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# The adolescent refugee experience: cultural attitudes of high school Burmese refugees living in Iowa

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THE ADOLESCENT REFUGEE EXPERIENCE:  
CULTURAL ATTITUDES OF HIGH SCHOOL BURMESE REFUGEES LIVING IN IOWA

A Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Designation  
University Honors

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Date

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## **Abstract**

This research seeks to explore the experience of a group of high school refugee students who currently reside in Waterloo, Iowa. At home, the Burmese refugee high school students are surrounded by a rich Burmese culture; they interact with the Burmese language, food, and family. In school, they are surrounded by American systems; English is the only accepted language, and American pop culture is inescapable. With a growing number of refugees entering the country, it is vital to understand the experience and perceptions of developing young adults. Better understanding will facilitate in giving schools and other services tools to equip young refugees with a strengthened feeling of empowerment and a better understanding of resources. Research will be based on approximately twelve open-ended interviews with male and female teens to gain an understanding of their perception of themselves within multiple cultures and systems.

## Introduction

Recent world events have brought to light the international plight of refugees. It is filled with insecurity, uncertainty, danger, and fear. While this is an important story to be told, refugees residing in the United States have a story of their own that is often overlooked. While they have gained refuge from immediate threats, they carry with them the memories of a former home and must adjust to a different life. Children, inherently shaped by the environment around them, are particularly vulnerable to this tumultuous refugee experience.

Iowa, a state known to be home to corn and hog farms, is also home to communities of Burmese refugees. Waterloo, Iowa hosts one of these communities. Here, Burmese families find themselves amidst an American culture full of societal expectations and norms about which they attempt to learn. This is particularly true for adolescents enrolled in the public school system. At home, the Burmese refugee high school students are surrounded by a rich Burmese culture; they interact with the Burmese language, food, and family. In school, they are surrounded by American systems; English is the only accepted language, and American pop culture is inescapable. With one foot in each culture, they experience a unique duality.

The synthesis of this research occurred during interactions with high school Burmese refugees in Waterloo, Iowa. As an American, I couldn't help but be fascinated by the rich bank of culture that the students have, and in interacting with them wanted to pepper them with questions. I was surprised by varied responses, and by the nonchalantness with which they spoke of their colorful traditions. This led me to wonder if these high schoolers, who are being assaulted with American pop culture in every way at school, value their home culture. One comment, in particular, opened my eyes to the fact that they may have conflicting views. A girl I was working on homework with turned to me, touched my arm, and said, "Such pretty white

skin". "But you have such pretty skin too!" I responded, to which she replied, "Oh no, mine is too dark." This led me to realize that there are many more confusions and thoughts and connections happening that I, as a person who has never been uprooted from my culture, cannot assume to understand.

This guiding experience resulted in the questions: What do adolescent refugees consider as "strengths" within their home culture? What aspects of adolescent refugees' home culture are perceived as barriers/challenges to adjusting to life in the U.S.? How do adolescent refugees imagine their future? Do adolescent refugees value and measure their life using aspects of their home culture or aspects from American culture? With a growing number of refugees entering the country, it is vital to understand the experience and perceptions of developing young adults. Better understanding will facilitate in giving schools and other services tools to equip young refugees with a strengthened feeling of empowerment and a better understanding of resources. In order to create a better understanding of adolescent refugees living in the community, this study seeks to investigate how adolescents perceive and feel about their current state of living within multiple spheres of culture.

## **Literature Review**

### **Burmese Refugees**

The life of a refugee is one defined by fear and flight. This flight of refugees has become a world-wide phenomenon. The United Nations formally defined a refugee as someone who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (UNHCR, 2010, para. 1). In most cases, the prosecutor or perpetrator of

oppression is the refugee's own country of origin. Movement is a matter of survival, a matter that affects the world as a whole. The year 2014 claimed the highest displacement numbers on record, with 19.5 million refugees, 51% of which were under the age of 18, the highest percentage in more than a decade (UNHCR, 2015).

The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, commonly known as Burma, is a nation state in southeast Asia. The country is in the midst of an ethnic strife that has been labeled as "one of the world's longest running civil wars" (South & Jolliffe, 2015, p. 4), spanning more than six decades. Violations of human rights, as identified by Amnesty International, include harassment for oppositional views, arbitrary arrest, torture, imprisonment, extrajudicial executions, among various other horrors (Amnesty International, 2015). This has led hundreds of thousands of Burmese to leave the country for reasons defined by the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights: physical security, prospects for stable livelihoods, access to services and amenities, perceptions of the peace process, influences from various political actors and authorities (UNHR, 2015). A common solution for many is the search for refuge at a refugee camp, often in a neighboring country. More than 120,000 people have sought refuge in camps in Thailand, often located along the national border between Thailand and Myanmar (UNHCR, 2015).

Oceans across from their country of origin, some Burmese refugees have found a new home in Waterloo, Iowa. The United States has settled about 70,000 Burmese refugees. Iowa has settled over 1,000 refugees, as well as over 4,000 secondary migrants. In Iowa, this is the largest ethnic group resettled, and has been for the past five years (Ethnic Minorities of Burma Advocacy and Resource Center, 2015). Understanding where this population originates, and the struggles they have endured is vital to understanding how they experience life in Iowa. We also

must strive to understand how the mixing of these contrasting cultural experiences is manifested in their attitude and perceptions, and their ability to adapt successfully to a new socio-cultural environment.

### **Refugee Experience**

While there is a significant gap in the literature of refugees living in America, particularly those from Asian countries, some literature has begun to explore the multiple aspects of the refugee transition and their effects on the individual. It is generally agreed that refugees offer a unique set of skills. Pragmatic knowledge has been developed by years of exposure to war, survival, and resiliency. However, the uniqueness of these experiences may at first seem to fit awkwardly within the bounds of a differently arranged culture (Gahungu, Gahungu, & Luseno, 2011).

