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REFUGEE SOCIAL RELATIONS: THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL TIES AMONG
BURMESE AND CONGOLESE REFUGEES IN WEST MICHIGAN

by

Diane M. Roushangar

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Sociology
Western Michigan University
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REFUGEE SOCIAL RELATIONS: THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL TIES AMONG BURMESE AND CONGOLESE REFUGEES IN WEST MICHIGAN

Diane M. Roushangar, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2021

Refugee resettlement has been studied extensively in the academic realm. Yet, an area that is less understood is among Burmese and Congolese refugees and their adaptation processes in the United States. This study focuses on the development of social relations within these two groups as they navigate interactions within their ethnic group and with the native-born community. Examining the process of how social relations are constructed, this study reveals the nuances of how Burmese and Congolese form close social ties by focusing on four distinct social domains. Illuminating how social relations are formed and maintained within the ethnic community, church community, neighborhood community, and workplace helps uncover the processes that individuals engage in forming social ties.

This research was conducted in western Michigan among the Burmese and Congolese communities in a small suburb of Grand Rapids. Data collection for this study was conducted over nine months and a total of 28 interviews were conducted including 17 Burmese and 8 Congolese refugees, two refugee agency staff, and one Burmese realtor. The findings in this study show that among Burmese and Congolese participants, there are extremely close social ties formed within their ethnic community and church community through various social activities and gatherings that create robust networks of social support. Conversely, the Burmese and Congolese do not form close social ties within their neighborhoods or workplaces due to

prejudice, discrimination, mistreatment and hostility. However, there are differences in the experience of each group as the Burmese experiences are significantly less overt, hostile, or strained with native-born individuals than the Congolese reported. By examining social relations among refugees, this study enhances our scholarly understanding of the mechanisms by which refugees form social ties and in turn what constitutes *segmented social relations* as the Burmese and Congolese in this study face various forms of strained social interactions with the native-born community.

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Diane M. Roushangar

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

How do we understand refugee integration? What does it encompass and what are the mechanisms that drive integration within the host society? Integration has been used broadly for years in the scholarly research to examine immigrant and refugee adaptation, but it remains unclear what social integration encompasses and the processes that take place. Additionally, in understanding the processes that refugees go through during resettlement, there are unanswered questions and unexamined assumptions in the literature relating to the adaptation process that are broadly framed through an integration lens. Inconsistent definitions and usage of the term have obstructed scholars from fully understanding the mechanisms and processes of refugee incorporation. To better understand the working of social integration, this study focuses on refugees' social relations and social ties as they develop in various social domains that facilitate refugee incorporation into the host society.

In this study, I examine the ways in which two refugee groups, Burmese and Congolese, establish and maintain social connections with others in four social domains in western Michigan. These domains include the ethnic community, church community, neighborhood community and workplace. By illuminating how social relations are formed and maintained within the four domains, this study reveals the process in which individuals engage to create social relations that, in turn, shape the way close social ties are created, sustained, and, sometimes, hindered. In exploring the development of social relations among these two groups, scholars can better understand the process of attachment within a host society and how relations

are formed, which helps to clarify the ways in which refugees adjust to a new environment and become members of the host society. Additionally, examining social relations among refugees enhances our scholarly understanding of the means with which refugees form social ties that lead to social integration.

To discover how refugees develop social ties with others, I ask questions about the ways in which Burmese and Congolese refugees develop relations within their ethnic community and the host society and what barriers exist in building close social ties. More specifically, I ask about the ways in which each group forms social ties and the ways in which the domain contexts affect interactions. By focusing on how refugees form relations, scholars can uncover how networks are formed, in what domains refugees form close relations, and how various types of relationship impact the closeness of the social ties formed. I also ask about barriers in forming relations with the larger receiving society, which provides insight into whether relations with the native-born community enhance or inhibit refugees' sense of well-being. Lastly, I ask how Burmese and Congolese refugees differ in their experiences of developing close social relations. The differences between the two groups aid in a more thorough understanding of the effects of ethnicity, race, nationality, and religion on integration experiences.

These questions are critical to ask because they help lend insight into the experiences of Congolese and Burmese refugees as these groups have received little attention in the scholarly literature. Furthermore, by asking questions about the development of close social ties, researchers can better understand the mechanisms that underly integration—an area that is also lacking in the scholarly literature. By showing the ways in which social ties are formed, this study also helps illuminate how coping methods are employed in response to resettlement obstacles and adaptation barriers.

Refugee Integration

The term *integration* has been used broadly in much of the immigration literature that discusses immigrant and refugee incorporation. Various definitions of integration create a lack of clarity in understanding what integration means and its applications in the empirical studies. The inconsistent definitions hinder scholarly understanding of the *processes* of social incorporation that take place for refugees in the receiving society. Some scholars have examined various factors such as political, civic, economic, and social integration to explain immigrants' adaptation experiences. For example, some use religious affiliation to understand civic and political integration (Laxer, Reitz, & Simon 2019), while others use economic integration to understand resilience among immigrants relating to employment and the availability of jobs (Lester & Nguyen 2020). Other scholars examine social integration to help understand the process of social attachment in the host society. Some argue that social integration is the ability to mesh with the host society's institutions (Hamberger 2009), while others maintain that social integration encompasses the level at which individuals can form friends and acquaintances within their ethnic group (Valenta 2007).

An assumption within much of the integration literature, however, is that immigrants and refugees will naturally form attachments to the society as they have more contact with the native-born population. Additionally, much of the research also suggests that integration into the host society is crucial in enhancing refugees' sense of well-being (Di Saint Pierre, Martinovic, & Devroome 2015). Nevertheless, this literature ignores some major factors of integration, such as government policies, prejudice and discrimination, and the immigrant community itself in shaping adaptation experiences. Additionally, a few studies suggest that the integration of immigrants with the host society could sometimes be harmful to immigrants. These scholars

argue that social exchanges with native-born individuals can lead to increased risk of rejection, thereby causing refugees to segregate themselves further from the host community as a result of unpleasant social interactions (Crow & Allen 1994; Wirth 1988). In other words, it is unclear in the literature as to whether having contact with the host society and native-born communities is beneficial for refugees' sense of well-being.

In the literature, social integration is often treated as a process that exists solely between the immigrant and the host society. However, this body of work tends to ignore other factors of incorporation, such as the adaptation that occurs within the same ethnic group. Furthermore, there is little knowledge about refugees' social ties in the immigration literature. In fact, there is only one study that mentions social relations as relevant to understanding social integration (Eraydin, Tasan-Kok, & Vranken 2010). In a recent study, Spencer and Charsley (2021) attempt to reframe integration through problematizing the use of the term and past applications of integration (Spencer & Charsley 2021). They argue that it is important to be aware of the limitations of the broad use of the term and how integration research is conducted.

In my study, I argue that by examining refugees' social relations in different social domains, researchers can gain a better understanding of the process that underlies the development of social ties that lead to social integration. Additionally, by examining social relations and the formation of close social ties, scholars can better understand how adaptation occurs as well as what barriers refugees encounter as they attempt to incorporate into the host society. I chose to compare Burmese with Congolese not only because they are both understudied, but also because each belongs to a different ethno-racial group that may impact the ways in which they form social bonds with others in the host society. By comparing the ways in which Burmese and Congolese develop social relations, this study helps reveal the similarities

and differences that arise during refugees' social interactions and how race and ethnicity affects their experiences.

Research Questions

Based on the literature discussed above, I ask three broad research questions pertaining to the development of social relations among the Burmese and Congolese:

1. How do Burmese refugees develop social relations in their ethnic community and the receiving society? What are the major barriers to build close social ties?
2. How do Congolese refugees develop social relations in their ethnic community and the receiving society? What are the major barriers to build close social ties?
3. How do Burmese and Congolese refugees differ in their experiences of developing social relations?

In my first and second research questions, I ask questions about how the Burmese and Congolese develop social relations within their ethnic community and within the receiving society, and if barriers exist during this process. More specifically, I ask in what domains and how they forge social ties with others. For example, I ask how the communities they live in shape their experiences with forming close social relations within and outside of their ethnic group. I ask about the way the social domain influences how these ties are formed. I also ask about the size of the ethnic group as it relates to establishing social relations and the strength of the relationships in influencing how easily they are able to create relations with other in their ethnic group. Lastly, I ask about the ways in which social relations are developed with the receiving community and any obstacles or barriers to forming close social ties and the role of networks in shaping social ties. In my third research question, I ask about how the Congolese

and Burmese differ in developing and sustaining social ties and how their experiences differ by social domain. By asking these questions, I seek to reveal the mechanisms that drive social integration through the development of social relations in different social domains and how the two groups differ in their experiences.

Theoretical Framework

Three theoretical perspectives help to frame this study, including categorical inequality, deservingness, and social ties and integration. Categorical inequality proposes that individuals emigrating to a new region are categorized differently by the native-born population based on warmth and competence. These categories shape the general population's social attitudes toward different immigrant groups, thereby creating varying degrees of marginalization for immigrants (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, & Pellegrino 2018). Because of these social attitudes, native-born individuals will find ways to maintain their privileged status through policy, discrimination, or other actions that create or sustain inequality. Categorical inequality is rooted in social perceptions of an “out-group” as it is cast in opposition to the “in-group”—a category which refugees and immigrants are unable to occupy. Included in immigration theory is the notion of deservingness that has historically situated legal immigrants, including refugees, as more deserving of state assistance than undocumented immigrants (Fujiwara 2005). However, more recently, refugees have been cast as undeserving of state assistance and a burden to societies. The notion of deservingness helps frame our understanding of the ways in which social groups are divided based on either immigrant or non-immigrant status and how refugees are perceived as worthy or unworthy of assistance. As the immigrant group is cast as the outsider, they can easily be framed as a threat to the dominant group and its resources (Holmes & Castañeda 2016).

When refugees are placed in the “out-group,” they may face more barriers as society views them as undeserving. Finally, I draw from Durkheim’s ([1987] 1966) theory of social integration to explain why social ties are crucial for understanding refugees’ integration in the host society. Because the social ties that individuals create with one another form social cohesion among that group, this helps to buffer against the strains of daily life. Social relations create the cement that binds individuals during resettlement that, in turn, provides the foundation for establishing networks of support during resettlement.

