the night or a weekend, they [KRM] would immediately respond to our call for help and would come to our home for assistance.” However, Surya indicated that after few months of resettlement, KRM workers showed less enthusiasm about helping refugees and at times would negatively respond to their requests for help. Per Surya, for example, KRM employees would say that they could not assist during KRM’s non-business hours. Other Bhutanese refugees shared Surya’s perception of decreasing and varying level of KRM workers’ commitment towards them. Some of the refugees indicated that they received smaller stipends compared to other refugee families that had equal or greater number of family members. However, when I asked the refugees if they knew why they were receiving smaller stipends, they indicated that they did not know the reason behind this discrepancy.

According to the KRM staff members, stipends are allocated and determined by the type of Federal welfare program in which each refugee or refugee family is enrolled. Refugees are enrolled in one of three types of Federal welfare programs through the office of KRM. Families with minor children are enrolled in Kentucky Temporary Assistance Program (KTAP), which funds a family for up to five years. However, per my conversations with refugees, the monthly stipend is modest in this program compared to the two other types of federal grant programs. Second type of funding program is the
Wilson-Fish Program (WFP) for adult single refugees or couples without children. Although this program funds a person for up to three years, it has a set of conditions that the grant receiver must follow. For instance, refugees on this program are required to attend ESL courses and job-training courses that the KRM provides. The third type of funding program is the Cash-Assistance Program. It is a match grant program; and KRM matches the federal grant through either monetary assistance or voluntary work. The disadvantage in this program, per conversations with refugees, is that due to lack of funding, KRM matches the grant through voluntary work. Refugees often perceive volunteer work as not an equal match or not as valuable as monetary assistance. Some of the refugees on this program informed me that they would prefer to receive monetary support instead of voluntary support. Although, I did not get a clear understanding of who decides which refugee or refugee family would be enrolled in which type of welfare program, it was clear that the apparent discrepancy in the stipends was due to being enrolled in different welfare programs and not due to difference in KRM workers’ commitment towards refugees. Lack of clarity of these issues is indicative of the structural gaps that contribute to refugees’ mistrust of the organization.

Another difference in expectation was that refugees, like Surya, expected to get support from the organization until they were completely independent and self-sufficient – i.e. having a job. Moreover, refugees believed that the KRM staff members were responsible for finding jobs for them. Based on informal conversations, many Bhutanese refugees perceived that the organization’s level of commitment towards them was decreasing. Most of these informal conversations took place after the cultural orientation course. Because all refugees were required to attend the cultural orientation sessions
every Friday, this provided an opportunity for refugees to socialize and share information with one another. Refugee families are scattered throughout the city of Lexington. For newly arrived refugees, the first two months are busy time for both refugees and KRM workers because refugees have to fill out necessary paper works such as filing for Social Security card, Medicaid cards, Welfare, Food Stamps, go to medical appointments to fulfill resettlement requirement. All of these in addition to attending the cultural orientation courses, ESL courses, and searching for jobs keep refugees very busy for the first few months allowing them very less time for socialization. Hence, as many refugees indicated, Friday afternoons were the only time for them to socialize and meet other refugees.

During one of these gatherings at the end of the cultural orientation session, many refugees and I were standing outside of the KRM office conversing. When I asked some of the refugees in general how they were doing, a middle-aged man responded that he feared he would not find a job because he did not speak English well. I was taken aback as I was only being courteous by asking refugees of their health. I was not prepared for this man’s response of hardship and anxiety. He continued to tell me that he felt that KRM was not helping them [refugees] find jobs and he was worried about the future [in terms of his family’s financial future]. Others chimed in affirming that KRM was not helping them find jobs. When I asked for clarification about why they expected KRM to find jobs, a woman in her mid-30s responded, “Prior to our [refugees] departure for the U.S., we were given an orientation course in the refugee camps, where we were told that the local resettling agencies would find jobs for them.”
In my interviews with the refugees, my informants echoed similar concerns of worry about not finding employment and shared their stories of “being told” that the local organization would find jobs for them. Bir Bahadur, a short and stocky man in his mid-40s with two teenage boys, stated many times during his interview that he was disappointed that KRM was not helping him find jobs. According to Bir, in the orientation class in the refugee camps prior to his and his family’s departure, they were shown a video recording of the types of jobs that refugees could get in the U.S. These jobs included working in a factory, housekeeping, or working in the meat-packing industry. I was unable to clarify who “they” were and whether the refugees were told directly by the UNHCR or IOM representative or whether these were just rumors floating in the camps. For Bir, who was trying to start over and rebuild his life, it mattered less who was circulating this misinformation about employment. What mattered for him was to get a job. His anxiety about the future was evident as he stated:

KRM will stop supporting us when we find a job. We all know that we have to find a job and be self-sufficient. But I have heard in other places that people who were jobless for over 8 months and could not afford rent were evicted... Right now, we are fine and we do not have that kind of problem, but I worry if that kind of problem could arise... They said that for three months I do not have to worry about rent, but we do have to pay for electricity. So tomorrow they may ask us to pay for rent too and what will I do.

Starting life over in the U.S. at his age with two children would be hard for anyone, but lack of English language skills and not being literate contributed to Bir’s difficulty of finding a job. Adding to his worry was the fear that KRM would stop supporting his family at the end of the third month regardless of whether he found a job. This claim was unsubstantiated because all of the refugees are enrolled in one of the Federal or state welfare programs that support them anywhere from a year to 5 years.
However, because these welfare grants tend to be very modest, KRM employees tell the refugees that they expect them to be self-sufficient and independent (i.e. find a job and support themselves financially) within three months of their arrival. I am not sure if Bir knew that he would still be supported at the end of the third month; but lack of information and ambiguity in this regard contributed to his anxieties and stress about financial insecurities.

Bir’s narrative of the video that promised refugees jobs in the meatpacking industry, factory work, fast food, and other manual and custodial labor positions raises issues of labor and downward social mobility. A majority of adult Bhutanese refugees stated that their decision to apply for the resettlement process was primarily based on a hope that coming to America would give their children a chance for better opportunities and a secure life – i.e. having a stable secured job that none of the manual labor positions could or would offer.

Gopal talked about the times when he and his brother hid their refugee status to work in Nepal. Because the Bhutanese refugees are not permitted to work in Nepal, he constantly feared that his refugee status would be discovered and he would not be able to provide for his family. It seems that his fear and frustrations with regards to employment have not subsided even after coming to the U.S. He talked about his fear of employment insecurity in the U.S. due to the economic crisis. Gopal used to be a teacher in Nepal, and now he worked as a part-time janitor. Similarly, Bimla, who has a BA in sociology, indicated her frustrations of not finding a secure and “better” (white-collar) job. Despite having a college degree, she felt frustrated for not being able to use her knowledge on the job. She worked as a waitress at a restaurant. Likewise, Sita used to work as an
administrative assistant at the refugee camp in Nepal. She indicated, “I was very proud of that position... Now, I am concerned about when I will find a job. I do not know if I will find one.” She now worked as a part-time housekeeper in one of the hotel chains. The downward social status that some of the refugees experienced through their employment in the U.S. raised many questions among the more educated refugees of whether they were brought here to work in manual labor positions as a “solution for illegal migrants” (Interview with Bimla, June 24, 2009).  

Arjun and Sita shared similar concerns about employment and expectations from the KRM employees. Unlike Bir, the two siblings were in their 20s, had completed high school and spoke English fluently. Although both were single, they had their share of the burden of taking care of their family. Arjun and Sita were two of the eight children. Their eldest three siblings were married and had their own families. As the oldest among the unmarried children, the burden of taking care of the family fell on them, especially on Arjun as a male, who was now the head of the household. Both siblings indicated of having a lot of stress due to the difficulty of finding employment despite their youth, a high school education, and English language skills. Like Bir, Arjun too expected KRM to help him find a job. Frustrated with what he perceived as the KRM employees’ inability to find jobs for the refugees, Arjun asserted:

Our [refugees] expectations from KRM are that we will receive all the help [we need] until we find a job, and that KRM will find jobs for us. However, in terms of finding jobs for us, I feel that it is their [KRM’s] shortcoming. They do not find jobs for us. It is more like we have to find jobs on our own. I found that change after coming here.

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14 Issues of downward social status through labor that refugees (and immigrants) experience within the larger context of the U.S. Immigration policies and racialization processes are beyond the scope of this thesis. These issues have been extensively documented in the literature on immigration studies. Although I do not look into these issues, they are nonetheless important to of refugee resettlement that future studies could address.
Like many refugees, Arjun also indicated that an IOM representative in the refugee camps had told him that local NGOs in the U.S. would find jobs for them. Sita, who was also present during this interview, voiced similar concerns of noticing a difference in KRM employees’ commitment levels. She perceived this difference as KRM’s shortcoming. The downward social mobility, instability of employment status, and refugees’ expectations of KRM finding jobs highlight structural discontinuities that are well beyond the scope and responsibility of a local NGO like the KRM.

It is interesting to note here that one of the cultural orientation course focuses on the expectations of refugees and of KRM. During that session, the facilitator, Christine, listed things that refugees should expect from KRM. Those expectations included: to provide a decent, safe, and sanitary housing with necessary furnishings such as mattress, box spring, box frame; enough sleeping space for everyone; help get refugees Social Security cards, food stamp cards, and ID cards; help them with various funding such as KTAP, match-grant, or Wilson-Fish; help them get into ESL classes; and help refugees find jobs. The last responsibility of finding jobs was the source of ambiguity for refugees. As illustrated through ethnographic examples, refugees’ expectations that KRM find jobs meant that the KRM workers would fill out application and literally find a job for refugees and all refugees need to do is to show up and begin working. KRM employees’ understanding of “helping find jobs” meant helping refugees by filling out job applications, directing them to resources where they may find jobs. This discrepancy of what “helping find jobs” mean for both the refugees and KRM employees has been a major source of misunderstanding between the two groups.
Continuing with her list of expectations, Christine listed KRM’s expectations from refugees as: becoming independent and self-sufficient; keep their homes clean; follow rules of apartment complex; and regularly attend ESL courses and cultural orientation course – as she said this last expectation, she reminded the refugees that their funding depended on their attendance. As Christine listed refugees’ responsibilities and what KRM expected of them, some refugees were having side conversations, loud enough for everyone to hear. One refugee complained about how they could possibly clean the apartment when it was already infested with roaches when they moved in. Another complained that their kitchen sink was clogged and water was backing up and leaking in the kitchen. Interrupting Christine, a refugee asked her if she or another KRM member could help with their issues related to their housing. Christine suggested informing the apartment management. She added that this way they [refugees] could learn how to solve problems on their own and be independent. Another refugee responded that many did not speak English well enough to explain these problems to the management. On this note, Christine reiterated the importance of attending ESL courses so they could learn English. Without doubt, having English language skills and learning to become independent are very important for successful integration. However, there seemed to be an apparent disconnect in these conversations that illustrate structural gaps.

