

People Helping People: Exploring Ways Refugees Help Each Other with Technology

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Abstract

Refugees relocating in a new country experience difficulty adjusting to the new culture. Sharing technology can help them help each other adapt. Existing literature is not sufficient to explain the process or mechanisms of how refugees share information within a cultural context of a refugee community. There is a need to qualitatively explore the capabilities and inclinations of individuals living in refugee communities to assist each other with using technologies that are helpful in their resettlement process. This case study will examine a refugee populace through the lens of sociocultural theory postulated by Lev Vygotsky. Open-ended interviews and observations will be conducted with current and past Burmese refugees currently residing in Omaha, Nebraska. The findings identified will generate ideas and demonstrate pathways for refugees to establish technology sharing communities where they can help each other succeed in adjusting to their new country.

Keywords: refugee, social, sharing technical information, zone of proximal development, cultural mediation.

People Helping People: Exploring Ways to Promote the Use of Technology among Refugees

Introduction

The status of refugees worldwide demonstrates a complicated and seemingly overwhelming issue facing humanity today. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR, n.d.-b), reports that there are more than 65 million refugees worldwide of which 25 million are displaced in a country other than their own, with 52% under the age of 18. Most of those refugees reside in a host country that is considered a developing nation itself, and only 100,000 (roughly 0.01 %) will be able to resettle permanently in another place.

Due to the nature of worldwide emergencies, the landscape for refugees is constantly changing. There are various source countries, host countries, and resettlement countries. The top countries of refugee origin in recent years have been Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar (Burma), and Somalia (WorldVision, n.d.). Common host countries are Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, and Uganda (Edmond, 2017). It is estimated that 7% of refugee camps have access to digital infrastructure for Internet and mobile phones. Of those living in urban areas, 68% have a mobile phone, but in rural areas, that number drops to 20% with 29% having no telephone at all (UNHCR, n.d.-a). Access to the Internet can provide connection, social inclusion, and use of mobile money which leads to opportunities for education, self-sustainment, and entrepreneurship.

The U.S. State Department Refugee Processing (Omaha World Herald, n.d.) center reports that 6,390 refugees have settled in Omaha, Nebraska since 2002 including 4,167 persons originating from Myanmar, formerly known as Burma. Most of these refugees are of Karen (pronounced kuh-ren) ethnicity, a prominently Christian group that has been persecuted in

Burma/Myanmar since the second world war. Their language is typically one of three dialects that are more commonly spoken and not written. This further complicates the use of technology that requires detailed knowledge of the written English language.

For all refugees, Internet connectivity, and the technology that goes along with it, has been deemed to be as important to survival as food, water, and energy (Grandi, 2018).

Technology serves as a “critical survival tool” that provides refugees with information and a connection to their community. According to Lloyd et al. (2013), lack of technology access “can affect ability to extend social networks, to gain employment, maintain health and to improve educationally, thus creating a cycle of alienation, continued marginalisation and disenfranchisement in this sector of the community.”

Being able to use technology successfully is a significant piece of accessing information. In 2016, the UNHCR started a new initiative to provide connectivity for refugees with a focus on three areas: availability, affordability, and usability (UNHCR, n.d.-a). The latter focus of usability depends on digital literacy, training, and access to services that are relevant to refugees. With an overwhelming number of refugees that need assistance, it is important to explore how refugees use technologies to help each other accomplish tasks and propel each other forward to find information and develop actionable solutions.

Literature Review

Although the term “refugee” can be complicated due to complex international laws, this study will follow the definition from the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR, n.d.-c) that states that a refugee is “A person forced to flee their country because of violence or persecution.”

As you can imagine, the consequences of being a refugee are enormous. Lloyd et al. (2013)

examined refugees in Australia who struggled to adapt to a new culture where the information landscape was foreign to them due to language, cultural practices, and informational organization.