Research Methods

To answer my research questions, I utilized in-depth interviews. Data collection for this study was conducted over nine months beginning in late 2020 and continuing through the spring of 2021. I chose in-depth interviews as my primary data collection tool since qualitative interviewing helps reveal the perceptions of the participants. The interviewing process uncovered the direct experiences of my participants as they told their stories. In this way, interviewing helps to understand what refugees think about their social relations as well as barriers for forming social ties with others. While some observation was also conducted as a secondary tool, it was reserved for the time directly before and after the interviews took place and thus provided context about the participants’ lives rather than direct information about their social relations.

This research was conducted in West Michigan among the Burmese and Congolese communities in the city of Kentwood, a small suburb of Grand Rapids. In 2019, the population of Kentwood was just over 50,000 (Grand Rapids is just over 200,000 in 2019) (Census 2019a,c Table 1). The interviewing and observation took place in the participant’s homes or in my key informant’s homes. The significance of the location in this study is that the majority of all

refugees who are placed in West Michigan are resettled in the Kentwood area, including the Burmese and Congolese participants in this study.

I interviewed 28 individuals in total, including 17 Burmese and 8 Congolese refugees, two refugee agency staff members, and one Burmese realtor. Each interview took approximately 40-60 minutes. The majority of the Burmese participants opted out of being audio recorded; as such I took rigorous notes during the interviews. All of the Congolese participants allowed me to audio record their interviews, and I transcribed within a week of the interview. The interview questions were structured in a way that asked about experiences living in the United States and social interactions. For example, I asked about living arrangements, how individuals found housing, how often interactions took place with neighbors and if they liked their neighbors. I asked questions about whether they felt welcomed by the local community or if they felt connected to the West Michigan community to understand the relations with the native-born community. I also included questions about whether discrimination was experienced. In addressing each ethnic community's experiences with developing social relations, I ask questions about size of the community and how well-connected individuals are within their ethnic group. Likewise, I asked about how often individuals get together, what types of events they go to, and where they go to church. The interview questions center primarily on experiences of living in the United States and the social interactions that took place in various arenas including community, work, church, and home. Additionally, I asked supplemental questions about how refugees engage with the resettlement agency including the types of relations formed, how they assisted and if relations varied among staff and caseworkers.

In addition to the refugee participants, I conducted two interviews with staff at a resettlement agency in Grand Rapids, Michigan which were used to provide contexts for the

refugee participants' interviews. These interviews took approximately one hour each and were conducted in an online video platform that was recorded and later transcribed. The staff interview questions centered on the specific experiences of staff within the agency, including questions about how they became involved in the agency and what is most rewarding and difficult about working within the agency. I also asked questions that addressed how the agency staff interacted with different refugee groups including the programs offered to assist refugees and if the staff perceive barriers to adaptation. I asked questions about their experiences with helping refugees, if they found differences in helping each group, as well as their perceptions of difficulties faced by each refugee group. I also asked questions about how they viewed refugees' development of social relations within their ethnic group as well as with the host society and any barriers they saw refugees facing. By including questions about the agency staff perceptions, I was able to understand how agency staff perceive refugee experiences, which helped contextualize the refugee narratives about social relations.

I also interviewed a Burmese (also a refugee) realtor who helps Burmese refugees purchase homes in the area. This interview took place in a public library and lasted approximately one hour. The interview was audio-recorded and was transcribed shortly after finishing. I asked questions about this individual's role as a realtor for the Burmese in the area, how he entered the field, how long he had been a realtor, and how he found his clients. I also asked about the process of home-buying for his clients, what steps they took to be able to purchase homes, and some of the factors included in the process such as location, schools, family and work. By including the realtor's perceptions of home-buying, this provided some background information about the process as well as context.

Analysis

Data analysis for interviews began during data collection (Charmaz 2014; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Weiss 1994). I utilized grounded theory to analyze interview data as it calls for a simultaneous data collection with analysis where codes are created from the interview data itself and not from previously constructed assumptions (Glaser & Strauss 1967). By beginning analysis during the interview process, I was able to discover new questions to be asked as well as to reframe existing interview questions (Spradley 1979). My initial codes from open coding included 20 different categories and after sorting and organizing the categories, there were six themes that arose. These six themes include: discrimination, types of work, neighborhood interactions, church environment, co-ethnic activities, and native-born interactions. After further refining of the themes, they were then synthesized into four major domains including ethnic community, church community, neighborhood community, and workplace that all connected to the overarching theme of social relations and social interaction.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is composed of eight chapters. The first chapter explains the rationale and purpose of the study, outlines my empirical concerns and theoretical framework, discusses my research methods, and describes the organization of the dissertation. Chapter Two reviews the scholarly literature examining refugee resettlement as it relates to the policies of refugee admission and refugee resettlement in general, including definitions and refugee admissions statistics. I also discuss the literature that examines the history of immigration and the process of restrictions that were enacted over the past century and a half through today. I include a description of my research questions and explain the theories I use to frame the study.

In Chapter Three, I discuss the historical contexts and backgrounds of the Congolese and Burmese refugees. I include a discussion of the two groups cultures of origin, the arrival and population statistics in the United States, Michigan, and Grand Rapids area. Furthermore, I also discuss the research site in Kentwood Michigan. In Chapter Four, I outline the research methods used in this study to collect data. I include the demographic information of my research participants and a brief discussion of the geographic area. I explain the interview process briefly discuss the limited participant observation that was gathered to aid understanding of the contexts about participants' lives. Further, I discuss recruitment and ethical issues in this chapter.

Chapter Five documents Burmese social relations in four different social domains. I describe how social ties are formed among the Burmese within their ethnic community, their church community, the neighborhood community and the workplace. Chapter Six documents Congolese participants' social relations. I discuss how Congolese participants form social ties within their ethnic community, church community, their neighborhood community, and the workplace.

Chapter Seven juxtaposes the experiences of the Burmese and Congolese. I discuss the similarities and differences of the two groups' social relations in different social domains. Finally, in Chapter Eight, I conclude my dissertation by summarizing the main findings of the study and discuss their implications for sociological research of refugee integration. I also explain the limitations of the study and offer insights for future research.

CHAPTER II

REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

While the literature on refugees' adaptation and integration is abundant, scholars have given little attention to Congolese and Burmese refugees in the United States. Although humanitarian organizations suggest there are positive outcomes for refugee adaptation, the scholarly literature illustrates that many refugees experience difficulties in adapting to the communities they are placed in (Allen 2009). Burmese and Congolese refugees may adapt differently in the United States because of their experiences in their home countries and causes of displacement. Furthermore, when the structure of a society and its institutions create the conditions that hinder refugees' ability to adapt, this can intensify adaptation problems (Twagiramungu 2013). As a result, examining the resettlement experiences in light of the ways refugees form social ties may help illuminate the coping methods employed in response to resettlement stressors such as loss of vocation, experiences with discrimination, and language barriers. By examining the experiences of Congolese and Burmese refugee integration, this research has the potential to uncover the nuances in resettlement that individual refugees experience as well as the experiences of each group as a whole. To date, there are relatively few studies that examine African refugee resettlement in the United States (Shandy & Fennelly 2006) with a similar lack of attention on Burmese refugee resettlement in the United States (Fike & Androff 2016).

In the sections below, I discuss the politics of refugee admission and policies and review the literature of refugee resettlement, adaptation, and integration. Following the review, I discuss

the inadequacies in the literature and ask three research questions based on the discussion. Finally, I explain the theoretical foundation on which the study is based and why I focus on social relations in this study.

The Politics of Refugee Admissions

Since the second world war, the United States has assisted in resettling hundreds of thousands of displaced people. For nearly four decades beginning after World War II, the United States was committed to resettlement in an “ad hoc fashion;” this, however, changed with the onset of the Refugee Act of 1980 in which the role of nongovernmental agencies became integral to the resettlement process (Brown & Scribner 2014:101). While the Refugee Act was supposed to remove some of the political interests embedded in the refugee resettlement process, it was these very policies that allowed the government to shift towards immigrant enforcement and control (Light 2013). For example, following the implementation of the Refugee Act, control of immigration was implemented through mass deportations, including permanent residents, citizens, and undocumented immigrants (Hernandez 2007). Today, there is still a considerable amount of political influence on the process in which the United States accepts refugees. For example, the United States has historically accepted refugees based on religious persecution, such as during the period after the fall of the Shah of Iran, which was the result of policy that was embroiled in strategic political interests on the United States’ part (Nawyn 2019). Further, government policies tend to accept refugees and immigrants from communist countries such as Cuba, while denying asylum to individuals coming from countries that did not fit within the United States’ geostrategic interests such as Haiti, El Salvador, and Guatemala (Hernandez

2007). In other words, admitting refugees becomes beneficial if the act of admitting them can strengthen the country's global power.

Additionally, admitting refugees into the United States also helps the national economy in terms of the jobs filled that many United States citizens and native-born Americans are uninclined to take. Since many refugees find that any education or training they had prior to entering the United States is not recognized, they are at greater risk of marginalization within American workforce (Fangen 2006). The meatpacking industry, for example, actively targets immigrant and refugee groups because the unskilled immigrant and refugee labor force are situated in a capitalist society to bear the burden of exploitative work due to their marginalized status (Broadway 2007). As an industrial capitalist economy needs a reserve labor force from which to draw on during economic growth and decline, marginalized racial and ethnic groups fulfill this demand (Blauner 1973), and employers recruit immigrants because of their very "exploitability" in the labor market (Gomberg-Muñoz 2012: 347).