Uncertainty about employment and future were not the only source of anxiety for refugees. Many indicated that learning to navigate bureaucracies –in particular, understanding the U.S. healthcare system - was a constant source of anxiety for the refugees. For instance, sharing his frustrations of dealing with medical bills, Arjun stated, “I am tired of getting medical bills…since I do not have a job and they [KRM] barely
give me enough money through the KTAP grant. I give all my medical bills to KRM and let them handle it. But the [health] clinic continues to send me the bills and I wonder if KRM is looking into it.” Although Arjun believed that KRM should take care of these bureaucratic issues, he also doubted the organization’s commitment and interest in helping him resolve the issue.

Comprehending and navigating the healthcare institution can be an excruciating experience for anyone. For refugees, who have to go to different health departments to fulfill a number of health requirements, such as vaccination shots, complete physical and gynecological examinations that are mandated by the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, working with administrative bureaucracies in healthcare can be an extremely unpleasant experience. Navigating bureaucracies not only become a major source of barrier for integration for refugees, but also add to refugees’ frustrations and stress of resettlement (Fadiman 1997). Bhutanese refugees’ frustrations were exaggerated by their assumption that KRM was responsible for handling these bureaucratic issues. Although, I did talk with a KRM staff member about the organization’s responsibility in handling these issues, Bhutanese refugees’ attitudes and perceptions of institutions, including KRM, illuminate the barriers and challenges that refugees face daily.

Overcoming these barriers not only becomes a crucial matter for successful integration, but they also highlight structural gaps. These ethnographic examples illuminate more than an unfortunate reality of unexpected hardships that the refugees are grappling with due to misinformation given at the refugee camps and the differences in refugees’ and KRM workers’ expectations. Refugees’ disappointments with unmet expectations reveal larger institutional discontinuities that depict KRM as cold,
calculative, and lacking commitment, although that was not the case. The KRM workers, I found out, were very invested and committed to their work. Many of the employees had previous experiences of working in other humanitarian organizations, international experience working in developing countries, working as Peace Corp and as Ameri Corp volunteers; and some started by volunteering in church-based community work. Due to a small number of full-time staff, the administrative and bureaucratic demands take most of the employees’ time and limit their ability to provide adequate services to the refugees. Refugees perceive this inadequacy as lack of commitment. This apparent contradiction in KRM’s commitment and their constrained actions are illustrative of the politics of humanitarianism.

“It’s frustrating having restrictions on your services”: Bureaucracies of Power

One of the main sources of contradiction in KRM employees’ commitment and actions was inconsistency in information provided to refugees. Inconsistent information in resettlement not only creates ambiguities about the organization’s role and responsibility, but also obscures the organization’s paradoxical position within larger structures of power, such as KRM’s position vis-à-vis its main head office in Louisville. Ambiguities and discrepancies produce confusions and create dissonances in both refugees’ and KRM’s expectations and outcomes. Throughout my fieldwork, I observed numerous inconsistencies that undermined KRM’s role as a humanitarian organization. Moreover, lack of clear communication and discrepancy in KRM employees’ responses to refugees’ requests led some refugees to perceive their actions and responses as bureaucratic and robotic/mechanistic in manner and doing what “they are paid to do,” (From conversations with Gopal and Shyam, June 23, 2009). KRM employees’
discretionary power and bureaucratic practices and actions not only perpetuated mistrust among refugees, but also undermined their good intentions and efforts in resettlement.

One such example was the inconsistent information about whether the cultural orientation course was a requirement for refugees. A collection of 8-9 sessions, KRM offers cultural orientation courses to refugees as part of resettlement process. Each session covers a wide range of themes about living in the U.S. The courses were held in a large hall in the basement of a church that was located across the KRM office. For each session, a guest speaker from the community would come and give presentation on a topic. Topics that ranged from parenting, banking information, U.S. rules and laws to understanding American culture and tips on finding employment. Guest speakers would be either a bank employee giving a talk on banking, a sergeant informing refugees of their civil rights, duties and U.S. rules and regulations, or a psychologists giving information about mental health and depression. At the end of each session, the facilitator would remind refugees to attend the next session. Refugees were told that the course was a requirement and failure to attend would result in sanctioning of their federal grant money. Some of the KRM staff members, however, had different opinions and understandings about the requirement of the course. The staff members also differed in their opinions about how best to handle a situation if a refugee failed to fulfill this requirement.

Anne indicated that refugees were encouraged to attend all of the 8-9 sessions but the courses were not required for all refugees. She explained that this requirement was based on specific federal program in which each refugee family or individual refugee was enrolled. She stated that if a refugee was on “Cash Assistance” program, then, the
receiver (refugee) was required to attend the cultural orientation course and the English as Second Language (ESL) courses.” If the requirement to attend the course, as Anne stated, was dependent on the type of welfare program on which refugees were enrolled, then, why were all refugees told that they must attend the sessions or face penalties? I did not follow-up with this question. However, when I asked Jill, the same question, she had a different understanding about the course requirement.

Jill opined that the course was required for all refugees regardless of which program they were enrolled in. She believed that a refugee might be penalized for not attending. When I asked her if KRM had ever penalized a refugee for failure to attend the sessions, she stated that there had been one case where a refugee was penalized. The following interview excerpt with Jill describes the incidence when disciplinary action was taken against a refugee for being “non-compliant.”

CS: If they [refugees] were to miss more than just one to two classes, do you penalize them?
Jill: It depends… most people [are] usually compliant. There was one incident [where a family] was not complying in several ways… so for this one family that was not complying, two of the people [who] were in the Wilson Fish program, we actually had to sanction them for a period of time and continued to meet with them. Later they agreed to comply and so we reversed the sanction. It just means [that] with the Wilson Fish program, refugees get $300 each month. Since that refugee was not using the money to pay the bills and also refused to go to a job interview… that was ground for the refugee to be...cut off that funding.

Jill emphasized that the disciplinary action taken against this refugee was due to his/her non-compliance behavior in many things and not only failing to attend the cultural orientation course. According to her, non-compliance could be anything from not showing up for appointments (health, welfare, food stamps, and, job interviews), not paying housing rent or other bills to sending the federal money back to their families in the camps, or failure to attend orientation courses, ESL courses, or job training courses.
Although Jill did not dwell on the particularities of the refugee’s non-compliance, one thing was clear that for her, there was a strict demarcation between which behaviors were compliant and which ones were not; and failure to attend the cultural orientation course was non-compliant behavior for Jill. I was still unclear about which federal aid program required refugees to attend the cultural orientation course because the refugee was on WFP. Per Anne, if only those refugees on Cash Assistance program were required to attend, then, why was this refugee who was on WFP sanctioned?

Ambiguities and inconsistencies in information make it difficult to assess KRM’s commitment in advocating for and helping refugees. Moreover, the example of sanctioning illustrates that humanitarian organizations are placed in a direct opposition against refugees due to larger forces such as the policies surrounding welfare grants. As a federally appointed NGO for resettling refugees, KRM may not have had a choice but to penalize refugees if they found out that refugees were breaking federal rules, such as sending remittances to families in the camps or not attending the cultural orientation course.

Christine, a soft-spoken young woman in her early 20s, had a different perception from either Anne’s or Jill’s about the requirement of cultural orientation course. Like Anne, she believed that the requirement was not the same for all refugees. She believed that a newly arrived refugee family may “opt out” if the family had an “anchor” family. An anchor family, she explained, was a family or a friend who was familiar with the U.S. system and who could help the newly arrived family in the resettlement process. She explained:

Well, the way I understand it, they [refugees] are supposed (required) to complete the 8 weeks [of cultural orientation sessions]. Now if they [refugees] have an
appointment and miss a week, then, that is fine. They will just make up for that week in the next [round of] session, when it comes around. [S]ome people opt out of it [cultural orientation courses]. [For instance] some of our Iraqi families that have an anchor or somebody who has already been in the states for a long time and they do not need those kinds of things [information that apparently helps to integrate into the American culture], and they have somebody to show them around, then, they opt out of it. As far as I am aware, there is no penalty for that [opting out and not attending cultural orientation courses].

As her statement reveals, Christine was more lenient about keeping attendance of refugees in the orientation course. Her perception about the requirement contradicted from both Jill’s and Anne’s understandings of this requirement. Who decides who is allowed to “opt out”? When I asked some of the Bhutanese refugees about “opting-out,” they had a different story. They stated that this was not true. KRM told them that they were required to attend the course regardless of whether or not they had an anchor family. The discrepancy in the information provided to refugees and different understandings of the requirement had many implications. First, it sent mixed message to the refugees. Second, lack of consensus among the staff members implied that the requirement might be an arbitrary rule of KRM. Third, some refugees perceived this as another bureaucratic nuisance that wasted refugees’ time – time that they could have spent searching for jobs. Fourth, the fact that some refugees could not opt out suggested that KRM might be playing favoritism at the expense of refugees – few Bhutanese refugees felt that they were being discriminated against. Finally, the discrepancy had larger implication of unequal power and privilege to which KRM employees subscribe and enact upon refugees.

This type of routine action of the staff members illustrates their obliviousness to how bureaucracies of power impact refugees. KRM employees failed to understand that the threats of repercussions and sanctions were real for the refugees, who felt compelled to attend even if some of the refugees felt that some of the sessions were redundant. This
does not imply that the cultural orientation course is useless and must be discarded. In fact, the course offers very useful and practical skills necessary for refugees to successfully integrate. Moreover, a majority of the refugees believed that the course was very valuable to them because it gave them important and helpful information about “how things are done in America,” as one refugee put it. It was also clear from my conversations with the KRM employees that they had good intentions for offering these courses. However, these good intentions are undermined by the ambiguities and inconsistent information.