For the high school refugees in Waterloo, Iowa, adjusting to American culture may seem a daunting task. The life of the adolescent is inherently in transition, as teens adjust to the passing from child to adult. In addition to that unsteady identity transition, adolescent refugees must also undertake the transition from one culture to a completely different culture. For those attending American school, one foot is in one culture, with the other in a contrasting culture. While this stage is very fragile, it is also crucial in self-development. While refugee youth exist within the larger macrosystem of the host society, their exposure is more limited than what an adult, who must navigate more logistical and technical aspects of the society, may experience. Their experiences come through a filter, and the microsystems of home and school are two daily aspects of adolescent life that highly impact their growth and development (Yohani, 2010). It is also necessary to explore the processes through which refugees experience and interpret the systems around them.

## **Acculturation and Self-identity**

The processes through which incorporation occurs can be recognized as acculturation. Berry (2005) offered a definition as, “the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (p. 698). The key aspect of this process is the point of contact or connection between the two cultures. There does not need to be a loss of one’s former culture, or loss of cultural identity. Many contemporary concepts consider acculturation as a bi-dimensional process in which individuals selectively pick and choose aspects of the home and host cultures (Johnson-Agbakwu, Flynn, Asiedu, Hedberg, & Breitkopf, 2014). The result of this is a certain state of being, commonly referred to as biculturalism or transnationalism. The navigation of two cultures, as argued by Szapocnik and colleagues (1980), requires learning and mastering separate sets of rules. Portes and Rivas (2011) discussed the large amount of research on the identities of immigrants, as identities are often fluid and inconsistent, changing through both time and contexts. Second generation youths, the category with which children born in the home country are often grouped, are often described as translation artists. Their familiarity with the home culture puts them in the position of translating and morphing between the home and host cultures.

The manifestation of acculturation in an individual’s life may occur in different ways. Berry’s (2005) research suggested that integration strategies result in less stress and better adaptation, as compared to marginalism. Another study elaborates on this environment interaction with the self by identifying four different acculturation outcomes, ranging from integrated to marginalized (Bhui, Lenguerrand, Maynard, Stansfeld, & Harding, 2012). This

suggests that there is a range of acculturation and incorporation outcomes, or that acculturation does not follow a linear process.

The social life of an individual is a large indicator of engagement within a particular society. One study used social integration and identity to measure acculturation of the individual solely off the composition of the friend group, which reflects the attempt to balance cultures within one's social life (Bhui, et al., 2012). Cultural integration was defined according to the number of friendships with one's own and other ethnic groups. This particular study sought to connect this aspect of acculturation to mental health. The authors concluded that cultural integration was associated with better mental health, an insightful connection between socio-cultural events and emotional operations of the adolescent.

In addition to choice of friends, cultural integration can be identified by other factors. Cultural preferences and behaviors may include media factors and language use (Cabassa, 2003). Language is a large player of acculturation, because while it creates a barrier at home with parents it offers a bridge to peers at school, and develops more motivation to learn English (Hastings, 2012). It is generally agreed that fluent bilingualism is associated with higher self-esteem, academic performance, and cognitive development (Portes & Rivas, 2011). While these are valuable conclusions, there has been little research to determine the attitudes of bilingual adolescents towards their use of language, or whether or not they recognize these identified benefits.

While cultural behaviors are highly indicative of acculturation, Schwartz and Unger (2010) called for an expanded definition of acculturation by including values and identifications. They suggest that one's feelings of loyalty, allegiance, and identity is an important consideration in the development of biculturalism. For an adolescent, the two realms of school and home are

illustrative representations of cultural experience, in which such feelings of identity and allegiance grow and develop (Yohani, 2010).

### **School experience.**

The school system implies established expectations, rules, customs, and norms. It is also a hub of buzzing adolescent life. The navigation of this social world is often represented in academic success. Many of the existing studies on adolescent refugees focus on the struggles and barriers of students within the context of school, and how these may be overcome by learning facilitators. Portes and Rivas (2011) concluded that educational aspirations and expectations are a key indicator of achievement for immigrants. While these studies focus more on academic success than the youth's thoughts and attitudes, they offer insights to key strengths and barriers.

A study conducted in Africa by Gahungu, Gahungu, & Luseno (2011) found that many refugees skipped grades during the transition from Burundi, Africa to Chicago, Illinois due to a lack of school in the country of origin. Consequently, many students dropped out. Smaller, more detailed cultural differences such as differences in a sense of time, the formation of a name, or the concept of a birthday were different enough to impact the children. The conclusion of this African study was that it is difficult to create a resettlement process within the school that is comprehensive enough to address barriers such as these (Gahungu, Gahungu, & Luseno, 2011). This demonstrates the power of cultural experience on an individual's school experience.

A study conducted within secondary schools in the UK found three important themes in the concerns of refugee students: needing and getting help, feeling safe and secure, and adaptation and belonging. These themes were identified as a result of the impact of the student on their environment and the environment on them. Strategies were then identified to address these themes (Hastings, 2012).

While these studies focus on measurable success, Rivas and Portes (2011) focused more on the ability of education to shape self understanding. They concluded that higher education promotes a transnational or bicultural identity. Adolescents, they said, are more comfortable in navigation of multiple systems and are more efficient at selective integration of elements from different cultures. This may be due to the large use of the host country's language, as well as the inescapable interactions with peers. While this takes a step towards understanding the emotional experience of adolescents within the school system, it fails to fill the gap that seeks to understand specific attitudes, which may not be represented by academic success or cultural behavior.

### **Home experience.**

Home life often implies a different use of skills and interactions than those utilized at school. Literature analyzing the barriers within home culture and the way that these are incorporated into the adolescent's life generally focuses on mental well-being. A study conducted in Canada (Betancourt, Frounfelker, Mishra, Hussein, & Falzarano, 2015) found that prevalent difficulties at home, from both an adult and youth perspective, included lack of money for food, rent, clothes, and bills, children losing moral education, completing homework at home, and communication between children and adults, all of which were positively correlated with symptoms of depression and anxiety.