Regardless of how states deal with immigration, human migration has been critical for adaptation to environmental, social, and political factors with the goal always to improve circumstances (Massey et al. 2018). Events such as displacement due to war and political persecution have created a total refugee population of over 16 million (UNHRC, 2016) and a total migrant population of over 243 million worldwide, with approximately 124 million of this total migrating to high-income countries (United Nations 2015). Since 1980, the United States has admitted over three million refugees (US Department of State n.d.), but the level of receptivity toward refugees by native-born refugees has fluctuated for various reasons. Although the reasons underlying concerns over immigration are complex, several factors have been studied extensively, including xenophobia, racism, and fear of labor market devastation (Ha 2010;

Yakushko 2009). Some studies have focused on the economic well-being of a country as a primary determinant of attitudes toward immigrants (Scheve & Slaughter 2001), but recent research has shown that perceptions regarding the extent to which migrants affect the host culture influences immigrant tolerance within host countries (Lucassen & Lubbers 2012). This perceived threat of change within the host culture can evoke exclusionary reactions that are fueled by racial and ethnic prejudice, and ultimately heighten anti-immigrant sentiment among the native-born population (Lucassen & Lubbers 2012). Explanations surrounding the factor of “cultural threat” cite concerns over globalization in which some native-born residents may perceive the threat of non-natives as promoting a loss of national identity (Norris 2005). Coupled with xenophobia, which “undermines social cohesion [and] peaceful co-existence” (Crush & Pendelton 2004:1), a perceived loss of national identity intensifies the threat from cultural change in the presence of an increasing immigrant population (Lucassen & Lubbers 2012). Native-born individuals become threatened by immigrants due to a fear of cultural change in addition to racial and ethnic prejudice towards immigrants.

Different resettlement regimes have different goals and although nations seek to construct policies that incorporate refugees as fully functioning political members with rights, many individuals have had their rights removed as was the case with the deportation of Cambodian refugees (Hing 2004). Other policies in the United States have allowed for the mistreatment of groups such as Haitian asylum seekers who were barred from the legal process of asylum, held in detention centers, and physically abused (Dow 2008). These policies are also constructed in a way that justifies the mistreatment of groups labeled unfavorably such as Iraqis and Afghans, particularly after the September 11, 2001 attacks (Dow 2008). While feelings of compassion often arise with the depiction of forced migration or of people fleeing their countries as a result

of persecution, compassion may be worn away when refugees and asylum seekers are viewed as illegitimate (Watters 2013). When refugees are perceived as a security threat by native residents, viewed as abusing the social welfare system, or seen as using bogus claims to secure refugee status, compassion from native-born individuals may diminish (Lawlor & Tolley 2017).

Refugee Resettlement

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines a refugee as “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHRC(a) n.d.:1). In order to be granted refugee status, however, the individual must be able to establish their “well founded-fear of persecution” (USCIS(a) n.d.). The process of being granted refugee status occurs outside of the United States, while the claims themselves are adjudicated within the United States (Kerwin 2012). In a similar definition, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS(b) n.d.) states that a refugee:

“is located outside of the United States; is of special humanitarian concern to the United States; Demonstrates that they were persecuted or fear persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group; is not firmly resettled in another country; is admissible to the United States”. Additionally, a “refugee does *not* include anyone who ordered, incited, assisted, or otherwise participated in the persecution of any person on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. (p.1, emphasis original)

The United States has been one of the leading countries for accepting refugees since the latter part of World War II (Nawyn 2013). Although the United States has historically accepted

high volumes of refugees, and even more during the mid-1970s, there has been an ebb and flow of actual admissions based on political factors that include restrictive refugee admissions policies and procedures, many of which were put into place after September 11th that systematically excluded legitimate asylum seekers (Kerwin 2012). Today, the UNHCR estimates that by the end of 2018 there was a global refugee population of over 20 million (UNHCR(a) n.d.). While refugees are not guaranteed resettlement as a right according to international human rights laws, they are entitled to the right to “seek and receive protection” (Nawyn 2013:108).

In terms of national origins, in 2017 the sending countries at the top of the list of admissions into the United States were the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq and Syria (Mossadd 2019). By 2018, the admissions numbers for Iraq and Syria dropped to about 200 total individuals from a combined 14,000 for both countries in 2017 (Refugee Processing Center(a) n.d.). In 2017, the administration under President Donald Trump put the travel ban into effect in which asylum seekers and refugees from Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, and North Korea were blocked (National Immigration Forum 2019). Other countries placed on a “high risk” list were Egypt, Mali, and Somalia with fewer than 300 admitted in 2019 from these countries (Refugee Processing Center(a) n.d.). The newest refugee ban put in place in February 2020 included Sudan, Tanzania, Eretria and Nigeria as well as two Asian countries—Myanmar (Burma) and Kyrgyzstan—regions in this list holding substantial Muslim populations (Kano-Youngs 2020). Furthermore, the refugee ban for these African nations may impact African refugees currently living in the United States due to negative media attention.

While the admissions caps are put in place by the President in conjunction with Congress as they set priority levels, admission by region, and unallocated reserves (Martin 2010), the political climate and the anti-immigrant and refugee sentiment reinforces how groups are either

included or excluded (Hernandez 2007; Light 2013). For example, exclusions occurred when changes were made to policies that curtailed overall refugee admissions for a few years following the September 11th terrorist attacks. However, by the end of 2010 these numbers rebounded with the U.S. accepting over 73,000 refugees. These caps remained steady through the administration of President Barack Obama and were set between 70,000 and 80,000 between the years of 2010 and 2015 with actual admissions at or just below these numbers (US Department of State n.d.). By the end of the 2016 fiscal year, the last year of the Obama administration, the United States had an admissions cap at 85,000 and admitted 11 individuals shy of this total. However, these caps plunged within the first few years of the Trump administration with ceilings placed at 54,000 in 2017, 45,000 in 2018 and 30,000 in 2019 (National Immigration Forum 2019) with actual admissions at 53,691 for 2017, 22,405 for 2018, and 27,513 for 2019 (Refugee Processing Center(b) n.d.). In 2018, while the cap was set at 45,000, approximately 50% of this cap was admitted—a 59% decrease from 2017 and a 46% decrease from 2016 (Mossaad 2019). Looking closer at the fluctuation in refugee admissions since 1980, the total numbers admitted for 2018 were the lowest recorded with the second lowest occurring since the year 2002—just after the September 11th terrorist attacks (Department of Homeland Security n.d.). In both 2018 and 2019, the United States saw some of the lowest caps since the Refugee Act of 1980 was passed (Rush 2019). However, in late 2019, the Trump administration set a new low with the refugee ceiling placed at 18,000 for the 2020 year (Presidential Memoranda 2019).

Control of Immigration and “Othering”

Coerced migration began in the United States with the Atlantic slave trade that lasted over 200 years, but it was during the 19th century that voluntary migration sprang from a market economy in which many Europeans were able to emigrate to the United States, Canada, and Australia (Polanyi, Arensberg & Pearson 1957). While mass migration occurred in large numbers from these regions, it was not perceived as a national threat since these individuals filled a labor void in the host society (Light 2013). However, with the large number of displaced people that arose during World War I, many nations were forced into grappling with methods of handling displaced immigrants during a time where “hardening of state borders” was also occurring with most immigrants arriving from European nations including Poland, Germany, Ukraine, and Russia (Nawyn 2013).

Immigration into the United States was not officially restricted until the late 1800s with Chinese being the first group excluded and the second group exclusion from the Asian Pacific regions who experienced either total exclusion or at minimum partial restrictions in the early 1900s (Ewing 2012). Additionally, ethnic, religious, and racial divides created opposition by native and non-native-born whites who were against Chinese and Japanese immigrants, which resulted in drastic immigration policy changes from the late 19th century through the mid-20th century (Zolberg 1999). As a direct result of these restrictive measures on immigration laws and policies, during the early 1920s, even harsher limits were put in place—this time based on the “national origins” of the immigrants (Light 2013).

Narratives surrounding immigration are often framed in a way that create a dichotomy of “citizen/foreigner” in which the “foreigner” is the “other” and thus “subject to special restriction on their entry to the territory of another state” (Light 2013:345). Inscribed in these

representations of “otherness” are cultural and racial depictions of inferiority (Naber 2006). Othering serves as a mechanism to mark individuals as different from oneself (Weis 1995). Within this process of othering, the dominant group always enforces these racialized categories (Omi & Winant 2014). For example, the marginalization of Muslim individuals across the globe has helped produce an “othered” group in which religion, race, ethnicity, and/or culture are used to marginalize and exclude this group while simultaneously using religion as a means to frame some groups as a “security threat” (Naber 2006). Thus, the amount of acceptance by the host country varies greatly based on the country in which the asylum seekers reside.

This “othering” of immigrants is also linked to a social exclusion process that both marginalizes and disempowers, creating an “us and them” dichotomy (Grove & Zwi 2006:1933). Othering then is created out of constructed group identities in which marginalization is the outgrowth of belonging to the outsider group (Powel & Menendian 2016). Furthermore, language is often used in a way that frames refugees as a threat to host counties. For example, when “illegal,” “migrant flows,” or “overrun” terms are used to describe refugees, this reinforces a narrative that embodies the us/them binary (Grove & Zwi 2006). In a study conducted with Sudanese refugees in Australia, the participants actively sought to assimilate into Australian culture in order to obtain the Australian identity and push back against the othering process that positions them as outsider (Hatoss 2012). In another study examining racism among Sudanese refugees in Australia, the social exclusion based on the race and ethnicity of this group created significant difficulties for Sudanese refugees in the education system (Baak 2019). Framed in these terms, refugees then face both marginalization and social exclusion during resettlement based on nationality, racial and ethnic identity, and language.

Integration in its Various Forms

Although integration has been pervasive within the immigration literature, it often lacks clarity in definitions and empirical applications. While there is noteworthy scholarly work on the integration processes of immigrants and refugees, these studies include numerous definitions with unclear factors of what integration encompasses, which muddies scholarly understandings of the processes of adaptation in the receiving society. In some studies, the term *integration* (and its various categories) is either not defined (Grant & Kronstal 2013; Nash, Wong, & Trlin 2006; Reitz, Banerjee, Phan, & Thompson 2009) or when it is defined, it is unclear what is being measured or how it is being measured. For example, Hynie (2018) defines integration in broad terms, suggesting that integration includes elements of economic and social participation, yet he lacks an articulation of what each term comprises. Alba and Foner (2014:263) posit integration as “processes that allow members of immigrant groups to attain [...] the opportunities afforded long-term native citizens of obtaining such valued social goals as improved socioeconomic positions for themselves and their children and to gain inclusion and acceptance in a broad range of societal institutions.” This statement positions native-born members as the measuring stick for all immigrants, whereby they must reach this “level” of integration. In a more comprehensive definition, Penninx (2019:5) defines integration broadly as the “process of settlement of newcomers in a given society, to the interaction of these newcomers with the host society and to the social change that follows immigration.” This definition focuses on the relations between immigrants and the host society but overlooks the relations that may be formed within the same ethnic groups in the host society.