Lack of clear communication with the refugees was another major source of inconsistency and ambiguity. Because a number of refugees indicated that they were told in the refugee camps that local NGOs would find jobs for them, I asked a KRM staff member about whether KRM was aware of circulation of such misinformation amongst refugees. The staff member answered that she had no power over the information that was disseminated to the refugees in the camps and she did not know what and if she could do anything about it. Without doubt, KRM does not have control over the information disseminated in the refugee camps. However, the organization could clarify such misinformation after the refugees’ arrival to the U.S. There was no indication in the employee’s response that she or any other KRM workers intended to clarify this misinformation to refugees. One must then ask what responsibility does KRM have towards refugees for clarifying inconsistency and misinformation. What is at stake if the organization does not correct refugees’ misunderstandings?

Contrary to refugees’ expectations, KRM employees believed that it was refugees’ responsibility to find jobs. Jill stated during one of the cultural orientation
sessions, “While we realize that due to the economic crisis it is hard to find jobs, KRM expects you [addressing refugees] to find jobs and be independent.” The emphasis placed on finding a job within the third month of refugees’ arrival was not because it was KRM’s requirement, but a result of limited funding. Informal conversations with Jill indicated that the main head office in Louisville controlled their budget and the Lexington office was allotted a specific budget for a fiscal year. Any public or private grants that the organization received first went to the Louisville office and a portion then went to the Lexington sub-office. Because Lexington’s refugee population was growing rapidly, Jill believed that the money they received from Louisville was never enough. Moreover, as a sub-office of Louisville, Lexington’s office could not apply for a separate grant or funding, but had to go through the main office. Such bureaucratic barriers further limited KRM’s ability to adequately support refugees. Some of the KRM staff members expressed frustrations of institutional barriers placed on their organization by larger structures of power.

Nancy, an older employee who had been working at KRM for many years, accounted some of the difficulties she experienced in her work. One of the major sources of difficulties was the financial limitation. She indicated that the meager federal funding that KRM received from the state department for resettlement was not nearly enough to even get an apartment for a family. Pouring out her frustrations, she asserted, “We have to buy things for the apartment…food, household items, beds, pillows, which we try to get from donations. When we get an apartment, we have to pay deposit and utilities…that money [federal stipend] is gone quickly.”
Nancy continued to discuss the difficulties of managing the services with limited financial support from private and government grants, and the budget restrictions placed by Louisville office. Bureaucratic controls and financial restrictions on KRM demonstrate a complex web of the politics within humanitarian organizations where larger structural forces control smaller local NGOs and constraint their ability to provide adequate assistance. The intricate bureaucratic and political webs are reflective of the politicization of humanitarianism where, as Foucault (1980) calls, systems of domination intersect in ways that negatively impact refugees’ lives.

Other KRM staff members shared similar frustrations of bureaucratic barriers that continually prevented them from doing an effective job. Sharing her experience with bureaucracies, Christine explained that she was frustrated with inadequate support from the Federal government as well as from their “mother” office in Louisville. She claimed:

Christine: The most difficult for me is…how frustrated I have been at how the organization has to run sometimes, the kind of the bureaucratic issues between our organization and Louisville…I do not understand all of it, but I think that it is frustrating having restrictions on your services and when you can really…so many people needs so much more than you can provide…that has been very difficult.

CS: Can you give some examples of what are some of the bureaucratic things that have been restricting?

Christine: Well, it is that the Lexington office does not have its own budget […] this is from whenever I was writing the grant. It was very difficult to write a grant when you do not know what their current budget is, so it is kind of like…Louisville is kind of like a parental type office to us. So I guess…

Reflecting on structural and financial restrictions placed by the Louisville office, Christine became quiet. Her aggravation was only the tip of an iceberg of the paradoxes and dilemmas that humanitarian organizations often find themselves in. Her genuine interests in helping the refugees and working at KRM were overshadowed by the bureaucratic restrictions and financial limitations. Christine’s reference to the Louisville
office as a “mother” also reveals that NGO workers are aware of the structural hierarchies that control them. These webs of power and politics in humanitarianism place local NGOs in a paradoxical position against refugees and undermine the organization’s efforts and good intentions. Moreover, KRM’s restrictions due to institutional hierarchies within the organization and the bureaucracies of power also highlight structural discontinuities that impact refugees but destabilize the organization’s role as a humanitarian entity.

“How much rice can they eat?” Surveillance and Micro-politics of power

Although bureaucratic webs of power and structural hierarchies within an institution constrain local NGO’s level of service and commitment, it is also important to recognize the local NGO’s position and power vis-à-vis the refugees. The following long excerpt from my fieldnotes illustrates the micro-politics of power where the KRM employees have the power to decide and choose who gets aid and to what extent.

Examining the interaction between a KRM staff member and a refugee, I highlight the unequal power relations reproduced at everyday miniscule level, and emphasize the hierarchical donor-recipient relationship that exists between refugees and KRM workers.

One afternoon in June as I chitchatted with Kamala outside the KRM office, she told me that their family was almost out of food. Fearing that she would confuse the KRM staff members with her broken English, she asked me to ask Jill if someone from the organization would bring food for her family. On Kamala’s request, I called Jill and asked her if someone from KRM could bring food for Kamala’s family or take them for grocery shopping explaining that the family was almost out of food. Jill responded that someone from the office had brought food to the family from a local charity organization a few days prior and that the family should have plenty to last for at least a week. I asked Kamala about the food drop-off. She said that they [KRM] had brought batta (boxes), cardboard boxes and tin boxes (cans). She said she was not sure what they were, did not know how to cook, and how to open those cans. The only food she recognized were some small bags of rice, which were almost gone.

Since it was a Friday afternoon and the KRM office would be closing soon for the weekend, there was an urgency to resolve this matter. Assuring Kamala that KRM would find a solution, we decided to enter the office to see if anyone could help us. The office was almost empty except for an intern and a staff member. When I relayed
Kamala’s concerns to them and asked if they could give us some money so I could take her grocery shopping, the staff member replied that she did not have the authority to hand out money.

Understanding the constraints and restrictions of bureaucracy, I called Jill again. I explained the situation and asked her if she could tell the staff member to give us some money. In what seemed to me an annoyed tone, she retorted that she had taken the family grocery shopping earlier that week and had bought 7 1 pound bags of rice, in addition to the food brought from the local charity organization. “Surely,” she said, “it should not be gone by now.” I explained to Jill that the canned foods and boxed pastas were completely foreign to Kamala. Jill replied that the family should still have rice emphasizing that she had bought “7 1 pound bags of rice for them.” I explained to Jill that rice is the main staple for Nepalese and Bhutanese people and that we eat rice for lunch and dinner. Jill responded with irritation that the family needed to learn to ration their food. She was busy at that moment and could not help the family.

As she spoke these words, I wondered what Jill meant when she said that the family “needed to learn to ration food.” Was she implying that the family should learn to eat less because she knew how much food should last for one family? Or was she implying that the refugees needed to learn to conserve food and not be wasteful of the food? Kamala had spent most of her adult life in a refugee camp where food was rationed weekly by UNHCR and she had to make sure that it lasted until next round of distribution.

When I asked Jill if she had ever observed the family eat their meals, she said that she had been at the family’s home when they were having rice for breakfast. I explained to her that she must have seen how much rice the family ate to understand the importance of rice. She should multiply the amount she observed the family eat at least by two, if not three times, for each member of the family per day. Jill replied, “Well that is 7 bags, 1lb. each, and surely a family of four cannot possibly finish that much rice in just few days. How much rice can they eat?” Then, she asked me if I had gone to their house to check if the family was truly out of rice. I replied that I had not gone nor was I planning to go and check on whether Kamala was telling the truth.

Trust plays a central role in any relationship – specifically between aid organizations and recipients. Scholars of refugee studies have explored in-depth on the issue of trust and mistrust (Daniel and Knudsen 1995; Malkkii 1995; Hynes 2009). In particular, they have examined how mistrust between refugees and institutions is reproduced through ambiguous spaces and contexts. Rather than trying to understand why there was not enough food for Kamala’s family – until I explained to Jill that Kamala did not know how to open the cans nor she knew how to cook the pasta, Jill mistrusted Kamala and attempted to regulate her resources. Perceived as dishonest and “cheating”
the system, and thereby undeserving of aid, refugees are mistrusted and they mistrust the resettlement organization. These forms of regulation and surveillance are indicative of how the daily routine work of over-worked and burned out NGO workers, over time, reproduces micro-politics of power. Moreover, the micro management of refugees’ resources is illustrative of the KRM workers’ authority over the refugees. Jill’s declaration that the family needed to “learn to ration” not only reinforces an unequal hierarchy between the KRM employees and refugees, but also demonstrates that humanitarian organizations could easily slip into the older political hierarchy that replicate colonial patterns (Hinton 1996; Redfield 2005). What is at stake when NGOs validate their position and authority through control of their subjects?

Kamala’s expectations that KRM should provide adequate food were well founded. However, Jill’s expectations that the refugees needed to learn how to ration food were not only unreasonable, but also unfounded. To simply state that this difference in expectations is due to cultural differences that are characteristic of resettlement process would be a gross over-simplification of the complexities surrounding the politics of humanitarianism. This simplification would essentialize the concept of culture as static, and universalize and reduce culture to generalizeable traditions and practices. In addition, the use of “cultural difference” as an explanation masks and leaves unquestioned the structural inequalities (Abu-Lughod 2006).

The incident is also exemplary of the constant monitoring and control that the KRM workers often employ onto the refugees. Surveillance and oversight of the refugees have become part of KRM’s daily dealings that complicate resettlement. Specific mechanisms of disciplinary power and gate-keeping of resources place the organization
in a contradictory position that renders it as an extension of the U.S. state’s apparatus. Jill’s actions to control Kamala’s food reproduce ambiguities in her role as a humanitarian worker; rather her actions resemble more as policing refugees than helping them. It is understandable that due to financial and material limitations, KRM employees have to place restrictions on the amount of food they are able to donate. However, this restriction also places the organization in a contradictory position that demands them to act as gatekeepers of the resources. This paradoxical position not only produces ambiguities in KRM’s role, but also causes the organization to miss opportunities of truly helping refugees and understanding the position and context in which refugees are compelled to manipulate the system. I would argue that this contradictory position of the organization is a harbinger of deeper structural and institutional issues.