Studies have shown how social inclusion (Andrade & Doolin, 2018) and social capital (Elliott & Yusuf, 2014) contribute to the success of a refugee's resettlement. AbuJarour & Krasnova (2017) demonstrates how these factors can be strengthened by shared knowledge of technology when quoting a Syrian refugee in Germany, "We come together on Facebook, and we share our knowledge about the new legislations and we look for their translations on other Facebook Arabic pages. Then, we start discussing and sharing our own experiences and we share our knowledge and hints among each other. This way, we manage to know more" (p. 1803).

The benefits of social interaction include the information and knowledge obtained from others in their network, including how to use technology. Fisher and Yafi (2018) note that Syrian youth, with their easy adaptation to a new language and technical skills, often act as wayfarers for others in their refugee community. The researchers studied this by observing refugees communicating with LEGO figures and narrative drawings. Gilhooly and Lee (2014) focused on a family of young (high school age) Karen refugees from Myanmar (Burma) who increased their computer skills even when they could not write in either English or their own native language. The boys were able to use technology to maintain friendships, connect with their ethnic community, and create videos about their culture.

Peisker and Tilbury (2003) examined resettlement styles emphasizing the advantage of active roles of refugees such as achievers and consumers. This paper mentions how the Australian government formally and informally provides ethnic community support for refugees

from Africa and former Yugoslavia. As expected, active participants realize greater satisfaction during resettlement. This works in a complementary way also, as mentioned by Crea (2016) who observed that “Refugees’ experiences of personal growth also inspire them to help and build the communities around them.”

Finally, Traxler (2018) has studied the problem of digital literacy extensively from an educational and policy point of view. Common Sense Media (n.d.) offers some clarity for information and digital literacy, stating:

Digital literacy is part of media literacy. They're both included in the idea of ‘information literacy,’ which is the ability to effectively find, identify, evaluate, and use information.

Digital literacy specifically applies to media from the internet, smartphones, video games, and other nontraditional sources.

Traxler mentions that it is probably not possible to define digital literacy in a culturally neutral way, thus implying that it varies depending on the culture and region. In addition, he emphasizes that digital literacy is not static. This reiterates the notion that refugees can benefit by assisting each other in their own specific environment that is constantly changing.

Current literature hints, and in some cases, concludes that culture is an integral part of digital literacy and yet there is little evidence demonstrating how that information can be transmitted among refugees for mutual benefit. With recent advances in availability of technology and education, there is an opportunity to further discover how refugees can leverage their own cultural knowledge and skills to adapt to a new location. Existing literature is not sufficient to explain the process or mechanisms of sharing technical information within a refugee community.

In summary, the literature shows that while social inclusion and social capital are major factors in the process of a refugee's resettlement, these can be strengthened with shared knowledge of technology and transmission of the cultural aspects of digital literacy (Figure 1).