The role of the parent at home is vital in the creation of a certain environment for the adolescent, which was highlighted in a study conducted with refugees in Norway (Tingvold, Hauff, Allen, & Middelthon, 2012). Parents found home language acquisition necessary for family communication and cultural continuity, as well as the role of extended family and the teaching of respect. Children often noticed the gap between these cultural views of their parents and those of the newly settled country, and attributed it to their parents' lack of desire to change.

The gap in cultural opinion between the first and second generation is often referred to as intergenerational conflict. The Intergenerational Congruence in Immigrant Families (ICIF) Scale was created specifically to measure this phenomenon, and has been applied to evaluate treatment effectiveness within the social work field (Ying & Han, 2007). A study analyzing parent-child relationships of refugee families in Canada (Hynie, Guruge, & Shakya, 2012) suggested that youth responsibility increased following arrival to the host country. This often took the form of helping the family in interpretation, financial support, and household chores, ultimately becoming a vital resource in system navigation for the family, or “resettlement champions.” The study concluded that overall, these increased responsibilities did not significantly contribute to intergenerational conflict, but does make the youth more vulnerable and illuminates a gap in agency and policy services for refugees. One of the few studies concerning specifically Burmese youth concluded that young women find increased power post-migration due to English language acquisition and increased education. However, intergenerational conflict was increased due to parents’ increased social restriction, exposure to egalitarian style of education, and increased access to technology (Koh, Liamputtong, & Walker, 2013).

### **Gap in Literature**

While the literature offers an insightful look into the barriers and challenges of refugees, understanding of the implications of world-wide migration is only beginning to be investigated. A large majority of studies focus on refugee populations in Europe, Canada, Africa, or the Middle East. This leaves refugees living in America as a surprisingly understudied population.

Much of the research involving youth examines the youth of immigrant families, and in the process, groups a “first generation” and “second generation,” considering the acculturation differences in the two groups. The “1.5” generation, or the children born abroad but brought to

the host country at a young age, is often entirely left out or grouped with the second generation. This represents a significant gap in literature. While the second generation's ties to the home country are largely initiated by their parents', the 1.5 generation has their own emotional ties and experiences in the home country, outside of the connection provided by their parents. This lack of studied experience and perspective makes them an ideal group to investigate.

Research concerned specifically with refugees does not adopt this categorization as often as literature concerned with immigrants, but tends to highlight what the professionals have identified as strengths and barriers, and how those can be addressed within the American cultural systems already in place. An additional common theme in literature is measuring self-esteem based off measurement of cultural behavior. One study by Johnson-Agbakwu, Flynn, Asiedu, Hedberg, & Breitkopf (2014) measuring the acculturation process for African refugee women in Minnesota uses an adaptation of the Bicultural Involvement Questionnaire. This questionnaire quantifies cultural experiences, both of host and home cultures, as well as enjoyment of such activities. While the incorporation of attitudes and enjoyment levels is useful, I believe the application of the Questionnaire would give skewed results with the adolescent population used in this study. The activities of an adolescent are heavily influenced and controlled by their parent's activities. In addition, responses of attitudes and opinions are pre-categorized, rather than the participants self-identifying labels and attitudes. This differs from an understanding of what the individual identifies as strengths or barriers, and how they internalize that in their understanding of the world around them. The youth may be participating in such cultural behaviors, yet still *feel* or *perceive* themselves as the outgroup. This study seeks to give voice to this ignored population, shadowed between the first and second generation, inquiring into their thoughts and perspectives,

## Methods

This study uses a qualitative research design, as it seeks to approach life experiences with the intent to gain insight and understanding. The qualitative approach is valuable, as it gives context and setting to the behaviors of the participants (Creswell, 2007). The research is designed to draw out meaningful and genuine responses of the 1.5 refugee generation. Their attitudes and values are most effectively represented coming from their own words.

More specifically, the research utilizes a grounded theory approach that allows the analysis of data to reveal themes and patterns that are “generated or grounded from participants who have experienced the process,” rather than choosing an existing theoretical framework “off the shelf”, to understand the data (Creswell, 2007, p. 63). Charmaz (2006) identified a more specific branch of grounded theory, identified as constructivist grounded theory, which emphasizes an interpretive approach with flexible guidelines. She points to views, values, beliefs, assumptions, and ideologies over specific methods of research in order to highlight the presence of diverse local worlds and realities (Charmaz, 2006).

Participants of the study were Burmese refugees who attend Waterloo West High School. All in the same English Language Learning class. The ELL instructor was supportive of the study. Permission from the school district was received in December 2015 (see Appendix A). Approval from the UNI Institutional Review Board was received in January 2016 (see Appendix B). Necessary for both approvals was the creation of a parent permission form, provided in written Burmese, for participants under 18 years old, as well as an English copy (see Appendix C). Consent forms were received from all participants, including a read-through to assure comprehension and understanding (see Appendix D).

A total of eight participants were involved in the study. The chart below illustrates the demographics of the sample. The eight participants represent a mean age of 17.38 years. The samples represents an equal number of females and males. The mean length of residence in the United States is 5.75 years.

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Value</i>
Participants (n)	8
Mean age (years)	17.38
Gender (female/male)	4/4
Mean years living in United States	5.75

As English is the second language of all participants, a language barrier was anticipated. However, all participants are in English classes and functioning in school, therefore the barrier was manageable. Clear communication from the interviewer was also important in minimizing the barrier. Interviews were one-on-one and took place during the student's study hall, each lasting approximately forty minutes. Interviews took place during a week in mid-March in the library of the school, which is a neutral location. Interviewer and interviewee sat in an isolated corner in order to assure privacy. While the school setting may be influential in the participant's behavior, it allowed for a consistency between participants.