Similar mechanisms of surveillance and control of refugees’ lives are illustrative when both Anne and Jill on separate occasions asked me if I knew whether Sita had a job. When I told them that I did not know, both of the staff members asked me to find out and let them know if I hear anything of it. When I inquired to Jill why she did not directly ask Sita, she replied nonchalantly that refugees tend to hide their employment status in hopes of continuing to receive the welfare money and grants. She added that by cheating the system, some of the refugees continue to receive grants that they otherwise should not have received.

Later at a staff meeting, one of the employees mentioned that some of the refugees were hiding their employment status. Nancy suggested sending sanction letters to those refugees as a warning and to prevent others from following suit. When I saw Sita a few days later, I asked her about her job status and whether she was aware that she was
supposed to inform KRM of the change in her employment status. She replied that it was a temporary part-time job and she was not sure how long she would be employed. She feared her that welfare grant would be cut off if the organization found out of her employment and her earnings from the temporary job would not be enough to live on. “Besides,” she added, “many other refugees were also keeping their employment status under wraps.” Rather than investigating why refugees like Sita feel a need to hide the truth about their employment status and why they need the welfare money despite having a job, employees of KRM regulate refugees’ behaviors and take on state-like functions, to use Hinton’s (1996) phrase. Such forms of surveillance and control legitimize the institution’s power, sustain notions of deserving and undeserving refugees, and transform the organization into an extension of the state’s apparatus. In so doing, these micro-dynamics of power demarcate who belongs and who does not and who are deserving and who are undeserving of aid.

This chapter has explored numerous issues of complexities in resettlement; those issue include differences in expectations, inconsistencies and ambiguities in the requirement of the cultural orientation courses, the disciplining of non-compliant refugees, keeping track of refugees’ resources and employment status, structural limitations placed on local NGOs by larger forces and bureaucratic hurdles that complicate resettlement. All of these issues and ethnographic examples illustrate a deep structural disjuncture where the organization’s commitment and actions are paradoxical. Bureaucratic structures seem to support these contradictions and ambiguities for the purposes of surveillance and regulation of refugees; and thereby, reproduce and maintain paradoxes. In doing so, structural discontinuities within and outside the humanitarian
regime that have set the organization up as a governing institution and expose the politics in humanitarianism; simultaneously, discontinuities obscure and undermine KRM’s goals and render refugees as dependent subjects. Structural webs of power and politics contextualize the politicization of humanitarianism and illuminate asymmetrical positionalities of KRM as the “donor” and refugees as the “receiver,” and further reveal that these webs of power and politics of humanitarianism impact how both refugees and KRM workers experience the demands of resettlement and integration.
CHAPTER THREE
BECOMING AMERICAN: “THIS IS HOW THINGS ARE DONE IN AMERICA”

“American culture is like a khichadi [hodge-podge or mixture]…In orientation class, KRM tells us that this is how things are done in America or this is American culture…all these things that they say are American culture, these things come from various cultures like Mexican culture, Japanese culture, and other countries’ culture.”
-- Gopal

Although the United States is a khichadi of different cultures, Gopal’s observation of the cultural orientation course is suggestive of how specific notions of American-ness are used to describe life in the U.S. writ large as if they are universally applicable. The underlying implication of the phrase “this is how things are done in America” suggests that in order to belong and integrate into American culture, refugees must incorporate specific features of what it means to be an American or of American culture into their lives. On the flip side, then, what would exclude refugees from belonging to American culture and make them the “other”?

The term “other” denotes marginalization of specific groups or individuals who are considered to be outside of the mainstream majority group. This process of othering could result from racial, ethnic, gender/sexuality, class, and religious marginalizations. Such types of othering and exclusion have also been used to render certain groups or individuals as either legal/illegal persons. Abu-Lughod argues, “culture is the essential tool for making the ‘other’” (2006[1991]:470). Arguably, the process of Americanization supports the politics of belonging and exclusion and maintains hegemony of the

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15 I use the terms American culture, Americanization, and American-ness, interchangeably to refer to the processes that reinforce refugees’ understanding of what it means to be an American.

16 Critical race theorists and other social scientists have extensively explored marginalizations through the lens of intersectionality where they argue that persons are marginalized on many accounts of socio-cultural factors and not just one factor of either race, class, gender, or sexuality. The issue of intersectionality in the context of marginalizations of refugees is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, the intersectionality theory offers a useful framework for understanding integration of refugees in the larger context of the U.S. racialization processes.
construction of the “other.” Drawing on ethnographic data from cultural orientation course, my conversations with refugees and observations of their actions, this chapter examines how refugees integrate and become Americanized via specific mechanisms of othering. I argue that the ways in which refugees integrate are reinforced by notions of belonging that are embedded within specific values identified or coded as American.

For example, KRM employees’ frequent use of the phrase, “this is how things are done in America,” suggests that successful integration of refugees requires embodying specific features that the KRM staff members perceive and understand as being American. One must then ask, who decides whether a refugee has successfully integrated into American culture? Who defines what it means to be an “American”? The discourse analysis of American-ness is useful in revealing how these values are based on neoliberal understanding of personal accountability and responsibility. Embedded in the Americanization process is the notion of deserving and undeserving subjects. The process of embodying American-ness, then, renders refugees as the “new” neoliberal subjects. A critical examination of the process of Americanization based on neoliberal logic allows for exposing how institutions avert their responsibility of integrating refugees onto the refugees themselves.

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17 I use the term integration in the same manner as the KRM staff members have applied the term. Generally, they refer to successful integration as refugees, who, through acquiring employment, are economically independent and are able to understand and balance cultural differences between their own culture of origin and that of the host nation.

18 The social theory of neoliberalism derives from the poverty studies of early 50s and 60s that shaped welfare policies. The theory blamed the conditions of the poor on their behavior and way of life rather than on structural and institutional power that perpetuate their poverty. Neoliberal theory is often used to place value judgments on this marginalized group and hold accountable for their poverty, while disregarding the political, socio-cultural, and economic factors, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion.
Conceptualizing American culture

During one of the cultural orientation sessions, the refugees settled in the church basement and took their seats at the round tables among their peers. Christine, the facilitator for that session, greeted them with her usual warm smile and introduced the guest speaker, a 30-something psychologist who had dark complexion, dark hair, and sharp facial features. She was dressed in business suit and wore a dark red colored rectangular shaped prescription glasses. The speaker introduced the topic for that session saying, “Today we will talk about cultural differences.” The speaker began by asking refugees what cultural differences they had noticed between American culture and the cultures from their respective countries. Although everyone in the room understood what she meant by the phrase “your respective countries,” its use in the context of refugees seemed ironic because the phrase conveniently ignored the fact that refugees’ identity and link to their countries had been severed. The reference to “your countries” implied a “them” and “us” discourse that suggested refugees to be outsiders.

Each of the refugee groups around the room began listing differences they have observed between their cultures and American culture. Some identified American culture as being more systematic in nature and that Americans were very different in their clothing style, food, language, and mannerisms from what they were used to. The speaker continued to make her point that the purpose of highlighting differences in cultures was to talk about how differences in cultural aspects and ways of life could lead to feelings of homesickness or feeling like they do not belong. Then, she discussed the phases of integration from what she called “honeymoon phase” –where when everything is new and exciting and feels good, to feeling down due to homesickness. She emphasized that the
homesickness phase could lead to depression; and she discussed how to recognize early
signs of depression. I thought this session was very helpful for refugees because it
brought up issues of mental health and issues that refugees may experience in integration.
It also provided refugees with important information about where and how to seek help.
After the session ended, everyone started to walk out of the church basement and into the
parking lot discussing their daily lives, catching up, and socializing as they usually did at
the end of every session. Some of the Bhutanese refugees continued the discussion of
differences they found between American culture and “our culture.” I was not sure what
“our” culture referred to in this instance and whether they were referring to Nepalese or
Bhutanese culture. Nevertheless, during this session, the follow-up discussions, and
throughout my fieldwork, I often noticed that both the refugees and KRM workers
mentioned American culture in reference to integration, during their ESL classes, and
almost daily in everyday conversations. The frequent reference to American culture
among my informants led me to query how both the refugees and KRM workers
conceptualized American culture and how they understood the notion of becoming or
integrating into American culture.

When I asked my twelve interviewees what the phrase “American culture” meant
for them, the two groups, Bhutanese refugees and KRM staff members, had different
conceptualizations of American-ness and of integrating into the American culture. KRM
staff members perceived that the phrase American culture referred to specific values and
concepts such as individuality, independence, and self-sufficiency. These perceptions
about American culture were strengthened by the cultural orientation sessions that were
supposed to give refugees concrete knowledge and understanding of American culture.
One of the cultural orientation sessions was on the U.S. laws and regulation. A sergeant gave presentation through concrete examples on the “dos and don’ts” of the U.S. laws and policies. As the sergeant went over the rules and regulations, many times he used the phrase, “In America.” For instance, talking about personal space, the sergeant stated, “I do not know about your culture, but in America, we like to keep our distances and that doubles for cops.” In this statement, the sergeant reinforces the divide of “them” and “us”; and at the same time, his comment of personal space suggests that part of being American is to have space.

Similar notions of American-ness were also invoked in conversations with the KRM workers and their interactions with the refugees. Specifically, when explaining certain concepts to refugees, KRM workers would use phrases such as “In American culture” or “this is how things are done in America.” During interviews, when I asked my informants how they conceptualized the phrase American culture, following are few examples of the responses I received:

CS: Many times in these orientation courses, I have heard speakers and KRM staff [members] use the term in America or in “American culture” so and so happens. What does American culture mean to you and how are you relaying that message?

Christine: In general... I would say it [American culture] is fast-paced. Here people value independence, I mean describing [what] American culture is one thing and describing the important things [about American culture and what] I think a refugee needs to know is a separate thing. I would tell a refugee that there is a value placed on a nuclear family and not so much on extended family. And to pay rent on time [laughs] I don’t know.