Scholars suggest, however, that there is much “fuzziness around the concept of integration” (Penninx 2019:11). To understand integration, researchers have examined factors

such as political and civic incorporation, economic integration, and social integration in their various forms to explain the processes of adapting to a new host society. For example, Laxer et al. (2019) argue that political and civic participation is important aspect of integration because it is a process immigrants and refugees go through to gain citizenship, whether they engage in the voting process of a nation or if they participate in their community organizations. Using religious affiliation to understand the level at which Muslim minorities were able to engage in civic and political processes in Canada and France, this study argues that while Muslim immigrants have high citizenship rates in Canada and low rates in France, their participation in voting was the inverse. This suggests that civic and political participation rests on factors outside of citizenship such as education and age (Laxer et al. 2019). Likewise, Lester and Nguyen (2020) examine economic integration—the ability for immigrants to successfully enter the labor market—in order to understand the regional variations and resilience among immigrants relating to employment rates. Their findings suggest that the jobs available across various industries relate to the diversity of the jobs held by immigrants in which there were better outcomes in metropolitan regions that led to higher resilience. In other words, living in an urban region with diverse job opportunities works as a buffer against economic downturns.

While the above studies have focused on political, civic, and economic forms of integration, others have narrowed their focus to social integration to help understand the complex processes of social attachments that take place during resettlement among immigrants and refugees. For instance, Snel, Engbersen and Leerkes (2006) view social integration as the “informal social contacts of immigrants with native [...] people and, [...] the extent to which immigrants endorse the host society’s prevailing moral standards and values” (see also Vermeulen and Penninx 2000). Other scholars, such as Hamberger (2009), define it as the ability

of individuals to mesh with the host society's institutions. Valenta (2007) suggests that social integration is the level at which individuals are able to form friendships and acquaintances within their ethnic group, which brings in more of the social relations aspect of integration than relations with institutions. In a broader definition, Gross and Lindquist (1995) define social integration as "webs of interpersonal interactions, commonly comprised of relatives, friends, or other associates forged through social and economic activities that act as conduits through which information, influence, and resources flow" (p. 329). In this definition, however, social integration is interlinked with economic activities, which are commonly seen as separate from the social in much of the literature, yet there are no clear indicators showing how immigrants or refugees are well integrated. Strang and Ager (2010) posit that social integration is a process that changes both the individuals resettling as well as the communities in which the refugees reside—shaping each other in the process. This mutual exchange between host community and refugee community is noteworthy, as resettlement is not a linear one-way process, but this study is not explicit in how social integration occurs among refugees.

Individual refugees and the communities in which they interact are interconnected at various levels, yet an assumption within the integration framework is that, over time, ethnic groups will naturally "integrate" as they have more contact with the native-born population (Valenta 2007). However, there are factors that influence the level of integration including the government's policies towards refugees, the level of prejudice towards immigrants, and the overall qualities of the immigrant community (Nunez 2004; Portes & Rumbaut 2006).

Regardless of some disagreement among scholars, research largely suggests that integration with the host society is crucial for refugees to enhance their sense of belonging (Di Saint Pierre et al. 2015). Likewise, others argue that it is necessary for refugees to socially integrate with the

native-born population to enhance their sense of well-being during resettlement (Kabuya 2008). Still, other studies suggest that increasing integration through networks with the native-born population can escalate the risk of rejection, leading refugees to segregate themselves further from the host society (Crow & Allen 1994; Wirth 1988). It is unclear in the literature whether integration is beneficial for refugee's sense of well-being. Hynie (2018) examines social integration as useful for understating integration as it helps to promote inclusion. He argues that for refugees to feel a sense of inclusion, there must be social support to promote interaction and participation among the refugee community and that refugees' ability to integrate "is strongly determined by policies that shape their social and material context" (p. 267). At the same time, this study also suggests that there are psychological components of integration that also impact a refugee's ability to integrate, such as how robust their social connections are with others outside of their own ethnic community.

Much of the scholarly literature that examines social integration in all its forms views it as a process that happens primarily between the immigrant (or immigrant group) and the host society (native-born individuals), yet there are factors of incorporation that also occur within the same ethnic groups but appear largely absent as a factor in integration studies. In only one study was there mention of social relations as relevant to understanding social integration, yet this was muddled by the use of other points of interest to explain social integration, such as entrepreneurship and social capital (Eraydin et al. 2010). Because of these unclear definitions and inconsistent applications of social integration in the scholarly research, I argue that by looking at the refugee's social ties, we can gain a better understanding of how refugees develop relations with others, who they develop relations with, and how they develop relations in various domains. The term *social relations* is often used to describe connections with others, but they do

not necessarily have to be close in nature. Social ties, on the other hand, are much closer and are established through sustained and more frequent interaction among individuals. For example, a refugee may establish a relation with a neighbor as they wave every morning before going to work, but this relation may not be a close social tie if their interaction does not go beyond a wave. When higher levels of interaction are established with others, however, this tends to create stronger social ties that could facilitate integration. Therefore, social relations offer a critical site for studying varying degrees of social integration.

In a very recent study, Spencer and Charsley (2021) argue that reframing integration is necessary to understand the *processes* of immigrant adaptation better. By problematizing the use of integration and outlining its limitations, scholars can avoid issues associated with its overuse and misuse. For instance, Spencer and Charsley (2021) urge researchers not to fall into the traps of normativity, othering of migrants, viewing society as nationally bounded, methodological nationalism, or a focus on a one-sided process of migrant adaptation during research. The critique of normativity outlines that studies that examine integration often focus on the outcome instead of a focus on “what is happening [and] the actual processes” of adaptation (p. 5). They suggest reflexivity is the antidote to this issue during the study design and analysis of research. The second critique lies in the “othering” of migrant groups who are often framed as needing to integrate as this leaves the process as one-sided. The third critique deals with the need to shift away from viewing society as a “bounded, stable, functional entity” in which migrants are the wrench (so to speak) in this entity which exist on the sidelines. The fourth critique addresses the methodological nationalism that tends to ignore the global and transnational processes of migrants. Lastly, the narrow focus on the migrant as the “problem” or the sole factor in the integration process needs to shift towards examining “multiple and systemic factors which

facilitate and impede processes” relating to integration (p. 6). To this end, Spencer and Charsley (2021) suggest that by being more reflexive and noting the limitations in the use of integration research, scholars can conduct and contribute to understanding the processes of integration more thoroughly.

Drawing from Spencer and Charsley (2021), I use the development of social relations to understand the processes and mechanisms of refugee incorporation in different social domains. I challenge the assumption that refugees’ social integration takes place solely through their contacts with the native-born population. Rather, ethnic relations could serve as a significant mechanism that facilitates refugees’ incorporation into the host society. I argue that the development of refugees’ social ties varies by race and ethnicity. It also differs across social domains, thereby resulting in varied outcomes of social integration. Finally, using subjects’ own experiences and interpretations as the starting point of analysis, I place refugees at the center of research inquiry to avoid othering or sidelining them.

Social Integration: Refugee Empirical Studies

Scholarly research examining refugee social integration is sparse. What does exist tends to focus heavily on the strength of networks. For example, some suggest that that social capital is formed through “bonding and bridging” within one’s ethnic group and outside of one’s ethnic group (Ryan 2011). Namely, it is bonding (the ability to forge ties among the same ethnic group) and bridging, which are the connections made with those outside of refugees’ ethnic group that are key in forming social capital and in turn strengthening social networks. However, there are different social relations created depending on the network that is being accessed, which in turn creates varying levels of social capital. Other studies, suggest that there are different types of ties

formed among refugees that provide various levels of support (Chimhowu & Hulme 2006). These close and extended relations with others provide resources, but depending on the level of closeness, the resources or access to resources vary. Likewise, other research examining kinship ties points to close relations as critical in offering support than those with only extended networks (Porter, Hampshire, Kyei, Adjaloo Rapoo, & Kilpatrick 2008). Put simply, the closeness of the social ties that are formed and who they were formed with is critical to understand when examining how refugees create bonds with others in the host society. Yet, these studies focus primarily on social capital and networks and less on the examination of how social relations and social ties are formed.

Less examined in the literature is that of social relations—specifically among the Burmese and Congolese and the ways in which social ties are forged and with whom they are cultivated and maintained. Burmese refugee resettlement in the United States is understudied (Trieu & Vang 2015); there is only one study that examines social integration in the United States among Burmese (Lee, Choi, Proulx, & Cornwell 2015). In their research, Lee et al. (2015) suggest that integration among the Burmese includes multiple components of adjusting to a new society including physical, psychological, and social. Similar to other studies (see Berkman & Glass 2000), this study also suggests that refugees expand their networks to gain more social connections outside of their ethnic groups in order to access resources. While the findings in this research are interesting, this study did not distinguish in what ways social relations were formed. It also assumes that social integration only occurs among English speakers.

Some studies examine isolation as a factor in understanding levels of social integration. For example, one study revealed that inter-ethnic splintering occurred among Burmese in the

United States creating mistrust and opposition of other Burmese ethnic groups (Fike & Androff 2016). Similarly, Gilhooly and Lynn (2014) suggested that it was isolation from other ethnic groups that inhibited access to resources for the Karen ethnic group of refugees in the United States because it minimizes the network in which Burmese refugees belong to and thus fewer resources are available. While these empirical studies address the resettlement process of Burmese, they do not examine how social ties are forged, what factors shape these ties, and among which networks refugees create social relations.