With a grounded theory approach in mind, a semi-structured set of questions was created for interviews. The themes of the questions were: transition to America, friends, language, family, and future (see Appendix E for the list of questions asked during interviewing). Questions were open-ended and allowed the participants the opportunity to elaborate and explain their reply. This method maintained discretion to follow conversation leads, as each participant often had a particular story or thought which offered a unique insight (Bernard, 2011). In some cases,

emotionally sensitive or loaded questions had to be broken down first into a “yes” or “no” question because the participant was overwhelmed or did not know how to respond. This was followed by a probing question to elicit more details, which is suggested by Bernard (2011). Some participants were sometimes more reticent than others. Their first answers were short or simplified answers, which the interviewer followed up with a “why?” or “tell me more” probe.

The recorded interviews were transcribed, resulting in approximately forty pages. The transcriptions were then coded. Major themes were identified and categorized. Connections between categories were also identified. This qualitative, grounded theory approach gave the best opportunity for genuine opinions and thoughts to form themselves into themes.

## **Results**

Interview questions were organized by themes designed to elicit answers to the proposed research questions. Following these themes (cultural transition, friends, school, language, family, and future), several different patterns revealed themselves. While specific answers varied across interviews, general topics and sentiments were fairly consistent. Throughout each theme, the most commonly used word was “different,” offering a frame for how the adolescents understand their experience.

Cultural transition was the first topic discussed, and elicited a heavy variety of responses and emotions. Feelings of sadness, fright, and nerves often characterized the experience of moving to America. Almost every participant had previously lived in a Thailand refugee camp, and each spoke of a lack of safety, poor conditions, and a lack of freedom in a negative way. Despite this, every participant also spoke fondly of the camps. Nature was a re-occurring response, as the beauty of the river, farm, and bamboo forest were mentioned. “I have a lot of memories there,” one participant said (personal communication, March 8, 2016). Another

interesting, and consistent, theme was that while every adolescent said that they would like to one day visit their old homes, they would not like to live there.

Opinions about culture were part of this theme. In regards to their “home culture,” festivals, food, and community were often favorites. Every single participant felt that it was vital to remember their home culture, as “it’s not good to just come to United States and just forget your culture and forget your language” (personal communication, March 8, 2016). Favorite aspects of American life included opportunity, education, safety, freedom, and technology. There was a general sense of curiosity; a couple of times, the interview reversed and I was asked questions about American culture. When asked how these cultures compared to each other, there was an overall strong acknowledgment of difference, with an attitude of indifference, a “you have your culture, I have mine” perception. When further questioned, one response demonstrates an acknowledgement of both cultures: “I like both...because in the America I also like stuff. Yeah, cars and houses. But in the other way, I like about the nature. Like, how simple you live your life” (personal communication, March 10, 2016).

There was an even larger uncertainty in the consideration of “home” and nationality. When asked where “home” is, some pointed to Thailand, some claimed not to have a home, and some pointed to Waterloo simply because they “don’t have anywhere else to go” (personal communication, March 11, 2016). One participant expressed her uncertainty when she said, “people say that if you immigrate to America you cannot go back where you live...I’m not sure” (personal communication, March 11, 2016). When asked what defined an American, responses were characterized by long pauses and confusion, and questions rather than statements. Perhaps being born in the United States was the answer. Many mentioned the status of citizenship. When asked what she would be considered after receiving citizenship, a participant said, after a long

pause, “I say like half...you’re kinda part with American but you’ll still be same culture.” (personal communication, March 8, 2016). While emotions and feelings were sometimes identified with certain large events and places, cultural identity often became an elusive concept for the adolescents.

Questions of friends and social groups often followed similar themes of support and resources. Friends made school and life at home fun. Friends were also almost entirely of the same nationality. There was variance of specific regions within Myanmar, but most friend groups were composed of other ELL students from Myanmar. This was true within and outside of school. Activities with friends often revolved around pop culture: movies, music, and TV, which derived from a variety of cultures such as American, Chin, Burmese, Korean, Thai, Karen, and Karenni. Referring to the country of origin of pop culture, “I like it all”, was said by every participant.

Participants often perceived a large barrier between themselves and American peers. In many cases, the adolescents expressed a desire to have more American friends, but also expressed a helplessness and reticence in interacting with them. Two participants shared the perception that American peers are making fun of them and judging them based because of their lack of language ability. This anticipated judgment, because “probably they don’t understand what I say” (personal communication, March 8, 2016), keeps them from reaching out to American peers. In three cases, participants expressed that American students should be the first to reach out. One participant shares how these perceptions affect him. He perceives other’s thoughts of him as: “He is Chinese, and he don’t know English. So, he can do by himself...feel nervous and shy. And I don’t want to do nothing. Just stay quiet by myself” (personal

communication, March 9, 2016). These insecurities about language incompetence, and how they are projected onto American peers, often result in self-designated isolation.

The idea of sharing their culture stayed consistent with these behaviors, as participants said that they would like to share their culture with others, but would only share when asked. Information is rarely volunteered. Many participants want others to understand them, and think that knowledge of their background might allow for this. When asked which aspect of their culture they would like to share, common responses related to how difficult the language was for them, how different the culture was, and the difficulties of living in a refugee camp. “I want to inspire people”, a participant said (personal communication, March 11, 2016). However, there was a common concern that they would be judged for “weird” (a common word used by participants to describe the difference in cultural norms) aspects of their culture, and this anticipation acted as a barrier, the thought that “when I tell them, they be like ‘oh you eat weird food’ ...I don’t want them to feel that way” (personal communication, March 8, 2016). Another participant expresses the same concern of sharing, saying, “I think she might think it’s silly...it’s too different to American culture” (personal communication, March 9, 2016). This is the result of an awareness and sensitivity to the perceived differences in culture.