I was unable to follow-up with Christine about why she believed that describing American culture to a refugee was or should be different from describing it to someone who was not a refugee. What were at stake if the refugees did not learn those specific concepts of American-ness that were identified by the KRM? In contrast, Bhutanese
refugees associated the phrase American culture to material and tangible items, such as clothing, food, and specific behaviors and mannerisms. The following excerpt from Arjun’s interview is reflective of how the refugees understood the American culture:

CS: Generally, what do you understand by the phrase “American culture”? If you were asked to describe the phrase, or if someone were to ask you what does American culture mean, how would you answer it?

Arjun: By the phrase American culture, I think it means, American traditions, clothing, language, way of life, religion, etc…things that people have been following the tradition for centuries. All of these things are American culture. If you look at these things, it covers, clothing style, language, food, religion, mannerisms all fall under American culture…For example, there are many differences between our culture and American culture like food is very different. Nepali food and American food are very different. Clothing style is very different. When we speak, the way we speak there and the way people speak here are different. Here, people speak politely and they are not afraid or ashamed to speak out. There, in our culture, we do not tend to speak to new people. We hesitate and are shy to speak to strangers. Traditions are different. In our culture, we believe in continuing the traditions and customs as they have been carried out for thousands of years. In American culture, it is not like that. If certain things [traditions] are bad, they will not continue that tradition and will take on only good things…they are more flexible here.

The stark difference in Christine’s and Arjun’s understandings of the phrase American culture not only reflects different cultural values, but also illustrates how the two groups understand the term culture. Christine’s understanding of culture, specifically American culture, describes values associated with being American such as independence and individuality. In contrast, Arjun’s understanding describes tangible things such as what a person eats or wears, and how a person acts. Christine’s response is representative of the KRM employees’ beliefs about American values. Arjun’s view of American culture as a mixture of different traditions and codes of behaviors and mannerisms is characteristic of other refugees’ understanding of American culture. For refugees, as evident in Arjun’s interview, integrating and belonging to American culture meant
discarding “bad” (Nepalese-Bhutanese) traditions and retaining only “good” traditions from it.\footnote{I did not follow-up on his thoughts about who decides which cultural traditions are “bad” and which ones are “good” in the process of integration.}

My observations and conversations with both the refugees and KRM staff members suggest that the ways in which the refugees integrate and learn to belong to American culture are interconnected in that the refugees become Americans by incorporating what they perceive as “good” American behaviors. For instance, Gopal believed that the Bhutanese refugees must be taught (by KRM) about how to be good (American) parents. There was an incident where an apartment management complained to the KRM that some of the refugees’ kids were being left unattended near the apartment pool. Speaking of this incident, Gopal opined, “This would not have happened if our kids behaved properly like American kids do.” He asserted that parenting was one of the things that the Bhutanese refugees needed to learn. He believed that the Bhutanese kids’ behavior was a reflection of poor parenting of the Bhutanese implying that American parents know better than their Bhutanese counterparts. He argued, therefore, that this “bad parenting” was an ominous Bhutanese cultural trait that must be discarded. Gopal’s understanding of becoming American by incorporating good behaviors is illustrative of how refugees inculcate certain values as Americans. I did not follow-up why he believed that this behavior was reflective of the Bhutanese culture rather than an isolated incident of parents not knowing the rules and regulations of the apartment complex.

Although some of the refugees shared Gopal’s belief that bad Bhutanese cultural traditions should be discarded, they also believed that certain American traditions were equally bad and should not be embraced. One afternoon in mid-July, I visited a refugee
family’s home. A group of women (mostly married with small children) who lived in that
apartment complex in neighboring buildings had gathered in the family’s home and were
talking about their children’s future growing up in the U.S. It was a two-bedroom
apartment and the main drawing room/dining room was no more than 10 by 15 ft. Two
used couches were placed next to each other on one side of the wall a few inches from the
door. Although the apartment was carpeted, beautiful rugs hid most of the fading beige
colored carpet. Three women were seated on the sofas: one was an elderly woman who
had seen her share of changes in life and two were of middle age. One woman was on the
floor; where she was sewing something. The floor was littered with pieces of cloths,
colorful threads, a large pair of scissors, and a small sewing machine. As I entered the
apartment, everyone gave a welcoming smile and one woman on the sofa moved aside to
make room for me. A small toddler ran across the apartment with a huge smile and stared
at me. Another woman from the kitchen shouted to the toddler “Namaste gara auntie lai,”
(Do Namaste – i.e. a greeting where one clasp his/her hands together in front and bow
down, to auntie – referring to me). I smiled and greeted everyone and sat on the sofa.

I asked them what they were talking about. One of the younger women, Maya,
who was in her 40s and had three children – one of whom was already a teenager, was
seated next to me on the sofa. She explained that they were talking about how American
culture is very different. Maya told me that when they (the women) had taken their kids
to a public pool a few days prior, they saw Americans swimming in the pool in their
“undergarments” (bikinis). They talked about Americans’ lack of lajja (shame). The
women, then, laughed and teased each other about what would happen if they or their
children integrated (or embraced) such “bad” American cultures and shamelessly
presented themselves in the future. They were warning each other to be careful that their children do not embrace bad American cultures. Although she was saying this as a joke, and other women laughed and talked about this encounter as a funny cultural difference, they also worried that their children would embrace such “bad” American cultural traits. They feared that their children would forget their cultural identity and become “American.”

While it was important for these women that their children integrate (i.e. speak English fluently and move upward in social/class status) into the American culture, it was equally imperative for them that their children retain their cultural identity. Many scholars of refugee resettlement studies have examined that although refugees are eager to integrate they also express a desire to maintain cultural integrity and identity (Ager 2008; Phillimore and Goodson 2008; Warriner 2007; Brettell and Sargent 2006; Feldman 2007). Ambivalences about integration and becoming American were evident in other similar conversations with the refugee women who indicated that they were aware that integration would allow them to belong to the American society; but they also did not want their children to embrace every aspect of the new culture. Such conversations with the refugees reflect the complexities of belonging both “here” (America) and “there” (Nepal/Bhutan) (Suárez-Orozco 2001; Peteet 2005).

“They have accents”: Belonging, Othering, and Language

The process of integrating into any culture is often mixed with ambivalences as demonstrated in the ethnographic example; and it is further complicated by the politics of belonging and specific mechanisms that mark groups as “the other” or outside of the dominant culture, often referred to this process as othering. Historically, language has
been used as a way to mark certain ethnic/cultural groups as the others. I observed many times in the ESL courses similar occurrences of the politics of belonging and othering through the discourse of speaking English well. Throughout the city of Lexington, many local NGOs are affiliated with KRM and offer different services to refugees and the Lexington community from ESL courses, other languages courses such as Spanish and French, computer courses, to job training and skills training courses.

To gain deeper understanding of how refugees learned American culture, I shadowed Anu, a Bhutanese youth in her early 20s, for a day. I went with her to a local organization’s office where they provided ESL course. As I conversed with the ESL teachers about the importance of learning English and of different levels of ESL courses from beginners to conversation level, one ESL teacher commented that it would be great to have an “accent reduction” class in Lexington. When I asked her what she meant by an “accent reduction course,” she clarified that many foreigners have heavy accents and Americans find it hard to understand them. Using one refugee’s accent as an example, she commented that because of this refugee’s heavy accent, “we (Americans and ESL teachers) have a hard time understanding him.” The ESL teacher continued that having an accent did not signify that the foreigners could not speak English. She asserted that an accent reduction course could help him and others like him to improve their English language skills.

This exchange illustrates the ESL teacher’s unawareness of how historically language has been used to marginalize and discriminate minority groups and how

20 The ESL teacher is a volunteer who teaches English at a local community center whose mission is to increase learning and literacy in the community. This non-profit community organization is not part of KRM, but they work in collaboration and offer ESL to refugees.
language-learning practices are linked with the politics of belonging. The suggestion of emphasizing “American” accent is indicative of how non-English speakers are excluded via the language. This exchange has a significant implication about power, privilege, and hierarchies of belonging. The ESL teacher’s reference to the refugees as “foreigners” indicates a form of exclusion and othering that distinguishes non-English speakers as the outsiders. Moreover, this exchange exemplifies that the ability to speak English not only becomes a necessity for refugees for mobility and accessing resources, but the ability to speak English “understandably” (i.e. with “American” accent) also becomes a necessity and a requirement for belonging where one’s accent is used as a measuring rubric to determine his/her American-ness. The ESL teacher’s belief illustrates that certain mechanisms of exclusion continue to shape refugees’ understanding of what it means to be an American – in this case, being American implied speaking English without accents.

Doris Warriner (2007) argues that the English-language proficiency does not always translate into economic self-sufficiency or upward social mobility. However, I have observed the KRM workers frequently emphasize the importance of English language skills and encourage –to a certain extent mandate –refugees to attend the ESL courses. It is problematical to say, as the KRM staff members often argue, that requiring the learning of English-language is in the refugees’ best interests to ensure job security and gives them a chance for social upward mobility because this argument has implications of a form of cultural hegemony. However, it is equally wrong to deny critical resources, such as the ESL courses, to refugees because lack of English language skills becomes a barrier for refugees to effectively communicate their needs and to find employment. Therefore, it is critical that both ESL teachers and KRM employees
recognize that teaching English to communicate is different from teaching to speak English with an American accent. The latter becomes a tool of exclusion and shapes refugees’ conception of American-ness. For instance, many older refugees, who were above the age of 65 and did not speak English, told me that they did not work and their socialization was limited to other Nepali speakers. For this elderly group, the requirement of attending ESL classes, which were generally designed for working adults, became a burden. In contrast, other adults indicated a desire to speak English fluently so that they would be able to communicate and find jobs. For them, learning English language was a necessity for survival.