In a similar vein, very little scholarly attention has been given to African refugee resettlement in the United States (Shandy & Fennelly 2006) and even less work has been focused on how and with whom African refugees' form and maintain social relations. Of the small body of empirical work that addresses Congolese refugees and integration, the focus tends to be on social integration as it relates to refugees incorporating with the native-born community, economic integration as it is intertwined with social networks, or difficulties with language and establishing economic integration. In a study conducted in South Africa, Amisi (2006) found that the Congolese refugee community experienced difficulties adapting due to a lack of access to employment and social protection. While the Congolese utilized their social networks consisting of other co-ethnics and family members, their over-reliance on support from families tended to foster social exclusion and mistrust among their close-knit kin groups.

In another study of in Norway, Kabuya (2008) found that when Congolese refugees were socially integrated with the native-born Norwegian community, they were able to establish more robust social networks that led to better overall well-being. While Kabuya (2008) cites various definitions of social integration, the argument set forth is that immigrants must have "social contact or civil engagement in the broader community", which implies that social integration

rests in the amount of contact with the native-born community (p.12). Hume and Hardwick (2006) found that when specific African refugee groups held limited English proficiency, those with unstable finances and limited English proficiency, such as the Congolese and Somalis, tended to experience unstable resettlement as a result of being intimidated by the other African refugee ethnic groups. In this case, the prejudice from other non-Congolese African refugees incited more isolation and less integration for this group. As with the Burmese empirical studies, the literature examining African and Congolese refugees lacks a close examination of the way in which social relations are formed. Additionally, some of the research focuses only on relations formed with the native-born community, which ignores the social ties that may be created within one's ethnic group.

Discussion of the Literature

While there is a rich body of research on migration and refugee resettlement, there has been less focus on the experiences of Burmese and Congolese refugees. The ways refugees themselves experience and navigate a new social landscape and how they form social ties is understudied; more specifically, social incorporation is less understood. Aspects of how refugees form social ties and the consequences of the ties they form are mostly absent in the research. When social adaptation is in focus there is less examining on the impact that strained relations have on refugees and coping mechanisms. As a result, there is a gap in understanding how refugees form social ties within their own ethnic groups as well as within the larger communities in which they work and live. Some research suggests that social integration is critical for improving sense of belonging. However, who refugees integrate with may determine the quality of their experiences as positive or negative since integration with the native-born population can

result in increased segregation or social exclusion from the host society due to prejudice or qualities of the community. Due to the shortcomings in the literature, this study seeks to fill a gap in understanding how refugees themselves experience the process of forming social ties within their own ethnic communities and with the receiving community.

Since the 1980s and particularly within the past two decades, anti-immigrant sentiment has been fueled by government policies that have placed restrictions on groups based on race, ethnicity, and religion. This “othering” process has helped construct refugees as a group that is marginalized based on multiple factors including race, ethnicity, geographic region and religion. Refugee resettlement is embroiled in geostrategic interests of the state that determines who is admitted and who is denied asylum. The act of labeling some groups as threats by policy makers and politicians is rooted in religious and racialized categories of “other” that perpetuate negative stereotypes of individuals. Resistance to admitting refugees from these stigmatized groups is evidenced by the various refugee bans put in place by the Trump administration that have drastically reduced the numbers of refugees being admitted into the United States. As a result of the 2020 travel ban enacted by the Trump administration that now includes several new African and Asian countries, this further reflects the anti-refugee sentiment in the Trump administration’s immigration policies and procedures. While the Democratic Republic of Congo is not on the ban list, Congolese refugees do make up a significant percentage of the West Michigan refugee population and many lived in the Tanzanian refugee camps—which was on the refugee “ban list.” As such, this new ban may create more stigma for African refugees in general even if they are not on this list. In addition, this heightened visibility may exacerbate negative perceptions from the native-born community when they are situated within the narrative of exploiting the social welfare system or making bogus claims to gain permanent residency.

An additional area that is understudied is how Burmese and Congolese refugees themselves experience the formation of social relations. Burmese refugees may face a different set of challenges during resettlement including linguistic discrimination, but African refugees can face race-based discrimination arising from racial categories and the United States racial hierarchy. Both Burmese and Congolese refugees face difficulties during the resettlement process but depending on multiple factors they may experience varying degrees of difficulty in the process. Thus, examining these two groups can help discover the complexities and variability in the groups' experiences where one group has a large ethnic base and the other does not in West Michigan.

Very little research examines either group in terms of the process of forming social ties. Similarly, little research has been done on Congolese social integration. Of the three discussed in this paper, only one was conducted within the United States, yet this study was not explicit in its use of social integration. Thus, there is a gap in the literature examining refugees' resettlement in the United States as it relates to the formation of social ties. Even less understood is the development of social relations for Burmese and Congolese. The scholarly literature that does focus on these two refugee groups is limited in scope when examining social relations. While there are a few studies that make note of the degree and type of refugee integration, these studies did not include Burmese or Congolese and were not conducted with refugees in the United States.

Other issues remain within the integration research such as the concept's frequent application with little attention given to the complexity of what this process of integration means for refugees. What is more, the process of the formation of social ties that refugees experience in order to survive their resettlement process is largely absent. Social integration is broadly applied

in the literature, with little attention to the nuances of relations that underlie social integration that is necessary to understand the formation of social ties among refugees. To date, there are few studies that examine the formation of social relations of Congolese and Burmese refugees in the United States.

Exploring social relations of refugees can expand our understandings of the processes that encompass how individuals form social ties. It is unclear in the literature how the social ties that refugees make impact their overall experiences, which may or may not lead to social isolation. Instead, there is a tendency to use social integration in broad strokes, which erases the nuances of how refugees form social ties. In this study, I focus on social relations as a way to frame the process in which Burmese and Congolese refugees create and maintain social ties with others in their communities. More specifically, I draw attention to the ways in which these social ties are formed and how groups and contexts impact those relationships. I set forth by focusing on an examination of social relations as a better way to understand the processes of adaptation among Burmese and Congolese refugees.

The term integration itself is unclear, which makes our scholarly understanding of the process of forming social ties vague and ambiguous at times. As a result of its inconsistent and poorly defined use, I abandon the term social integration and argue that its use in the literature is problematic. In addition to its inconsistent use, there are problematic assumptions within the scholarly literature that imply refugees must mesh with the receiving community in order to be considered successfully integrated. Refugees, however, may still be “integrated” and connected with others without having to establish social ties with the native-born population. They may have strong ties within their co-ethnic groups and be isolated from the receiving community and still feel a sense of home and well-being in the host society. More pointedly, not having

connections with the native-born population does not equate that an individual is not well integrated. If social connections with the native-born population is used as the measuring stick for refugees' well-being and success, this necessarily excludes other social relations formed that may, in fact, support refugee's sense of well-being as they navigate life in the United States, namely other refugees within their ethnic group and outside of their ethnic group. What is less understood is *how* refugees create relations, with whom, in what domains and how that constitutes integration. Therefore, I suggest that by focusing on social relations as a starting point, we can better understand the *processes* that refugees experience during their resettlement in the receiving society with less confusion.

Research Questions

Based on the discussion of the literature stated earlier, in this study, I ask the following research questions:

1. How do Burmese refugees develop social relations in their ethnic community and the receiving society? What are the major barriers to build close social ties?
2. How do Congolese refugees develop social relations in their ethnic community and the receiving society? What are the major barriers to build close social ties?
3. How do Burmese and Congolese refugees differ in their experiences of developing social relations?

Below, I articulate a series of questions under each of the three broad research questions:

Research Question #1

In what ways do Burmese refugees forge social ties with other Burmese? Are there specific social domains in which this takes place? Does having a large or small ethnic base in the area influence the way the Burmese develop their social relations? Do these relations extend beyond the local community? Does the strength of the relationship affect the ease in which they are able to form relations with others in their ethnic group? Are there barriers to forming social relations with non-Burmese refugees? How do Burmese form social relations with the receiving community? Are there obstacles that they face? Are there barriers to forming close ties with the receiving community? Does the community that the Burmese live in play a role in how social relations are facilitated? What networks do they draw support from?

Research Question #2

In what ways do Congolese refugees forge social ties with other Congolese? Are there specific social domains in which this takes place? Does having a large or small ethnic base in the area influence the way the Congolese develop their social relations? Do these relations extend beyond the local community? Does the strength of the relationship affect the ease in which they are able to form relations with others in their ethnic group? Are there barriers to forming social relations with non-Congolese refugees? How do Congolese form social relations with the receiving community? Are there obstacles that they face? Are there barriers to forming close ties with the receiving community? Does the community that the Congolese live in play a role in how social relations are facilitated? What networks do they draw support from?

Research Question #3

How do Burmese refugees differ from Congolese refugees in how they develop social ties? Do Congolese forge close bonds with others in their ethnic groups in similar ways to the Burmese? Are there differences or similarities in how they create and sustain these social relations? Do these relations differ based on the social domain? For example, do Burmese have varying experiences in forming social ties in their neighborhoods, ethnic group, or work than the Congolese? Are the Congolese or Burmese able to form social relations with the receiving community easier? Do the way social ties are formed with the receiving community depend on the social domain they arise within and how does this differ among the Burmese and Congolese?

Theoretical Framework

This study is situated in three theoretical frameworks, including categorical inequality, deservingness, and social ties and integration. Categorical inequality proposes that those who immigrate into a new country exist in opposition to the advantaged native-born group who will resist the redistribution of resources to any “outsider” group, namely immigrants and refugees (Massey et al. 2018). In this way, native-born individuals will find new ways to maintain their privileged status through policy, discrimination, or other actions that create or sustain inequality. Furthermore, categorical inequality is rooted in the social perceptions of an “out-group” as it is cast in opposition to the “in-group”—a category which refugees and immigrants are unable to occupy. Included in immigration theory is the notion of deservingness that has historically situated legal immigrants, including refugees, as more deserving of state assistance than undocumented immigrants (Fujiwara 2005). If refugees are placed in the “out-group,” then they may face more barriers as society views them as undeserving. I draw from Durkheim’s theory of

social integration to explain why social ties are crucial for understanding the process of refugee adaptation in the host society. Below, I explain these theoretical perspectives that pave the foundation of this study.