Within the formal aspects of school, attitudes were generally dismal. Although participants expressed the importance of good education earlier in the interviews, almost all felt a struggle with academics. Feelings of being uncomfortable often revolved around the lack of language fluency. Reading and presenting to the class were the two most dreaded activities. The feeling of incompetence was a common theme, and spoken of with frustration. When he does poorly, one participant said he “feel like I want to give up” (personal communication, March 9, 2016). Teacher interactions were also a part of their school experience. Two participants

expressed that they like it when the teacher reaches out to students, in a personal or teasing way. Three participants felt uncomfortable with a lack of respect from other students, suggesting that they mouth back and are too loud in the classroom. In two of these stories, they pointed to cultural difference as the cause of this.

When asked about family, the general tone in responses was tolerance; slight annoyance, sometimes, but generally tolerable. Translating for parents who had little to no English skills (which were the parents of every participant) was a family obligation felt by each participant I spoke with. Appointments, doctor visits, and interactions with community members often required the adolescent's assistance. They often felt scared or nervous for such interactions because of the perceived pressure in translating correctly or what may happen if they were to translate incorrectly. Despite this, every participant reported being okay with translating, as they felt the need to help their family.

Parent relationships were an important theme of questions, and resulted in a surprising lack of interest. When asked what their parents most commonly told them, themes of moral behavior and the advice for the future were common, to which adolescents may be slightly annoyed, but generally understood. Another theme of parent control revolved around everyday behavior, such as appropriate dress, going out at night, and technology use, to which adolescents responded with dismissal and the intention to ignore.

Participants were also asked what how they felt their parents perceived American culture, with the goal of revealing any ill feelings or sympathy toward the older generation who may not be as connected to American pop culture. Most participants were thrown for a loop, unsure of how to consider their parent's perspective. After thinking on it, however, they always concluded that their parents must not like or understand American culture. It is too different, they

concluded, and old people like to stay in their own way of things. However, most adolescents felt that their perceived parent's attitude was acceptable and understandable. They took a middle ground stance, anticipating the older generation's judgment while appreciating aspects of American culture in their own lives. One participant says, "they don't actually see far as I can do. So, sometimes they kinda blame on me. And I tell them, this is something different" (personal communication, March 8, 2016).

It should be noted that not all attitudes toward family were of disconnect or indifference. Six participants mentioned feeling pride in their family's ability to take care of them. They also reported enjoying spending time with their family. One participant said that Burmese families spend less time together, and that he wished that they spent as much time together as American families, comparing two of his own generalizations and perceptions (personal communication, March 8, 2016). This sense of pride, in combination with the desire to help family, revealed a family attachment, perhaps not obvious in expression of emotion.

When asked about the future or life after high school, almost every response was defined by uncertainty. This theme required the most prompting and clarification from me, and resulted in the longest pauses and looks of confusion or indifference. Answers were often general futurist goals or milestones such as getting a good job, making money, buying a house, and having a family. Only three participants had a specific idea of a potential occupation (two mechanics and a hair stylist). When I asked one participant if he was excited for the future, he responded, "Not really." "Why?" I asked. "I don't know what will happen in the future", he confessed (personal communication, March 11, 2016). The collection of these responses showed a re-occurrence of what the word "different" meant, with attitude and perceptions built around this perception. This

called for a deeper look into how these perceptions are influential and play a role in the adolescents' lives.

### **Discussion**

Questions were originally designed to be open-ended, with the hope that the interview participant would understand the idea of the question and elaborate. However, as the interviewer, I was initially surprised by the amount of prompting that was necessary. Answers were often very short and not revealing of any personal emotion or thoughts. Therefore, almost every question was followed by "How do you feel about that?" or "Why?". As the interview progressed, the student often picked up on this inquiry for their opinion, and they became more comfortable - at times eager - to share their own perspective. "Are you going to ask me *why*?" one student teased after answering a prompt (personal communication, March 8, 2016). It also became evident that students were shy or hesitant to answer, which required nonverbal encouragement, such as a nodding head or an encouraging smile. I had not anticipated this reticence, but the explicitly inquiring about feelings and emotions gave the participants more freedom in expressing themselves within each theme.

While questions were originally categorized into themes of cultural transition, friends, school, language, family, and future, responses demonstrated a weaving and interconnection of different thoughts, attitudes, and perceptions which resulted in four main conclusions.

#### **Dualism without Definition**

Across multiple aspects and categories of questions, the refugee youth displayed the state of "transnationalism" and "dualism." However, they often lacked a clear and consistent sense of how they categorized their identity and their role. This was evident in the uncertainty of the concept of "home", an uncertainty in what defines being an American (and whether they consider themselves American), and where they fit within nationality categories. They were

uncertain on how inconsistency in geographic location defined them as an individual. This supports Portes and Riva's (2012) theory that identity is fluid and not consistent through time and space.

Literature often mentions feelings of loyalty and allegiance as a part of identity formation, feelings which the interviewed adolescents lacked. While it is true that they expressed a fondness for their former home, these feelings were connected to memories and natural beauty more than a country or physical place. In addition, fondness for their host country, America, was also expressed, just using a different range and set of cultural aspects. In the recognition of the costs and benefits of both their home culture and host culture, nostalgia and emotional attachment weighed against freedom and opportunity.

Literature concerning immigrant youth often discusses intergenerational conflict as a result of a difference in cultural experience and attitudes, leading to fissures in relationships. The exploration of this in the lives of the Burmese adolescents revealed a slightly different twist. While youth expressed an awareness of possible differences in their parents' attitudes, they understood the reasoning and did not place a large emphasis on the difference. However, most literature highlighting this discussion compares the experience of first and second generations. The understudied 1.5 generation in this study have cultural attitudes, as compared to their parents, defined more by moderate attitudes rather than polarization. This suggests that they have a stronger tendency towards dualism, even though the adolescents themselves write this off with a shrug of their shoulders, saying that it's all just "different".

### **Language and Helplessness**

It is to be expected that the refugee youth, many of whom who have only been speaking English for about five years, would have difficulty being fluent in English. However, in addition

there was a heightened self awareness of language difficulty, and this affected the adolescents' everyday lives. Literature about bilingualism discusses the benefits of bilingualism, including academic, social, and mental. However, the goal of this study was to investigate how the participant *felt* and *perceived* their current state. In most cases, the adolescents did not express acknowledgment of being bilingual. Benefits of bilingualism in their lives was discussed on larger, more theoretical terms occurring in the future, such as English "will help me get a better education" or "help me travel the world", rather than a current state of being.