Informal conversations with refugees further demonstrated that they desired to speak English fluently and have a conversation beyond simple greetings. For instance, Maya expressed a desire to read, write, and speak English well. She was aware of the cultural, social, and political capital that knowing the language held. Maya’s interest in learning English was not unique among the Bhutanese refugees, and particularly among the women of her age group. Most of the middle-aged Bhutanese women were not literate in either Nepali or English. For them, it was crucial to learn English in order to find jobs, particularly in a suburban town like Lexington. Although she did not have any formal educational training, Maya knew some of the English words that she had picked up in the refugee camp. A smart and quick learner, Maya quickly picked up the language in her ESL classes. However, she was apprehensive and dismissive about her ability to

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21 Many women indicated that they never went to school. This is exemplary of women’s marginalization due to gender biases and discrimination.

22 In comparison to metropolitan cities where ability to speak English is not necessarily a requirement to get a job, in Lexington, the ability to communicate in English is a necessity and a requirement. According to one refugee, she was turned away from applying for a job because she does not speak English.
speak English well. I was unable to discover the reason behind her apparent lack of self-confidence. Other Bhutanese refugees also shared similar lack of self-confidence in their ability to speak English fluently.

Anu, who dropped out of school in secondary school, indicated similar desire of speaking English fluently. Compared to Maya, she could read and write in English better because she had attended grade school set-up by the UNHCR in the refugee camps. She also understood and spoke much better than she gave herself the credit. Yet, she was apprehensive and lacked confidence in her ability to speak the language. In fact, her timidity was over-powering to the point that she felt that her language skills were completely inadequate. When I asked her about her shyness, she said that she worried she did not speak as well as the Americans and that they [Americans] would not understand her.

Despite clear evidence of language ability, refugees, like Anu, Maya, and even those refugees who had attained higher post-secondary education, felt that their English language skills were inadequate due to lack of “American” accents and limited knowledge of colloquial phrases. Arguably, refugees’ lack of self-confidence and apprehension about their language skills reveal their internalization of the politics of othering and suggest that for refugees becoming American meant speaking English fluently. Lack of language skills not only creates barriers in terms of articulation and communication of ideas/concepts, but, as these ethnographical examples demonstrate, also reinforces feelings of exclusion and marginalization particularly for non-English speakers. These examples exemplify how the Bhutanese refugees as the newly settled
citizen-subjects are taught to belong and integrate into American culture; and simultaneously, they are excluded via the language.

**Policing “Good” and “Bad” Behaviors**

Becoming American is not only shaped by learning to speak English well, but regulation of refugees’ behaviors to reflect American values also heavily influences how refugees learn to become Americans. In a way, the notion of Americanization is inculcated into refugees through policing their specific behaviors that institutions have identified as good or bad behaviors. For instance, during one of the staff meetings, Christine noted that KRM had received a complaint from an apartment manager that the refugees (Bhutanese) were not complying with apartment policies – refugees kids were playing in the swimming pool unattended by adult. Another staff member at the meeting suggested, “It would be better if someone could scare them [refugees], so that they will listen and comply with the policies.” Jill added that perhaps Dee could set up a meeting with the refugees to talk about these issues. That person joked that the refugees were scared of Dee because she was firm and serious. Dee was one of the older staff members who have had many years of experience working at KRM. Without doubt, she was sturdy, firm in her mannerisms, and stoically professional in her approach to refugees. Although the staff members were only joking, it was a problematically statement about scaring refugees, who already were frightened and apprehensive of institutions. The disciplining of the refugees through fear tactics illustrates how institutions as the KRM police refugees. No one thought of speaking with the Bhutanese refugees to understand the context of the complaint and to get their perspective of the story. It was automatically assumed that the refugees were wrong and thus their behaviors needed to be corrected.
This ethnographic example is illustrative of how refugees are infantilized through constant regulation of their activities.

In addition to KRM, other institutions also policed Bhutanese refugees’ behaviors. For instance, one time I accompanied Kamala to the health department because she was having abdominal pain. She was nervous and worried about what might be wrong with her. I tried to appease her nervousness. Shortly, a young residence came in and instructed Kamala to lie down on her back. In her nervousness, Kamala lied on her side. The doctor repeated the instruction and I translated. She then rolled over and lied on her stomach. Holding Kamala by her arms this time, the doctor helped her to turn on her back. The doctor then began to examine Kamala. She put pressure on Kamala’s right side of the abdomen and instructed to let her know if the pressure began to hurt and to point out where exactly was the pain. As the doctor pressed on her right side, Kamala answered that it did not hurt on that side, but on the left pointing to her left side of the abdomen. The doctor replied that she was asking only about the right side and not the left, adding, “We will get there soon, but for now, does it hurt here?” Taking this question as a cue to relay her concerns, Kamala started narrating the time she first experienced pain in her abdomen – the first time was during her second pregnancy almost 12 years ago. Then, she continued that it did not hurt until very recently like a year or two before arriving to the U.S.

As Kamala continued her story of her pain, the doctor continued her examination without so much as a nod of acknowledgement to Kamala. Using her stethoscope, she listened to Kamala and asked her to keep quiet. Kamala stopped for a while, and as the doctor shifted from front side to Kamala’s backside still listening to her lungs, Kamala
started narrating again. It was clear that the doctor was not interested in hearing Kamala’s history and narrative about her illness. The doctor stopped me many times in mid-sentence as I was translating to ask me to tell Kamala that she only wanted an exact answer of what was being asked. After a few times, the doctor stopped her examination, and, in what I perceived to be a rather condescending tone, told Kamala to give only a yes or no response. The doctor asserted that she would do most of the talking, not Kamala. As an advocate for the refugees, I decided not to translate the doctor’s condescending instructions, and instead, I told Kamala that, for the sake of time, she should just give short answers like a yes or no response and to not disturb the doctor.

It is understandable that doctors are pressed for time and overburdened by many patients. However, I wondered how effectively a doctor would be able to treat patients, if she/he was not willing to listen to the patients’ stories. Furthermore, the discrepancy between Kamala’s and the doctor’s perceptions about the importance of detailed narrative illustrates a structural and a cultural disjuncture. Anne Fadiman (1997) illustrates the power of structural disjuncture that function to “Americanize” a Hmong refugee family. Problematizing certain actions of the doctors based on their perceived notions of non-compliance, Fadiman’s ethnographic account illustrates the effects of cultural disconnect on both, the refugees and the doctors sides. She questions the doctors’ role in policing refugees.

In Kamala’s case, the doctor’s actions could be perceived as policing her behavior. Kamala apologized for not understanding the instructions, explained that she was only used to the Nepali way of doing things when visiting a doctor, and did not know how it was done in America. Refugees’ understanding of American culture is shaped
through their encounters with different policing (governing) entities, such as the medical doctor as illustrated by this example. It is important to note, however, that regulating refugees’ behaviors does not mean that refugees are passive objects or sites upon which an institutional power enacts. In fact, Kamala’s frequent questioning and her long drawn out answers, despite the doctor’s repeated instructions to give a yes or no response, could also be interpreted as a form of resistance, albeit an unintentional one.

Cultural differences play a significant role in the interaction between Kamala and her physician, and some of the misunderstandings could possibly be due to the cultural differences. However, to merely state that the doctor’s attitude and actions towards Kamala were simply a result of cultural disconnect reduces the complex issues of social hierarchies and structural power. Ong (2003) argues that institutional entities project cultural values, codes, and rules in the process of learning to belong or “integrate,” and of making refugees into “good” citizen-subjects. In shaping refugees’ conceptualizations of American-ness, the refugee body becomes a site where neoliberal notions of good/bad and deserving/undeserving subjects are inculcated. In this ethnographic example, the doctor’s strict instructions to Kamala reinforced the message of “this is how things are done in America” where the doctors’ and patients’ roles were clearly marked. Thus, part of being American was understanding and performing the designated role of a compliant patient. There is a gap in the literature on how health care institutions become sites that reinforce “conceptions about cultural difference and ‘deservingness’ of public benefits are elaborated and deployed” (Horton 2004). This ethnographic example attempts to contribute to the body of literature that examines how medical institutions have the power to objectify and medicalize the body.
Reproducing Neoliberal Subjects: “Self-Sufficient” and “Independent” Bodies

KRM staff members frequently mentioned they expected refugees to be “self-sufficient,” and “independent” – the two terms were often used interchangeably. For instance, one Monday morning when I walked into the KRM office house, I heard Kamala’s voice coming from upstairs where all the offices were. Few refugees were waiting in the first floor. As I walked up the stairs, I saw Kamala come out of one office (from Jill’s) and enter the adjacent one to Anne’s office. In broken English, she was trying to convince Anne to either accompany her or help her get to the health department. Kamala and her three children, who had arrived in the US only ten days prior, were supposed to go to a health department for their follow-up appointments. Due to limited staff members in the office, she was told to go by herself. However, she felt that a KRM employee should accompany her and her children to the clinic because she did not know how to get there. Going from office to office, she was trying to find someone who would sympathize with her and take her. Upon seeing me, Kamala relayed her concerns and asked me to request KRM staff members on her behalf about helping her get to the health department. I conveyed the message to Jill, who responded, “By now the family should know how to get there as they have been there before, and they should also know how to take the bus.” I asked Jill why she believed that the family could go by themselves when Kamala insisted that she did not know the way. Jill replied that she had taken Kamala twice to the same health clinic; and therefore, she should know how to take a bus and get there. She added, “If she [Kamala] did not know which bus to take, she could always ask the bus driver with the help of her children.” I asked Jill rhetorically if living in the US for ten days was enough time for someone to become independent and know how to take
public transportations, especially if that person was not used to these facilities. After pondering on my question, Jill concurred that perhaps ten days was not enough to gain confidence to venture on one’s own. She, then, asked me to take them. I acquiesced and took the family to the health clinic in my car.