Categorical Inequality

Massey et al.'s (2018) theory of categorical inequality sets forth the argument that how individuals categorize others is rooted in social cognition in which the evaluation of others is based on warmth and competence. Once someone has been categorized based on these two traits then other attributes from previously learned cultural and social scripts can be applied. Warmth and competence can be ranked in terms of varying degrees of low and high based on stereotypes. Taken together, the combination of warmth and competence creates four groups: "In-group," "Envied out-group," "Pitied out-group" and "Despised out-group." Figure 2.1 shows the four groups in relation to warmth and competence.

Figure 2.1—Behavior from Intergroup Affect and Stereotypes (BIAS) Map (Massey et al. 2018 as conceptualized by Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick 2007).

		Warmth	
		<u>High</u>	<u>Low</u>
Competence	<u>High</u>	In-group Associated with positive traits: esteem, respect, pride. Perceived as “just like us.”	Envied out-group Hold skills, power, agency but not trustworthy or approachable. Not liked, but envied and respected (“middleman minorities” such as Asian Americans”).
	<u>Low</u>	Pitied Out-group The aged, mentally disabled, non-able bodied; pitied, sympathy offered towards members of this group.	Despised Out-group (outcasts) Drug addicts, dealers, homeless, prostitutes, & social outcasts. Scorn, contempt, derision—not fully human.

In the high warmth and high competence category, this offers the perception that another person is “just like me”—that is, a member of the In-group, which is associated with feelings of pride and respect (Massey et al. 2018:27). The Envied out-group consists of high competence but low warmth and is associated with both envy and respect. Jealousy and pride are also associated with the Envied out-group where individuals have power and agency but are not perceived as trustworthy or approachable. For the Pitied out-group, with low competence and high warmth, perception of these individuals elicits sorrow and sympathy as they experience misfortune for reasons “outside of their control” and often lack the agency and ability to overcome those misfortunes (Massey et al. 2018:28). This group is usually protected by society but may fall victim to mistreatment or abandonment when social upheaval or disorder occurs. The fourth

group, Despised out-group, is at low warmth and low competence and these individuals are framed with “scorn, contempt, and derision” (Massey et al. 2018:28). Members of this group are the social outcasts who are often exploited and ignored and experience harsher sanctions.

Categorization, as noted above, is not just about the warmth or competence—there are other socially created categories that affect individuals, such as segregation and discrimination. Within stratified societies such as the United States, this means that social categories produce differing access to resources such as status, prestige, income, and wealth, whereby exacerbating categorical inequality. For example, over time most immigrant groups, including earlier immigrants such as the Irish, Chinese, Japanese, Polish, Italians, Jews, have encountered discrimination and segregation and Mexicans who experience forms of exclusion and exploitation in the labor and housing markets (Massey et al. 2018).

Because loss aversion is a basic human motivation, it produces discomfort for those faced with giving up their resources and advantage. The members of the advantaged groups, namely native-born individuals, resist the redistribution of resources among the “others,” including immigrants and refugees, and privileged groups invent new ways to preserve their privileged status in society. As a result, the vulnerable become targets of policies and practices in the United States that include exploitation (see ICE raids, refugee bans based on nationality). These issues can be traced back to the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) that limited immigrants from entering the western hemisphere. Quota restrictions were not in place prior to 1965, but the implementation of the INA allowed for the first one to be placed at 20,000 (Massey et al. 2018). Furthermore, politicians used illegal entries of Latin Americans to stir fear, mobilize voters, and secure resources on “threat of the immigrant” (Massey et al. 2018:38). During this time and in the decades that followed, the United States saw a rise in the militarization of its

borders and terrorist threats merely exacerbated the problem which created policies that curtailed immigration (Massey et al. 2018). These restrictions are put in place to ensure that the native-born population maintains advantage in accessing both power and other resources.

Deservingness

There is a small body of literature that examines the ways in which immigrant groups are used to mark the distinction of a “deserving” group versus an “undeserving” immigrant group (Yukich 2013). The deservingness frame creates a line in which groups are divided based on immigrant/non-immigrant status where the immigrant group is the “outsider” and cast as a threat to the dominant group (Holmes & Castañeda 2016). While refugees tend to be framed as deserving of state assistance such as welfare when compared to other immigrant groups (Fujiwara 2005), refugee acceptance can vary greatly from hospitality to overt forms of xenophobia in terms of how they are received or welcomed by the host society (Holmes & Castañeda 2016). For example, some refugees are framed as “criminals” and other groups as “terrorists.” Others are framed as “model” immigrants aligning with American values meaning those who do not meet this “model” standard are cast as less worthy of social acceptance (Yukich 2013). The media and policy groups commonly use images of immigrant groups who have successfully found their ways into white middle-class America as the measuring stick for all other groups, namely Asian Americans (Lee & Kye 2016). However, not all ethnic groups experience the same barriers to integration. The creation of a more deserving immigrant group unfortunately divides and pits immigrant groups against each other (Fujiwara 2005).

The divide between economic migrants and refugees tends to cast one group as more deserving where refugees are seen as more worthy of assistance in the host country and

economic migrants are placed in a less deserving category even if they seek asylum in the host country (Watters 2013). This construct is problematic in that it seeks to quantify the treachery of one's experience in which one is valued above another as somehow more genuine, creating a false dichotomy of agency/no agency in which the refugee has no agency in migration and economic migrants have choice in where they move. With a recent uptick in anti-refugee sentiment, deportations of legal refugees, and the ban on refugees from "high risk" countries, refugees are faced with being situated ever more into the undeserving category (Nawyn 2016). Stereotypes are used to frame immigrants and shape perceptions even as they have changed over time. In the 1980s and 1990s, the discourse surrounded welfare policy as this social support system was being dismantled. As a result, immigrant groups were perceived as being a burden on the social services and on taxpayers for footing their bill (Yukich 2013:304). Since deservingness is often constructed around legality status, understanding the ways in which refugees are simultaneously cast as deserving and undeserving—a sentiment that is rooted in racism and xenophobia—is crucial to understand.

The factors that lead to deservingness are layered when considering who is framed as more deserving of social and state assistance in today's political climate as it is intertwined with social perceptions. Many refugees are seen as undeserving due to being framed as non-legitimate and exploiting state resources (Watters 2019). Due to the large influx of involuntary migrants from Muslim-majority nations, refugees from these regions may be subject to less positive social perceptions leading to a shift in this group being perceived as less deserving as in the case of Muslims who are framed as the "other." This construct influences the way in which otherness and a sense of belonging are interrelated. As a result, some asylum seekers are erected as the "new 'other' occupying a marginal space outside the limits of compassion" since it is illegal and

socially unacceptable to discriminate against native born minority groups (Watters 2019:86).

While some Burmese refugees are Muslim, most who are Christian may still occupy the othered category based on nationality, ethnicity, and non-native status, and thus be seen as undeserving.

Congolese refugees, who are primarily Christian, may face racial and ethnic discrimination differently than Burmese since they are African, but to varying degrees based on the racial hierarchy that exists in the United States. Since the majority of Congolese and Burmese refugees identify as Christian, this may leave other factors that create difficulties, namely the ethnic or racial group to which they belong. As a result, the Congolese refugees may be met with negative social perceptions based on ascribed racial classification that contributes to them being viewed as less deserving by the native-born population than other refugee groups who are not African. Conversely, while Asian refugees may be cast within the “model minority” category, they are still situated in the out-group, yet possibly not on the bottom rung of the racial hierarchy. While Congolese refugees may not be perceived as falling within the “model minority” category as many Asian Americans are, they may face a different set of stereotypes based on racial and ethnic categories that also lead to differing levels of compassion. Burmese refugees who are Christian and fit into the “model minority” group may still be othered due to their ethnicity and perceived “otherness” as a non-native resident. While all refugees are cast as undeserving—or as the “new other”—the racial, ethnic, and native/non-native categories may create varying experiences and degrees of “othering” for different refugee groups. While loss aversion is a driving force behind anti-refugee sentiment, as well as lower levels of acceptance of immigrant groups, native born individuals may be less threatened by some refugee groups than others.

Since refugee acceptance by the host society can vary considerably by ethnic and racial group, I use these two theoretical frameworks to create the base for understanding the degree in which refugees are accepted as it runs along ethnic and racial lines. First, individuals who are viewed as undeserving may be placed within the Despised out-group, while those viewed as a deserving group and viewed through a positive lens, may be placed in the In-group. However, since all refugees are othered, they may not be able to ever occupy the in-group and may be placed in one of the three out-groups. Since refugee acceptance varies from ethnic group to ethnic group, some refugees may fall in the in-between groups such as the Pitied out-group or the Envied out-group. Since the placement of specific ethnic groups within this typology may vary depending on the ethnic group, the undeserving/Despised out-group may include the Congolese based on the ethnic and racial hierarchy. Likewise, Burmese may be placed into the envied out-group as they fall in a different place on the racial hierarchy. Such social categorization may affect the likelihood for the two groups to develop social relations with the native-born community.

Social Ties as Mechanisms of Integration

Social ties are important in the process of resettlement as they provide the foundation with which to form relations and networks that are critical. For Burmese and Congolese refugees who are able to develop close social ties and robust networks within their ethnic communities, this may help act as a way to resist being placed into an “out-group” and against the label of undeserving. While both the Burmese and Congolese might be seen as “others” in the receiving society, developing close social relations within their ethnic group and community may be critical to opposing the negative labels and in turn help them become more accepted by the host

society (more “deserving” of social acceptance). By constructing close relations among their co-ethnics and establishing robust networks among other refugees, refugees could reject the labeling process imposed on them which in turn removes the strength of that label itself and creates space for more acceptance.