Research by Portes and Rivas (2011) offered a base of understanding language and the self by suggesting that fluent bilingualism is associated with higher self esteem. Therefore, if the adolescents do not perceive themselves as being fluently bilingual, then a lack of confidence and self esteem is to be expected. Anticipation of judgment from others for a lack of English skills demonstrated this lack of confidence and heightened self-awareness, resulting in a feeling of helplessness and reticence. Even in situations when they would like to share their culture or make a friend, participants did not feel confident enough in themselves to reach out. The intention to reach out was not even there; there was a feeling that they were incapable of being successful in that interaction.

### **Different Contexts of "Adjustment"**

Refugee youth experience many different spheres of experience, both at home and at school, and each sphere bears with it different interactions with culture and self. I suggest that the experiences result in different internalization processes. The discussion of adjustment in the literature often measures acculturation according to the number and type of cultural activities. However, I was unable to find any studies which considered acculturation within different contexts, and how these different concepts may be characterized differently.

At home, refugee youth appeared to be the “resettlement champions” suggested by Hynie, Guruge, and Shakya (2012). Compared to their parents, who speak little to no English, they were the most integrated. The youth were aware of this, as evident in their perception of differences in cultural attitudes discussed previously. In addition, they were experiencing the largest perceived benefits of immigration; they attended American school, the representation of better education and opportunity. Responsibility and obligation, again discussed by Hynie, Guruge, and Shakya (2012), were evident in the adolescents’ desire to help their family with translation needs. My findings support Hynie, Gurug, and Shakya’s (2012) conclusion that these responsibilities do not lead to intergenerational conflict. In fact, this may make the youth feel competent, able to navigate the American cultural map, when compared to their parents.

At school, however, refugee youth compared themselves to those around them, leading to feelings and perceptions of marginalization and isolation. As suggested by Bhui et. al (2012), a lack of acculturation was seen in the lack of ethnic diversity of friend groups. However, this does not reveal the adolescents’ internal desire to interact with Americans peers. So what holds them back from having a larger diversity of friends? As suggested in the discussion of language skills previously, refugee adolescents felt anxiety, anticipation, and reticence when speaking in English with American peers. In addition to that, judgment was anticipated at the idea of sharing certain aspects of their culture which they feel may be received negatively because the cultures are just too different.

Involvement in pop culture, such as music, TV, and movies, were also activities which were reported by literature to lead to integration. Many participants enjoyed a wide range of pop culture, including American. Participants were actively being involved. However, there did not create a bridge to attitudes of Americanism.

Between the contexts of home life and school life, two different pictures of integration are illustrated, based on relative ability. This is felt and internalized by the adolescents, and in some cases creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. School is the place of American pop culture, where they are surrounded by Americans and all that Americans do. But it is here where differences are internalized and become barriers, resulting in marginalization and cultural isolation. Perhaps this suggests a different picture of dualism than previously presented. Perhaps this sense of dualism is a jumping between worlds at different times depending on the context, rather than an integrated selection of certain aspects of cultures. Or perhaps the cultural lives of the students represent the early stages of mastering two cultures, which Szapocnik and colleagues suggest to be the road to acculturation (1980), and time and an expansion of experiences will build upon this road.

### **Lack of Reflection**

The final conclusion considers the general attitude and tone that many of the participants expressed throughout the interviews towards the questions asked them. In many cases, I identified a lack of deep reflection. Long pauses of uncertainty were common, as was a clarification of questions. This could be attributed to a language barrier, but the nonverbal communication and tone of voice communicated a lack of understanding and awareness of the importance of the themes and how these themes were seen in their own lives.

As discussed in the results section, indifference towards cultural states was expressed, which may not in itself reflect a lack of reflection, but often times, the adolescent had not thought about their likes and dislikes within those cultures. Sharing seemed an okay thing to do, if asked. Peers may not ask, and that is okay. Culture, and their place within it, is what it is. Many had not considered how their parents perceived the American world around them, and it

gave them a giggle or a raised eyebrow to consider it. Conversations with their parents were reported to stay at the surface level. Rarely did they discuss relationships, past life experiences, or deeper topics about life, showing a lack of reflection modeled by parents. Participants were also unsure as to where their own national identity lay. Questions about the future were the most representative of this conclusion, as most answers were milestones rather than personal aspirations and desires. They did not know what the future would be like, and so did not develop any conclusion or expectations.

Perhaps this tendency to focus on the here and now, rather than the future, and to focus on the concrete rather than the abstract is representation of a survival mode of thought and behavior. While living in a refugee camp, life was insecure and unpredictable with an uncertain future. This would put priority in thinking about what can be done in this very moment, rather than long term planning. If traumatic events occurred at any point in one's life, survival and moving forward would encourage an aversion to sharing and deep reflection. It is what it is. Perhaps the refugee students of West High School are still functioning on a level of survival.

### **Implications**

Themes of marginalization, insecurity and uncertainty, and a lack of deep reflection were woven throughout these four conclusions about adolescent refugee attitudes. This may sound like the experience of a typical angsty teen, figuring out life and their identity, but the Burmese refugees carry with them unique shaping experiences and interactions with their world.

As the school is a large part of the adolescent's experience, it is important that the school considers its intentionality in actions and attitudes toward refugee students. The classroom environment can be transformed by a teacher who is willing to reach out to students, which then models appropriate and helpful behavior for American students. In addition, it is important that

schools do not undermine or dismiss the student's role within their home life, as this too is a vital aspect of their identity formation, the source of their native culture and language which they have expressed as important to them. It may also be important for teachers and administrators to be aware of how they respond to students with limited English speaking ability. The youth are sensitive to any sign of possible judgment, so becoming frustrated or short is harmful, and will most likely shut the student down from attempting to communicate again.