Because health examinations may be scheduled in any one of the six local county health departments in Lexington, getting to these places becomes a difficult task for newly arrived refugees who are unfamiliar with the healthcare system. Although it is a simple task for locals and people with cars, even a simple task can be difficult and a source of anxiety for refugees – an issue that was often overlooked by the KRM staff members. For families with small children, these simple tasks become taxing. Moreover, if refugees cannot rely on KRM for simple tasks as getting help to get to a place, then, for what can they rely? One must also ask, who decides when KRM’s responsibilities begin and end? This ethnographic example is illustrative of how neoliberal logic of individual responsibility is often used. Rather than addressing the structural and institutional barriers, such as language barriers, cultural differences, and transportation issues, refugees are held accountable for their inability to overcome these structural barriers. On one hand, refugees are repeatedly told that part of becoming American is to incorporate American values of self-sufficiency and independence – i.e. finding a job, doing things on their own. On the other hand, they are not given adequate tools to become self-sufficient. Such paradoxes produce an environment where the organization’s bureaucratic management embedded in neoliberal logic becomes a hindrance for integrating and becoming American.
To get a deeper understanding of how KRM employees defined independence and self-sufficiency, I asked Nancy about KRM’s goals. She opined, “Everything that we do is toward the goal of early self-sufficiency. Early employment and early self-sufficiency [are] like the biggest goals of the refugee resettlement program in the US.” She defined self-sufficiency as, “Paying their own rent… [being] off of state welfare.” Although from her response, it seemed to me that Nancy had a clear idea of what self-sufficiency entailed, when I further probed into the subject, the concept was less clear. Her idea of self-sufficiency was for refugees to obtain a job and become financially secured. Her response did not address the question of whether financial independence was the only measure of self-sufficiency and independence of refugees.

Unlike Nancy, Christine perceived self-sufficiency as a complex concept that cannot be simplified as merely gaining financial independence. She defined it as:

Well, financial stability, so yeah getting a job is a big part of that and functioning in a society…being content with what you are doing, who you are, being here…it is not just financial self-sufficiency or financial stability that makes a person self-sufficient. I am thinking of one client in particular from Iraq. She has been here over a year now with her family and they are working, they are paying their bills, their daughter is in high school. But she is still in our office, I would say, on a weekly basis at least, [to get] help with different things. [For example} She wants to go home and visit [her] family; she cries because she is home sick or does not feel well and is sick…that sort of thing. I think that also has little bit to do with personality, you know…I guess self-sufficiency takes a long time and it is a pretty complicated thing.

Christine perceived the Iraqi woman’s repeated request for help from KRM in non-financial issues as being dependent. For her, self-sufficiency and independence did not only refer to financial independence but also to emotional independence. I was unable to get a clear understanding of what she meant by emotional independence. Nonetheless, the two interviews raise an importation question of the implications of labeling a refugee as
dependent based on ambiguous understandings of the terms: self-sufficiency and independence. The emphasis placed on these two terms as American values despite ambiguities surrounding the concept suggests that the concept of independence is merely rhetorical and bureaucratic exercise.

Christine’s conclusion that the Iraqi woman was “dependent” resonated with the phrase “culture of dependency” – a phrase that KRM staff members often used. I have witnessed the KRM staff members use the phrase “culture of dependency” in reference to refugees’ supposed hesitancy/refusal and/or lack of ability (in KRM’s perception) to become independent. During an informal conversation with Jill at the KRM office, she commented that because the refugees were used to having things done for them in the refugee camps, they expected the same kind of support when they came to the U.S. She asserted, “Because refugees had been dependent on NGOs’ support in the refugee camps, they were used to being dependent on NGOs for their daily rations of food and clothing.” The logic of culture of dependency resonate with Oscar Lewis’s (1996) “culture of poverty” theory that is based on neoliberal argument of deserving and undeserving subjects.23

In this case, the culture of dependency logic blames the refugees for their supposed dependence on NGOs, thus, reproducing the (il)logic of neoliberalism. If refugees are blamed for their supposed dependence and lack of integration, then, how are independence and successful integration into American culture defined? How does one measure “too much” of assistance? Jill’s comment demonstrates that KRM’s bureaucratic

23 Oscar Lewis’s 1966 “culture of poverty” theory blamed poor people’s reliance on public assistance such as welfare as a product of poor people’s cultural practices. The theory comes draws on neoliberal logic of personal accountability and responsibility and pathologizes the poor ignoring the history of marginalizations and racialization processes that perpetuate the vicious cycle of poverty.
power is wrapped in a neoliberal logic of deserving-ness that refugees often have to navigate and negotiate. Shrouded within this bureaucracy is the legitimization of KRM’s authority over the lives of refugees. Harrell-Bond (2002) argues, the “maintenance of these roles [the helpers and those who need the help] is independent of the actual needs or abilities of the refugees…” (2002:57). Insistence on refugees becoming independent and self-sufficient on KRM’s terms legitimizes the organization’s authority and justifies its actions.

This chapter began with a critical analysis of the Bhutanese refugees’ and the KRM staff members’ conceptualizations of “American culture.” In examining this concept, I explored how specific mechanisms of integration are tied with the politics of belonging and othering. Examining the significance of these mechanisms allows for understanding of how the concept of Americanization or becoming American is reproduced through notions of deservingness /undeservingness that also render refugees as good/bad citizen-subjects. These mechanisms of integration and the politics of belonging illustrate how institutional power and specific notions of American culture are intertwined in a complex web of bureaucracy that shapes refugees’ understanding of what it means to be an American.

Furthermore, the frameworks of integration and Americanization provide a useful analytical tool in examining the routine management of refugees by institutions, such as KRM and medical institutions. They also reveal how notions of American culture and bureaucratic power reproduce social inequalities and hierarchies of power. As Rosaldo argues, “Culture and power have become intertwined in a world and in institutional settings where diverse groups, themselves internally diverse, interact and seek full
enfranchisement and social justice under conditions of inequality” (1993:xix).

Problematizing the institutional approaches to integration embedded on neoliberalism, I have highlighted that the neoliberal logic assumes refugees’ individual responsibility and accountability. In doing so, this logic allows institutions to shift their responsibility of integration onto the refugees, who, in turn, incorporate and internalize these neoliberal American values into their daily lives. With hopes for better future and the promise of inclusion into the American culture, Americanization becomes a technique to either incorporate the refugees as “good” citizens or to marginalize them as undeserving subjects. In the process, notions of successful integration become absorbed into the framework of historical practices of racial and ethnic classifications that separate minorities into good and bad citizens.
“After coming here, we have high hopes that our children will be able to study that their lives will be better here. Two of my daughters are in school and I am happy about that. My youngest will join school from this August month. Everything is good. We came here hoping for better future for our children. As for us parents, we don’t have any hope, we don’t have hope of returning to our country. There was no hope of repatriation, and so we thought that coming here would at least ensure that our children’s future would be better. We don’t know where we will end up.”

~ Tara (Bhutanese refugee)

Having lived in a state of limbo for the past 18 years in the refugee camp in Nepal, for Tara, being resettled in the “promised land” brings hope for her children’s future even if that means compromising her present – i.e. making peace with the uncertainties about her future and learning to deal with the bureaucratic hurdles. Tara’s hope for a better future for her children is illustrative of the Bhutanese refugees’ perseverance and optimism in the face of hardships. Unfortunately, her comment also reveals the sad reality that the decision to resettle and persevere these hardships is the result of lack of viable options available for refugees. As Tara stated, “There was no hope of repatriation, and so we thought coming here would at least ensure that our children’s future will be better.” When I asked what she meant by the phrase “no hope,” Tara clarified that there was no hope for adults to get higher education in the U.S. or for a chance for upward social mobility. She indicated that because the adults were too old to join high school and not literate enough to join college, there was no hope for moving up the social ladder through better employment opportunities implying that only through education this upward mobility was possible. I suggested to Tara that she could get a General Educational Development (GED) – a degree equivalent of a high school diploma. She insisted that getting GED would be very difficult if not impossible because
many adults, like her, were not literate in English. Other refugees during informal conversations shared similar feelings of not having hopes for upward social mobility.

Refugees’ conscious decision to resettle, despite being aware of the difficulties they would come across, illustrates that refugees are not passive victims as they are often portrayed. Refugees actively seek ways to improve their situation. A majority of the adult Bhutanese refugees told me that their decision to apply for resettlement was primarily based on a hope that coming to the U.S. would give their children a chance for better opportunities and a secured life. Many refugees insisted that after living in the refugee camps for almost two decades since the early 1990s, the offer to resettle in one of the developed nations seemed like a better option and a chance to eliminate their constant fear of insecurity and indeterminacy of their statelessness. Recognition of refugees’ agency and their autonomous decision to resettle is important. However, it is also crucial not to be blinded by romantic positivism.

Romanticism of refugees’ agency obscures the limited options they faced while living at the margins. Whether it was living in a constant fear of being discovered by the colleagues as Gopal talked about the times when he and his brother hid their refugee status to work in Nepal or as Gopal stated “living a life in a limbo” in refugee camps, refugees’ narratives of camp life depict a state of liminality. However, drawing on the ethnographical data on resettlement, this thesis highlighted that refugees’ situation, though it is much better than in the camps, are still full of disappointments and frustrations in their host communities. Whether it is with regards to employment and financial instability, navigating bureaucracies of power, or their experiences of othering, deskilling of labor, language and cultural barriers, the ethnographical data illustrated the
challenges and limitations that refugees are experiencing in resettlement. They do not necessarily view third country resettlement as the best option for them, but the best for their children’s future. Moreover, this study also argued that not only the refugees experienced limitations and challenges in resettlement, but also humanitarian workers equally were impacted by the burden of resettlement. Through ethnographical data, I illustrated that larger structural forces shape humanitarian work and affect the relationship between the refugees and the local NGOs like KRM.

Anthropologists have studied the difficulties and complexities that refugees experience in third country resettlement (Holtzman 2008; Keles 2008; Ager 2008; Shandy 2007). Without doubt, resettlement has a transforming effect in the lives of refugees in terms of providing stability, security, access to resources, and opportunities for “better” life in the host (often Western) nations. However, as my in-depth ethnographic research illustrated, resettlement is a messy process and more research is needed to understand the power relations between the refugees and NGOs, and within the organizational structure of the NGOs. This study has opened up a space to address some of the contributions that anthropology could make for both studying refugee resettlement in the context of the U.S. racialization and Americanization processes and in designing and implementing effective programs that do not reinforce unequal power dynamics.

The data chapters demonstrated specific mechanisms of asymmetrical power that often exist in resettlement. Highlighting the paradoxes that characterize resettlement, the chapters argued that the structural discontinuities place in question a humanitarian organization’s position as apolitical and value-neutral. Drawing on ethnographical data and using the theoretical frameworks of the politics of humanitarianism, Foucault’s
micro-politics of power, and Ong’s citizen-subjects, this study analyzed the following research questions: What are the structural discontinuities in resettlement? Are the expectations and ambitions of KRM different from those of the Bhutanese refugees? If so, how are refugees impacted by these differences?