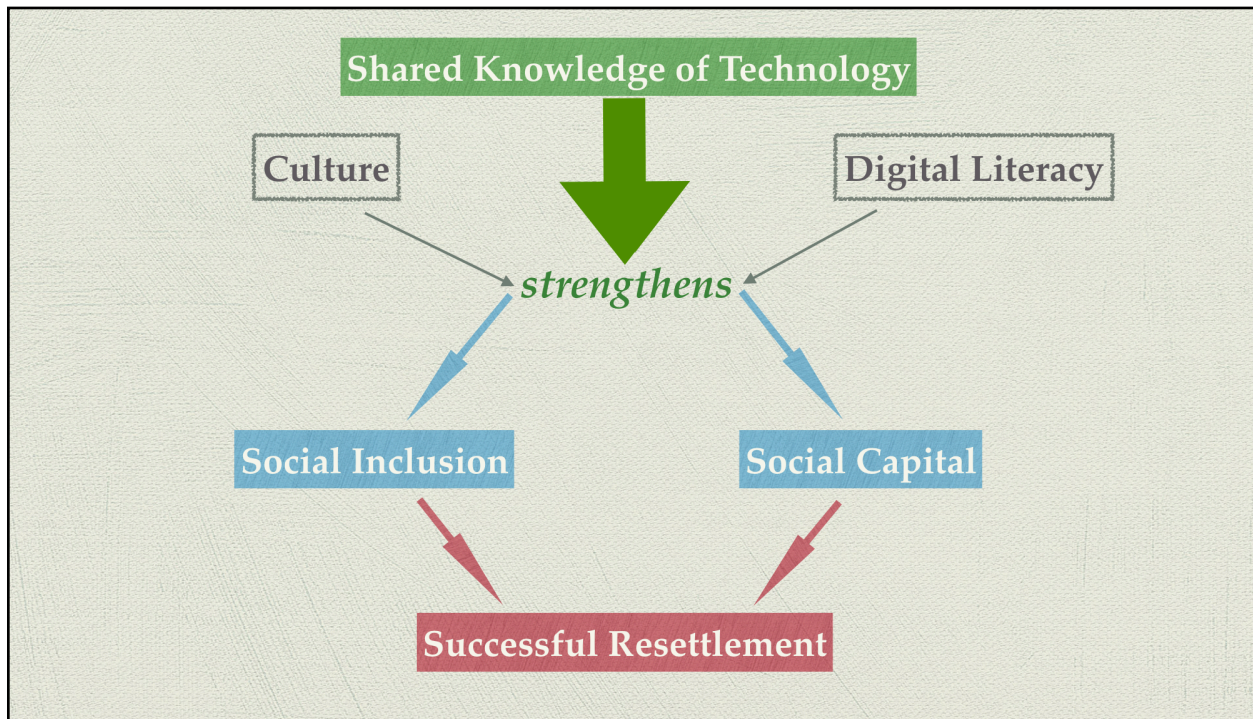


Figure 1. How shared knowledge of technology contributes to successful resettlement

Theoretical Framework

This study makes use of socio-cultural theories developed by Lev Vygotsky in the 1930s (McLeod, 2018). Vygotsky started out in developmental psychology where he believed that emotional, volitional, and cognitive development occurred through interpersonal and social connections.

He introduced two concepts that will be explored in this study. The first is cultural mediation, which determines meaning through cultural cues. For anyone, the use of technology is more than just a computer, a keyboard, and a mouse. For a refugee, it could be a means of

survival, a lifeline to stay in connected with friends and family, or a way to obtain skills and education. It is the cultural association, which comes from fellow refugees, that will embolden new immigrants to use and adopt technology.

The second concept is the zone of proximal development. This approach shows what people can achieve more when they have assistance, bridging the gap between what they can do and what they can't. For instance, English speaking refugees might assist others by calling the doctor for those who don't know the language. Digitally experienced refugees might help others accomplish tasks by sharing new ways to access and use technology within a cultural context. The "culture" could be the missing piece that is the zone between making progress towards successful resettlement and developmental stagnation.

Research Question

In this case study, I will explore the experiences of a specific group of refugees residing in a particular location (Omaha, Nebraska) in order to unpack technological methods and techniques they use to help each other resettle in their community.

The main research question is: How do refugees use technologies to help each other during the process of adjusting to a new country?

Methodology and Methods

The approach for this research is a case study in which each individual within the community is considered to be a case. According to Creswell & Poth (2018), a case study is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data

collection.” As this study focuses on the sharing of technology, it will provide an in-depth, bounded impression of how this happens and the benefits achieved within a refugee community.

Research Field / Context

The participants will be members of the Karen refugee community in Omaha, Nebraska. Members of this community will be contacted through both the Refugee Empowerment Center and the Karen Christian Revival Church, both located in Omaha. From those initial sources, and also through snowball sampling, approximately 20 participants over the age of 18 will be recruited for an interview lasting up to an hour in length. The final number of participants might vary depending on the level of content saturation. Follow up interviews will be conducted if necessary.