### **Conclusion**

The teen years are often riddled with identity confusion, self-esteem issues, and uncertainty, but grouping the adolescent struggles of refugees with other experiences incorrectly assumes congruence in the sources of struggles. This study asked of adolescent refugees their perceptions and opinions regarding their experience with a strong Burmese culture at home and American culture everywhere else. As the refugee youth at West High school attempt to navigate their way through multiple systems of expectation, behavior, and values, they find themselves forging a path of survival and multiple ways of beings.

It can be argued that this is the description of any adolescent. The search for identity and an indifference towards parental relationships is not an uncommon story for many American students. Adolescence in itself is a process of transition. However, adolescent refugees have a past experiences that give them a unique perspective of their place in the world. Their home culture is a part of this piece of their past. The process of balancing this with their growth as an individual is intertwined in their life, inseparable from their process of adolescence.

At this point in their life, they may not know what that means for them, which makes sensitivity and support vital for the success and empowerment of refugee youth. Schools are in the perfect position to offer this to students, as this is the scene in which insecurity is most felt.

Perhaps other community resources are able able to offer mentor programs or support networks designed to build skills and confidence.

Further studies may be able to investigate the consistency of what it means to be “different” in a world in which they a part of yet still feel marginalized. A comparison of results investigating other refugee populations, from other home countries, may reveal the common theme of survival and uncertainty, or perhaps may reveal otherwise. A comparison of school strategy in dealing with refugee students and community resources would offer an insightful look to what may be shaping different perspectives and perceptions.

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## Appendix A



Waterloo Community Schools

Educational Services

1516 Washington St.

Waterloo, IA 50702

Phone: 319-433-1800

TO: University of Northern Iowa – Human Participants Review Committee

RE: Proposed Research Study: Incorporating Engineering in the Chemistry Classroom.

DATE: December 10, 2015

I am formally approving Alexis Helgens Senior Research Project to work with high school refugee students at West High School in the Waterloo Community School District. We would expect Ms. Helgens' inquiry to involve active consent with regards to participants and that it would be in the students' and families' native language. We look forward to Ms. Helgens' inquiry that would surely provide voice to our students and a better understanding of their lived experience with in our schools.

## Appendix B

Dear Investigator(s):

Your study, [Cases of adolescent refugee experience: A look into the cultural attitudes of high school Burmese refugees living in Iowa](#), has been approved by the UNI IRB, effective [1/12/16](#). You may begin recruitment, data collection, and/or analysis for your project. You are required to adhere to the procedures and study materials approved during this review, as well as to follow all University and IRB policies and procedures for human subjects research posted on the IRB website at <http://www.uni.edu/rsp/protection-human-research-participants>.

Your study has been approved in the following category: [Expedited 6](#).

**Approval for your study will expire one year** from today. Beyond that date, you may not recruit participants, or collect and/or analyze data without continuing approval. To renew approval for your project, submit the Continuing Review and Closure form before the expiration date. The IRB office will email you the form 4-6 weeks prior to expiration or you can download it from the IRB website. **When your study ends**, you must download and submit the Continuing Review and Closure form as a **brief final report on your project**. If you are a student and planning to leave campus at the end of the academic year, make sure to submit this before you leave.

**If you need to make any changes** to your study, you must request approval of the changes before continuing with the research. Requests for modifications should be emailed to the IRB Administrator at [anita.gordon@uni.edu](mailto:anita.gordon@uni.edu).

**If during the study you observe any problems** or events pertaining to participation in your study that are *serious* and *unexpected* (e.g., you did not include them in your IRB materials as a potential risk), you must report this to the IRB **within 10 days**. Examples include unexpected injury or emotional stress, missteps in the consent documentation, or breaches of confidentiality.

**If you need a formal, signed approval letter**, contact the IRB office and one will be provided for your records.

Best wishes for your project success.

## Appendix C

### University of Northern Iowa Parental Permission Form for Child's Research Participation

Study Title: Cases of adolescent refugee experience: A look into the cultural attitudes of high school Burmese refugees living in Iowa

Researcher: Lexi Helgens

Dear parent of \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Lexi Helgens, and I am a student at the University of Northern Iowa. I am asking consent for your child to participate in a research study. This form has important information about the reason for doing this study and what will happen in this study.

#### Why are you doing this study?

The research is about the experience of high school refugee students living in America, and what they think of their home culture and American culture. This information will help the school district and the community what the high schoolers are experiencing and can hopefully make their experience better.

#### What will my child be asked to do if my child is in this study?

The interview that your child will participate in will take place during their study hall period, so no regular class hours or work will be missed. Your child will be asked to talk about different things they like about their home culture, what they like or do not like about American culture, what they have trouble with, and what they want in their future. This interview will take place approximately 40 minutes.

We would like to audio tape your child as he/she talks, to make sure that we remember accurately all the information. The researchers will keep these tapes in a locked drawer and they will only be used by myself and my advisor who is a professor at UNI. We will only audio tape your child if you and your child give us permission.

#### What are the possible risks or discomforts to my child?

Your child's participation in this does not involve any physical or emotional risk to your child beyond that of everyday life. If your child feels uncomfortable answering any of the questions, they are free to not answer or skip to the next question.

#### How will you protect the information about my child, and how will that information will be shared?

Results of this study will be used in presentation. There will be measures to protect this data. No names will be used in the study, and all recorded information will be kept in a locked drawer.

The information your child gives us is confidential, with the exception of a few cases. If your child expresses thoughts of killing themselves, intentions of harming others, or incidences of sexual abuse, then I am required to report the information to my superiors so that your child is able to receive appropriate help.

#### Financial Information

Participation in this study will involve no cost to you or your child. Your child will not be paid for participating in this study.

What are my child's rights as a research participant?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your child may withdraw from this study at any time—you and your child will not be penalized in any way or lose any sort of benefits for deciding to stop participation. If your child decides not to be in this study, this will not affect the relationship you and your child have with your child's school in any way. Your child's grades will not be affected if you choose not to let your child to be in this study.