Durkheim ([1987] 1966) argues that social integration is an important factor to individuals’ sense of well-being. In this highly influential work, Durkheim argues that weak social integration has a detrimental effect on individuals’ health, namely, the chances for committing suicide. This social patterning of suicide is directly linked to the level at which individuals are integrated in the group. Thus, the social level at which individuals develop social ties are what creates social solidarity—which is the social cohesion that helps cement individuals together in a group. When individuals create close social relations with others, it affords them a sense of protection from outside social influences. Therefore, the ties forged act as a mechanism of social cohesion that in turn bond the group and help buffer against the strains of daily life. Various domains including family, work, church, neighborhood, and the larger community may provide a network of social relations that bolster individuals’ sense of well-being and in turn belonging.

Due, Holstein, Lund, Modbig, and Avlund (1999) define social relations as “*the individuals with whom one has an interpersonal relationship and the linkages between these individuals*” (p. 663, emphasis original). These social relations vary in type depending on the social network such as with whom one has connections (family, friends, acquaintances) and where (neighborhoods, work) these connections are forged and maintained. While these scholars make note of formal versus informal types of relations, they do not include the domains in which these relations are formed. In this study, I examine social relations in different social domains to

reveal the complexities in how refugees develop social ties with others. As such, I expand Due et al.'s (1999) definition of social relations to also include social spheres in which social relations are formed to further understand the nuances of social ties as they can vary from one sphere to another. Context matters in when, how, or if social relations are created because in different domains, different types of social relations are created. However, there may also be barriers in some social domains that prevent refugees from developing close social ties. The domains I focus on in this study are refugees' ethnic group, church, employment sphere, and neighborhoods. Examining the various domains in which social relations are formed allows for a more in-depth understanding of how Burmese and Congolese refugees find, create, and maintain social ties and with whom.

I also take into consideration that a focus on social relations can fall victim to the same issues that integration has and thus apply Spencer and Charsley's (2021) suggestions to use reflexivity and avoid repeating the limitations of past integration research. Reflexivity refers to a reflection about a researcher's use of categories and the typologies which create shared meaning (Adkins 2003). Reflexivity can also be understood as situating the researcher as an active participant in relation to the social world in which they aim to understand (e.g., refugee integration) while also requiring a critical examination of how stories are interpreted, constructed, and told (Gray 2008). Reflexivity is the practice of situating researchers within a historical context that acknowledges and explores scholars' various points of views (Kenway & Mcleod 2004).

In this study, I use the terms *social relations* and *social ties* interchangeably but acknowledge the slight difference between the two notions. While both concepts describe

relations between two parties, social relations are broader than social ties because not all relations become ties that suggest interpersonal connections or bonds.

Conclusion

Refugee resettlement has been studied extensively within the academic realm, but an understudied area is within the resettlement experiences among Burmese and Congolese refugees in the United States. Refugees face a plethora of barriers during resettlement and much focus in the scholarly literature has been placed on *integration* in its various forms as a necessary achievement for refugees' well-being. From economic to social integration, the term is used with unexamined assumptions that underpin much of the current and past research. One assumption rests in the notion that integration with the host society must occur in order for the well-being of the refugee to be enhanced. The use of integration often assumes that refugees must engage with others outside of their ethnic community to feel a sense of belonging or to gain economic advancement. Nevertheless, it is problematic to assume that refugees are unable to feel at home if they are only surrounded with their co-ethnics. In fact, many refugees may find the opposite true and may experience unpleasant social interactions with those outside their ethnic community. Therefore, I argue that relations with co-ethnic and native-born individuals are equally important to understand refugees' resettlement experiences and the degrees of their integration in the host society.

Focusing on *social relations* instead of social integration, I seek to unpack the nuanced mechanisms and processes in which refugees develop and maintain social ties with their co-ethnic and native-born individuals in different social domains, including family, work, church,

and neighborhood. As these varied social relations could facilitate or hinder refugees' social integration, this study offers a fresh approach to understanding refugee integration.

CHAPTER III

BACKGROUNDS OF CONGOLESE AND BURMESE

In this chapter, I start with a description of refugee placement and resettlement admissions in the United States and in Michigan. I also discuss the geographic region of West Michigan as a politically conservative area that may influence social attitudes toward refugees and immigrants. The geographic area under examination holds a relatively high number of refugees who might face obstacles in developing social relations when adapting to the host society. I then describe the research site of this study located in this region. Following the geographic description, I provide an overview of Burmese and Congolese cultures, which helps to provide contexts of the participants' backgrounds that might shape their resettlement experiences in general.

Refugee Placement and Geography

In terms of the specific states accepting the highest number of refugees in the United States, the acceptance rates for the fiscal year of 2018 placed the following states at the top of the list in overall highest acceptance rates of refugees: Texas, Washington, Ohio, California, and New York, with over 7,000 resettled among these five states alone (Fact Sheet 2019). Texas and Indiana were the top two for accepting the most Burmese from 2015-2018, where in 2019 Indiana was first and Minnesota was second. For Congolese refugees, Texas and Arizona topped the list for highest acceptance rates over 2015-2019 except for 2017 when Ohio was second and Arizona third. Even with President Trump's executive order in late 2019 requiring all states (state and local leaders) to opt-in to whether they would accept refugees, the majority of state

leaders decided to continue offering support for refugees in their states. The only exception was Texas, as the governor claimed the state’s resources were overextended by the southern border crisis—a decision that received backlash from other politicians in the state (Chishti & Pierce 2020).

According to the Refugee Processing Center(b) (n.d.), the overall trend from calendar year 2015 through calendar year 2019 is that the Grand Rapids area tends to house more Burmese, Congolese, and Bhutanese than the east side and central parts of the state of Michigan. See Table 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 below for national, state and city admissions of Congolese and Burmese admission numbers including region and placement.

Table 3.1—Total Refugee Admissions Numbers at the National, State and City level, Calendar Year: 2015-2019

Year	United States	Michigan	Grand Rapids
2015	66,517	2,714 (4.1%)	1,282 (47%)
2016	96,874	5,039 (5%)	1,043 (21%)
2017	33,368	1,402 (4.2%)	411 (29%)
2018	22,874	722 (3.2%)	347 (48%)
2019	27,513	1,028 (3.7%)	563 (55%)
Total: 2015-2019	247,146	10,905 (4.4% of U.S. totals)	3,646 (33% of Michigan totals)

Source: Refugee Processing Center(b) (n.d.)

Table 3.2— Congolese Refugee Admission Numbers at National, State, and City Level, Calendar Year: 2015-2019

Year	United States	Michigan	Grand Rapids
2015	8,206	240 (3%)	130 (54%)
2016	19,829	788 (4%)	481 (61%)
2017	5,352	263 (5%)	167 (63%)
2018	9,305	378 (4%)	210 (56%)
2019	11,152	602 (5%)	332 (55%)
Total	53,844	2,271 (4% of U.S. totals)	1,320 (58% of Michigan totals)

Source: Refugee Processing Center (b) (n.d.)

Table 3.3—Burmese Refugee Admission Numbers at National, State, and City level, Calendar Year: 2015-2019

Year	United States	Michigan	Grand Rapids
2015	17,483	356 (2%)	162 (46%)
2016	11,572	288 (3%)	157 (55%)
2017	3,722	128 (3%)	82 (64%)
2018	3,771	88 (2%)	59 (67%)
2019	4,681	82 (2%)	68 (83%)
Total	41,229	942 (2% of U.S. totals)	528 (63% of Michigan totals)

Source: Refugee Processing Center (b) (n.d.)

Between 2015 and 2019, the Grand Rapids area admitted approximately 58% of the total Congolese population placed in Michigan with over 1,400 individuals out of the more than 2,200 statewide settled on the west side of the state. With an already large Congolese population in West Michigan, any new Congolese resettled in the area over the past few years may have a larger base of support in the region through their ethnic community. Even though refugees from Burma comprise one of the largest groups resettled in the United States with over 100,000 resettled (Office of Refugee Resettlement n.d.), these numbers along with all refugee admissions have dwindled since the Trump administration’s refugee policies took effect. While almost 2,300 Congolese were admitted into Michigan between 2015 and 2019, there were just under 1,000 Burmese admitted into Michigan in this same timeframe. Similar to the Congolese, the Burmese refugees placed in Grand Rapids comprise over half of the state’s admissions. However, because of fewer Burmese placed in Michigan, they may have fewer resources available than the Congolese who may draw from a larger network.

The majority of Burmese (63%) and Congolese (58%) refugees during this period (2015-2019) were placed in the Grand Rapids area, which suggests the significance of the area as a major location for refugee placement in Michigan. The federal government is responsible for the geographic placement of refugees and within this decision-making process, it considers available

resources including presence of family, cultural, religious resources, the presence of affordable housing and employment opportunities (Rojas 2015). The large Congolese population in the area offers an established ethnic community base that could help to mitigate resettlement stress. In contrast, lower numbers of refugees from Burma have been placed in the Grand Rapids area. Burmese refugees may encounter more issues with availability of resources, the ability and ease of forming social relations, and discrimination.