Data Collection Method

Data collection will consist of two parts. The first part will be ethnological to understand the Karen community and look for instances of technology use. This will be done by scouring web sites about the Karen communities in the United States such as the Karen Organization of Minnesota (<http://mnkaren.org>) which lists detailed information about their history and culture. In addition, local cultural events offered by the Karen Society of Nebraska will be attended over a three month period. Casual contacts made at these events will be used to ask questions about the Karen culture. Observations and insights will be noted in a journal and used to support the interview process.

The second part will consist of personal interviews with an introductory question followed by ten to twelve open-ended questions (see Appendix A) that can be answered with a free flowing, non-structured response, following the suggested protocol of Creswell and Poth

(2018, p. 165). The interviews will be recorded by audio, or video if possible. Questions will attempt to gain information about culture, digital literacy, cultural mediation, zone of proximal development, social inclusion, social capital, and shared knowledge. The participant will have a chance to demonstrate the use of the technology and create drawings to explain them. Relevant observations and field notes will be recorded before, during, and after each interview. Memos will also be taken for each person to note the researcher's thoughts and explanations.

Analysis

Interview data collected will be transcribed and a thematic analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 100) will be performed on the transcribed text, observations, and field notes for themes pertaining to cultural mediation, instances of zone of proximal development, and other significant ideas. Within each case, the data will be triangulated by drawing parallel themes within each participant's data. The report for each case will be reviewed by all the informants to verify accuracy. Finally, themes will be compared among all the cases in a cross-case analysis and an overall report will be generated.

The ethnographic observations will be used to provide a deeper understanding of the culture as it pertains to technology sharing. The interview memos will add reflection to enrich the final report.

Methodology Limitations

Because the Karen refugees use a language other than English, cultural and language barriers might exist making communication difficult. The researcher will try to overcome these obstacles by searching for participants that seem to be able to communicate effectively or by enlisting the assistance of a translator. This also may affect the study if those with better

communication skills tend to be younger or have resided in the United States for a longer period of time.

Timeline

Activity	Length	Date
Proposal	16 weeks	December 15, 2018
Participate in Karen cultural activities	12 weeks	
Readings on Karen culture	4 weeks	
Contact refugee community centers and arrange interviews	4 weeks	
Conduct interviews, create observation memos and field notes	4 weeks	
Data analysis	4 weeks	
Write up	4 weeks	

Expected Results / Implications

Both the research community and practitioners will benefit from the outcomes of this study. The results will contribute to a greater understanding of the ways in which refugees share technology to improve their resettlement process. The research will contribute to a new body of knowledge including new elements of a theory for how refugees use technologies and how social capital and social inclusion affect their practice.

Additionally, the study results will also provide implications for practitioners by generating ideas and demonstrate pathways for refugees to establish technology sharing communities where they can help each other succeed in adjusting to their new country. It takes into account the culture and technology that is in constant flux while capitalizing on the desire of

refugees to help each other. Further studies could focus on the implementation of the most promising and fruitful results in this or other refugee communities.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Context	Question
Introduction	Where are you from? How long have you been here? Please tell me a little bit about yourself.
Digital Literacy	What kind of technology do you use and how knowledgeable are you? How did you learn it?
Cultural Mediation	What does having access to technology mean to you? Can you give me an example?
Culture	Can you discuss anything about your culture that might hinder your use of technology?
Shared Knowledge	What kind of technical help have you received or given? Please describe.
Zone of Proximal Development	What kind of technology tasks have you performed for others to help them do something?
Social Inclusion	How do you use technology to stay in contact with friends and family? How has that changed or impacted your life?
Social Capital	How does technology help you broaden your network of social resources?
Shared Knowledge	Can you give me some examples of where you have worked with others in your community to accomplish a task or get something done using technology?
Shared Knowledge	Is there anything else you can tell me about how you have shared knowledge of technology?