If your child decides to withdraw from this study, the researchers will ask if the information already collected from your child can be used .

Who can I contact if I have questions or concerns about this research study?

If you or your child have any questions, you may contact the research, Lexi Helgens. My phone number is 319-899-8332, and my email address is [helgensl@uni.edu](mailto:helgensl@uni.edu). You may also contact the faculty advisor of this project, Anne Woodrick at 319-273-6375 or [anne.woodrick@uni.edu](mailto:anne.woodrick@uni.edu) , or the University of Northern Iowa office of the Human Participants Coordinator at 319-273-6148.

## **Parent Permission for Child's Participation in Research**

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I give permission for my child to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this Parental Permission form after I sign it.

Initial one of the following

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I agree

\_\_\_\_\_ No, I don't agree

### **Consent to quote from the interview**

I may wish to quote from the interview with your child either in the presentations or articles resulting from this work. A fake name will be used in order to protect your child's identity.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I agree

\_\_\_\_\_ No, I don't agree

### **Consent to Audio-Record Interview**

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I agree for my child to be audio-recorded

\_\_\_\_\_ No, I do not agree for my child to be audio-recorded

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Legal Guardian's Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of person obtaining parental permission (name of your child)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Parents, please be aware that under the Protection of Pupils Rights Act (20 U.S.C. Section 1232(c)(1)(A)), you have the right to review a copy of the questions asked of or materials that will be used with students. If you would like to do so, you should contact Lexi Helgens to obtain a copy of the questions or materials.

Source: <https://sbsirb.uchicago.edu/page/consent-form-templates-and-examples>

## Appendix D

### University of Northern Iowa Participant Assent Form

(This form will be read aloud to assure understanding.)

Just to go over this, I am from the University of Northern Iowa, and I am asking you to be in a research study.

#### **What I am asking you to do:**

For this study, I am asking you to answer questions that I have about your experience with culture. This will take place for about forty minutes. You can skip any question if it makes you uncomfortable.

#### **Do I have to be in this study?**

You do not have to participate in this study. It is up to you. You can say no now or you can even change your mind later. No one will be upset with you if you decide not to be in this study.

Your grades and your relationship with your school, teachers and classmates will not be affected if you choose to not participate in the study or if you choose to stop participating at any point.

#### **Will being in this study hurt or help me in any way?**

Being in this study will bring you minimal harm. We cannot say it will bring you no harm because there is risk in everything people do. The risks are similar to a normal school day. Also, there are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. It will hopefully help us learn more about what it is like for teenage refugees to move to America.

#### **What will you do with information about me?**

The interview will be recorded on a tape so that I am able to go back and listen to what you tell me. We will be very careful to keep your answers to the interview private. Before and after the study we will keep all information we collect about you locked up and password protected. There are a few cases in which I would have to break confidentiality. These include thoughts of killing yourself, intentions to harm others, or incidences of sexual abuse. In these cases, I am required to report to my superiors so that you are able to receive appropriate help.

If you want to stop doing the study, contact Lexi Helgens at 319-899-8332 or [helgensl@uni.edu](mailto:helgensl@uni.edu). If you choose to stop before we are finished, any answers you already gave will be destroyed. There is no penalty for stopping. If you decide that you don't want your materials in the study but you have already gone through the interview, just let Lexi know.

#### **If you have questions about the study, contact:**

Lexi Helgens  
319-899-8332  
[helgensl@uni.edu](mailto:helgensl@uni.edu)

or

Anne Woodrick

Anne.woodrick@uni.edu

**Agreement:**

By signing this form, I agree to be in the research study described above.

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**You will receive a copy of this form.**

## **Appendix E**

### **Interview Questions**

#### **Demographic Questions**

Age:

Year in school:

How long living in the United States:

How long living in Waterloo:

Where did you live before the US:

How many people in your family:

Where do your parents work:

What languages do your parents speak:

What languages do you speak:

#### **Transition and Cultures**

Tell me about your experience of moving to Waterloo.

What were some of the difficulties when you first moved here?

When did you first start learning English?

What is different about living in Waterloo?

What do you like about living in Waterloo?

What do you miss about your old home?

Is there a time when you were uncomfortable here in America?

What do you like about American culture?

What do you like about Burmese culture?

Is there anything about American culture that is the complete opposite of Burmese culture?

#### **Friends and School**

Who are your friends at school?

What do you like to do with your friends?

What is your favorite TV show? Movie? Music?

Do you listen to different music at home than when you're with your friends or at school?

What would you like to be different at school?

When is a time that you felt uncomfortable at school?

When do you have the most fun at school?

Is there a time when you told people at school about your Burmese culture? What was that like?

Is there a time when you did not want to tell someone about your Burmese culture?

If you could tell someone anything about your culture, what would you tell them? Or what about your culture is important for other people to know?

### **Language**

What do you enjoy about learning English? What is frustrating or not so fun about learning English?

During a whole day, do you speak more Burmese or English?

What do you think of your native language?

When is a time that you found your Burmese language important?

Have you ever felt uncomfortable or embarrassed speaking Burmese?

### **Family**

How much do your family members speak English?

What does your family usually speak at home?

When is a time when you had to translate for your parents or family member? How did you feel doing that?

What is a lesson that your parents tell you often? How do you feel about that?

What about your family are you most proud?

What do you most enjoy doing with your family?

What do you think your parents think of American culture? Do you agree or disagree with them?

What do you most often disagree about with your parents?

Are there any times when your parents did not understand what you were trying to tell them about American culture? How did this make you feel?

Does your family attend any religious services? What is that experience like? Do you enjoy attending?

### **Future**

What do you look forward to in the future?

Tell me about what you want your life to be like after high school.

What do you think your friends will be doing after high school?

Do you think you'll teach your children (if you want to have children some day) about the Burmese culture and language?