Exploring the differences in the expectations between the KRM staff members and refugees, chapter two examined the structural discontinuities in resettlement. Highlighting the context in which discrepancies in expectations occur, I argued that these differences are embedded within an unequal structure of power and privilege that reify asymmetrical donor-recipient relationship between the two groups. The asymmetrical donor-recipient relationship is illustrative of what Marcel Mauss argues, “There are no free gifts; gift cycles engage persons in permanent commitments that articulate the dominant institutions” (1990:ix). The rice example illuminated that the humanitarian “gifts” of KRM were not free and without obligations. It also showed how unequal relationship facilitated mistrust between the two groups. Moreover, similar examples of surveillance such as keeping track of refugees’ job statuses demonstrate the paradoxes in resettlement. The framework of the politics of humanitarianism is useful in contextualizing and analyzing how such paradoxes further complicate resettlement.

Drawing on ethnographic data, I demonstrated that the routine work of the KRM staff members resembles what Foucault (1980) calls the micro-politics of power. As DeTorrente (2004) argues, humanitarian work is politicized and influenced by larger structures of power. KRM’s actions must be contextualized within a larger political and institutional structure of power that place local NGOs in paradoxical positions. These contradictions reproduce ambivalence, frustrations, and inconsistencies in the way local
NGOs like KRM manage resettlement. For one, as ethnographic examples illustrated, the KRM employees’ routine bureaucratic practices and actions rendered the organization as a governing body and obscured its role and responsibilities. Second, KRM’s bureaucratic practices not only regulated refugees’ behaviors, but also constructed how the refugees understood the notion of what it means to be an American.

Demonstrating the mechanisms that constructed refugees’ understanding of “American-ness,” I argued that institutions essentialized American culture and reinforced the politics of othering. Through interviews of KRM employees and observations of their interactions with the refugees, I illustrated that notions of American-ness are embedded in a neo-liberal logic of “deserving” and “undeserving” subjects. Therefore, I argued that the process of Americanization has become a tool through which institutions, such as KRM and health clinics, defined the terms and conditions within which the refugees must integrate (assimilate). Aihwa Ong’s (2003) theory of citizen-subjects was useful to contextualize how the process of integration transformed the refugees into would-be citizens and subjects of bureaucratic institutions. Furthermore, I argued that KRM employees’ use of the phrase self-sufficiency and independence in reference to successful integration inculcated into refugees the notion of what it meant to become Americans. At the same time, KRM’s constant surveillance and regulation of refugees’ behaviors illuminated that the intertwining of institutional power and KRM’s specific notions of American culture shaped refugees’ understanding of American-ness.

In analyzing the resettlement of Bhutanese refugees, my ethnographic study illustrated that resettlement is a messy and unsettling process that is full of paradoxes and complexities. There is not a simple template or formulae that would make resettlement
smooth. Moreover, it answers Barbara Harrell-Bond (2002) question, “Can humanitarian work with refugees be humane?” that humanitarian work is not necessarily always humane. Even with the best interest and intentions, any type of humanitarian work involving refugees is politicized in that larger structural and institutional forces will influence how humanitarian work is delivered.

**Recommendations and Directions for Future Research**

One of the contributions my work could make is to show the impact of ambiguities and discrepancies in dissemination of information in resettlement. For instance, the ambiguities and inconsistencies, such as the issue of how funding is allocated, whether cultural orientation course is a requirement, and whether the KRM employees are responsible for finding jobs for the refugees contribute to mistrust and antagonization between the refugees and KRM employees. I would recommend having a clear communication with the refugees and addressing these ambiguities and inconsistencies. This would not only resolve any issue and misunderstandings, but give due credence to the KRM employees for their hard work. For instance, one of the biggest miscommunication was the expectation of finding jobs. If the KRM employees clarified that the refugees had been misinformed in the refugee camps about local NGOs finding jobs, this would reduce refugees’ disappointments and frustrations and open up a space to discuss other misunderstandings that may be occurring.

Another recommendation is to have available a list of culturally appropriate food. The example of the rice incident between Kamala and Jill illustrates that having this list of culturally appropriate and necessary food would avoid suspicions between the two. It was not that Jill wanted the family to go hungry, but did not understand the cultural
importance of rice, the main staple, for Bhutanese and Nepalese. In addition, it would be helpful if KRM gives anonymous surveys to refugees at the end of every session of the cultural orientation course. This will help to identify which information in the course is helpful and how effective are these courses. I would also recommend taking a general anonymous poll of the refugees’ views on the overall effectiveness and usefulness of the cultural orientation course. This will help reduce ambiguities that the refugees may have but were afraid to bring it up; and it will give a good feedback to the KRM employees about their services.

In conclusion, this study adds to the anthropology of refugee literature by exploring the question of how structural discontinuities and processes of integration shape the politics in the making and unmaking of the refugees as Americans. Future studies on refugee resettlement could focus on the impact of immigration policies and racialization processes on refugees as they integrate in the developed nations. History of immigration and the politics of belonging/exclusion unravel the intricate ways that the state maintains social hierarchies among different racial and ethnic groups through modes of surveillance and regulations (Loescher and Scalan 1986). The social hierarchies define who belongs and who does not and influence humanitarian work as was evident in KRM’s contradictory bureaucratic management of refugees. The contradictions render humanitarian work as, what Loescher and Scalan (1986) calls, a “calculated kindness.”

Future studies could also focus on the politics of calculated humanitarianism at higher structural level – i.e. focusing on the role of a state in resettlement. As Lucia McSpadden argues, “Research with refugees must begin with the active acknowledgment of the power of the state within the experience of the persons who are the focus of our
work” (1998:148). Echoing McSpadden’s argument, future studies could problematize and investigate the power of a state and explore its plurality at the junctures in smaller apparatuses. Conceptualization of state power as an abstract omnipotent force does little in understanding how state power works at everyday micro levels. Analysis of the rationalities and reasoning behind a state’s decisions to grant asylum will help to address questions such as: Who decides which Bhutanese refugees will be resettled to a third country? If a state is not capable of fully supporting refugees due to lack of funding, then, why does the state continue to resettle more refugees only to shift the burden of support onto local NGOs who are already stretched thin?

Anthropological study of the resettlement of the Bhutanese refugees highlighted the nuances and complexities of third-country resettlement. Ethnographic data illuminated that resettlement is neither a smooth transition nor a simple matter of moving people from one place to another. Rather, the issues of power relations, the local and global politics of inclusion/exclusion, the politicization of humanitarianism, mistrusts of and by the institutions, and the inconsistencies and ambiguities analyzed in this study illustrated that resettlement is an unsettling process. The unsettling complexities and politics in resettlement raise the question of whether refugee resettlement hailed as the “solution” is nothing more than a political gimmick of the states involved. The study highlighted the intricate web of politics and power in humanitarianism revealing that a state’s inadequate support to local humanitarian organization made resettlement a “calculated kindness,” and a project of managing displacement rather than helping refugees rebuild their lives. In sum, then, the politics of humanitarianism continue to negatively impact the refugees even after resettlement.
### APPENDIX 1 - BASIC DEMOGRAPHY OF INTERVIEWED INFORMANTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID(^{24})</th>
<th>Interview Date</th>
<th>Source(^{25})</th>
<th>Sex/Gender</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BR 1</td>
<td>06/01/09</td>
<td>Surya</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR 2</td>
<td>06/21/09</td>
<td>Arjun</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR 3</td>
<td>06/23/09</td>
<td>Gopal</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR 4</td>
<td>06/24/09</td>
<td>Bimla</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR 5</td>
<td>07/07/09</td>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR 6</td>
<td>07/09/09</td>
<td>Anu</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR 7</td>
<td>07/27/09</td>
<td>Bir</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR 8</td>
<td>08/01/09</td>
<td>Tara</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KRM 1</td>
<td>06/04/09</td>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KRM 2</td>
<td>06/22/09</td>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KRM 3</td>
<td>07/21/09</td>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KRM 4</td>
<td>08/05/09</td>
<td>Christine</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{24}\) BR = Bhutanese Refugees  KRM = Kentucky Refugee Ministries Employees  
\(^{25}\) All names are pseudonyms
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Haines, David W

Harrell-Bond, Barbara

Harrell-Bond, B.E. and E. Voutira

Harvey, David
Hinton, Rachel

Holman, Philip A.

Holtzman, Jon D

Horton, Sarah

Hutt, Michael


Human Rights Watch

Hyndman, Jennifer

Hynes, Patricia

Keles, Fethi

Lewis, Oscar


Loescher, Gill and John A. Scanlan

Luibhéeid, Eithne

Malkkii, Lisa


Mauss, Marcel

McKinnon, Sara L.

McSpadden, Lucia Ann

Ong, Aihwa

Pandolfi, Mariella

Peteet, Julie  

Phillimore, Jenny and Lisa Goodson  

Redfield, Peter  

Rosaldo, Renato  

Shandy, Diana  


Taylor, Lance  

Ticktin, Miriam  

Tourism Council of Bhutan  

United Nations Human Commission for Refugees (UNHCR)  

Warriner, Doris S

Williamson, James

Zucker, Norman
VITA

Christie Shrestha

Date and Place of Birth:
15 April 1982. Kathmandu, Nepal

Educational Institutions Attended and Degrees Awarded:
Berea College (2000 – 2004), B.A.
George Washington University (2004 -2006), M.P.H.

Professional Positions Held:
Teaching Assistant: Anthropology 160 (Fall 2009 – Fall 2010)
Clinical Research Coordinator, University of Kentucky (Oct 2006 – Jun 2008)

Scholastic and Professional Honors:
Del Jones Award, Society for Applied Anthropology (April 2010)
Bonnie Cox Award, Dept. of Gender & Women’s Studies, University of Kentucky (Spring 2010)
Lyndon T Johnson Fellowship, The Graduate School, University of Kentucky (Fall 2008- Spring 2011)
Merit Scholarship, School of Public Health & Health Services, George Washington University (Fall 2006)