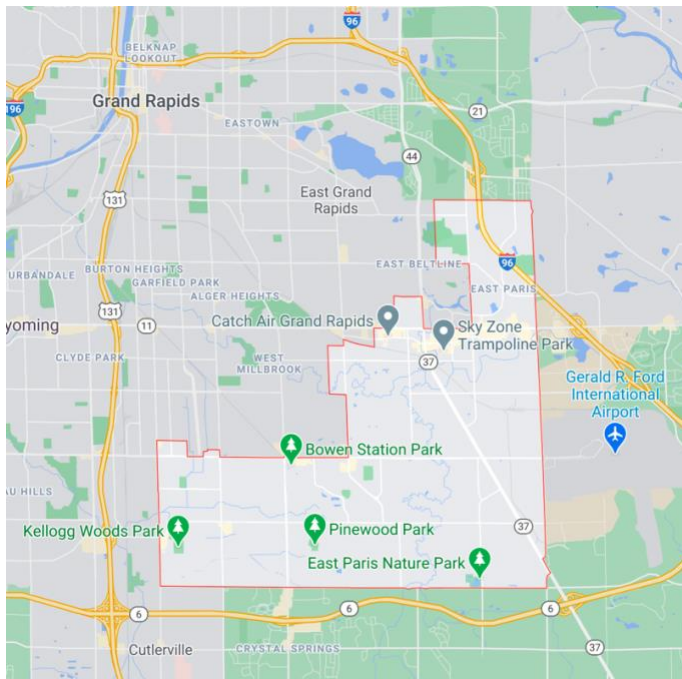
Political Climate in Michigan and Grand Rapids

West Michigan holds more conservative political leanings, which may also hinder integration when anti-immigrant sentiment and reception towards immigrant groups is negative and amplified. In the 2016 presidential election, all of Kent County voted predominantly for Donald Trump (Block, Buchanan & Kats 2018). In fact, except for Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo, and a few pockets along the western lakeshore, Michigan showed overwhelming support for Trump, whereas many of the cities and suburbs on the eastern side of the state, such as Detroit and Dearborn, voted predominantly Democratic in their support for Hillary Clinton (Wilkinson 2017). Research has illustrated that a propensity toward the liberal end of the political spectrum is associated with greater support for immigration (Fortin & Loewen 2004), while those leaning towards the conservative end are more likely to espouse anti-immigration sentiments and have strong feelings about curtailing immigration (Chandler & Tsai 2001). Further, those embracing conservative ideologies tend to evince a heightened sense of national pride, feelings which have been found to be negatively associated with immigrant tolerance (Chandler & Tsai 2001). Thus, refugees resettling in the West Michigan area may face more difficulties when residing in and around a conservative region.

Research Site

Most of the participants in this study live in the city of Kentwood, Michigan, which is a suburb of Grand Rapids, the second largest city in Michigan with a population slightly lower than that in Detroit. A few participants currently live in an adjacent suburb outside of Kentwood but were originally resettled in the city of Kentwood. Figure 3.1 shows a map of the Kentwood area outlined in red relative to the city of Grand Rapids that lies to the northwest.

Figure 3.1: Map of Kentwood, Michigan outlined in red



Source: Google Maps: Kentwood, MI

As of 2019, Kentwood has a total population of just under 52,000 and was the place of residence for all but one Burmese participant. All the Congolese participants were originally placed in Kentwood, but three relocated out of Kentwood for other housing options. The racial makeup of Kentwood is approximately 62% white, 22% black or African American, 9% Asian, 5%

Hispanic or Latino, and 3% mixed race (Census 2019a table 1). The median value of owner-occupied homes in Kentwood was at \$155,700 in 2019 (Census 2019a table 1), which is just above the overall state average value of owner-occupied homes which was at \$154,900 (Census 2019b table 1). These demographics suggest that participants in this study are surrounded by a diverse population. Kentwood is not a stereotypical suburban area that has predominantly White, wealthy residents. Rather, numerous ethnic grocery stores and restaurants in Kentwood indicate a multi-ethnic region that houses many immigrants. Moreover, many furniture factories in this area provide steady blue-collar job opportunities for newcomers and unskilled workers.

Backgrounds of Burmese and Congolese Refugees

Since the United States follows the 1951 Refugee Convention in which states have an obligation to assist individuals facing threats to life or freedoms (including religious freedom), no individual is supposed to be turned away or sent back to their home country (UNHCR(c), n.d.) Since then, United States has accepted thousands of refugees and asylees each year. Statistically, the United States has admitted more Christian refugees in the past decades (including those from Congo and Myanmar). According to Bier (2016), religion plays a role in the higher acceptance rates of individuals identifying as Christian over other religions, such as Islam. Although most Congolese and Burmese refugees in the United States are Christian their cultures of origin differ as do the causes of their displacement. Below, I introduce the backgrounds of these two refugee groups.

Myanmar (formerly Burma)

Myanmar is located in the western part of mainland southeast Asia and is the northernmost country of southeast Asia. The Bay of Bengal is located to the south and east of Burma. Myanmar shares borders with Thailand, Laos, China, as well as Bangladesh and India. Figure 3.2 shows where it is located.

Figure 3.2: Map of Burma



Source: World Atlas Myanmar

For over a century Burma was under British colonial rule with its independence gained in 1948 (British Rule of Burma, n.d.). After achieving independence, each successive government in place after 1948 has practiced some form of ethnic or religious exclusion or expulsion. Burma (officially the Union of Burma) was renamed by the country's military government in 1989 to the *Union of Myanmar*; with questions arising globally about which name is appropriate. Regardless of name, the region has experienced instability due to decades of civil war as the

result of ethnic and military/government conflict from the mid 20th century through 2011 (Trieu & Vang 2015). From the early 1960s through 2015, Burma was under various forms of military rule. For the duration of this time, the military established and maintained its power through force and by suppressing groups posing a threat to military power (McCarthy 2010). Throughout this period, the military marginalized many non-Buddhist ethnic minorities, including the oppression of non-Buddhist religious practices and the destruction of or taking over of sacred sites and structures (Keyes 2016). Although democratic rule was established in 2010, Burma has continued to oppress ethnic minorities due to the “pervasive influence of Burman Buddhist Nationalism” (Keyes 2016: 45). Political instability has continued to this day and significantly worsened since the military gaining control of the government through a coup in early 2021 (Cuddy 2021).

The oppression of minority ethnic groups over the decades has led to many individuals seeking refuge in neighboring nations. Similarly, religious minorities in Myanmar have experiences oppression and have also fled Myanmar. Likewise, much of the violence that took place in Burma during the military rule drove many to flee Myanmar. This political volatility, during the 20th and 21st centuries, has created severely unstable conditions leaving hundreds of thousands of individuals seeking refuge and in need of resettlement. As a result of the political repression, religious oppression, ethnic marginalization, and inter-ethnic conflict, this has left millions fleeing Myanmar (Maizland 2021). Many individuals move around within Myanmar to escape violence and conflict while others are granted refugee status in neighboring countries such as Thailand, Bangladesh, or Malaysia (Key Issues: Myanmar 2021). Some are then granted resettlement in other nations such as the United States, Australia, or Canada.

The Buddhist population in Burma adheres primarily to Theravada Buddhist practices and beliefs and its followers in Burma tend to view other religions as illegitimate (Keyes 2016). Theravada Buddhism has scriptures that are written in Pali (as opposed to Sanskrit) and Buddhist monks who follow *vinaya* (or the “ancient discipline”) as set forth by the Buddha. However, there are differences in some of the religious orders within Theravada Buddhism (including among Buddhist monks and laity). While the majority identify or practice Buddhism in Burma—approximately of 90% of the population (Gombrich 2006)—Islam and Christianity are also present in Burma and practiced by about four percent of the population with Hindus and Baha’i’s comprising the remaining percentage (Literacy Project, n.d.). With many of the Burmese Christians and Muslims experiencing persecution in the Buddhist majority country of Myanmar (Farzana 2017), this has led to an increase in refugees from the region.

In addition to religion, ethnic dominance constitutes another force of oppression in Myanmar. There are roughly 135 distinct “ethnic nationalities” with various other subgroups in Burma, though these are estimates (Farzana 2017). The largest and most dominant ethnic group in Burma are the Burman comprising just over two thirds of the population (Ethnic Groups of Myanmar 2020). The Burman reside in the central part of Burma. Because the Burman are the largest ethnic group in Myanmar, they hold more social and political power over the less literate ethnic minorities including the Karen, Kachin, and Chin (Myanmar, n.d.). The Karen is the second largest minority ethnic group in Burma who were promised an independent state after World War II (where they fought alongside the British and Japanese), but this never occurred, and they have since been persecuted as Christian minorities causing many to flee the country (Burma’s Minority Groups 2010). At the same time, there are segments of the Christian Karen

population that have fought against the loss of rights and have often done so with arms (Nieman, Soh, & Sutan 2008).

Due to the persecution of the minority Christian ethnic groups in Burma such as the Chin and Karen, their experiences may be significantly different in the United States as they are placed into the majority religious group even as they are still a racial/ethnic minority. The transition from minority to majority, in terms of religion, may also play a role in how they interact with the host society and form relations among native-born individuals and the larger religious community. While the specific sect of Burmese Christianity is not reported in the data for admission into the United States, many are Evangelical, Christian Reformed, Catholic, Baptist, and Seventh Day Adventists. The participants in this study who named their religion sect were either Christian Reformed or Baptist.

Burmese culture resembles cultures of other Asian societies under the broad influence of Confucianism. For instance, several Burmese culture values (*“face,”* having great consideration for others), a propensity towards nationalism, obedience, and patience. Face is the concept that shapes modesty and interactions in Burmese culture and is connected to one’s dignity and honor in which respect is at its core. The Burmese culture is also characterized by having high sensitivity to other’s feelings (Myanmar n.d.). Family is considered extremely important with close-knit families often including several generations living under the same roof. As respect and *“face”* are extremely important, children’s behavior is monitored and disciplined when it conflicts with norms of respect and honor because their behavior is a reflection of the parent’s honor and thus parents and the entire family can lose *“face”* if misbehavior occurs (Myanmar n.d.).

Most Burmese refugees flee to a neighboring country in Southeast Asia before resettling in the United States. The first wave of refugees arriving in the United States began as early as the 1970s, and many others admitted during the 1980s and 1990s (Kallick & Mathema 2016). It was not until 2008 that refugee admissions rose drastically and continued to rise in the next decade. Between 2008 and 2014, the United States admitted the largest number of Burmese refugees with nearly 110,000 placed in that time span (CDC, Burma n.d.). Between 2015 and 2019, there were just over 40,000 admitted into the United States (Refugee Processing Center (b) n.d.).

Many of the Christian Burmese refugees resettled in Michigan are placed in Battle Creek (a small town in south central Michigan) (Thiele 2018) and a handful in the western region of Michigan. The Chin ethnic minority group, who are also Christian, has also been named as a persecuted ethnic minority group in addition to the Rohingya Muslim minority group (Kingston 2015). In fact, the Rohingyas have been named the world's most persecuted minority group by the United Nations (Burma's Minority Groups 2010). Persecution of these groups has taken the form of the destruction of and overtaking of religious centers, destruction of homes and removal of rights (including owning property and civic and political rights), as well as violence and torture (Gravers 2005; Human Rights Watch 2003; Kingston 2015).

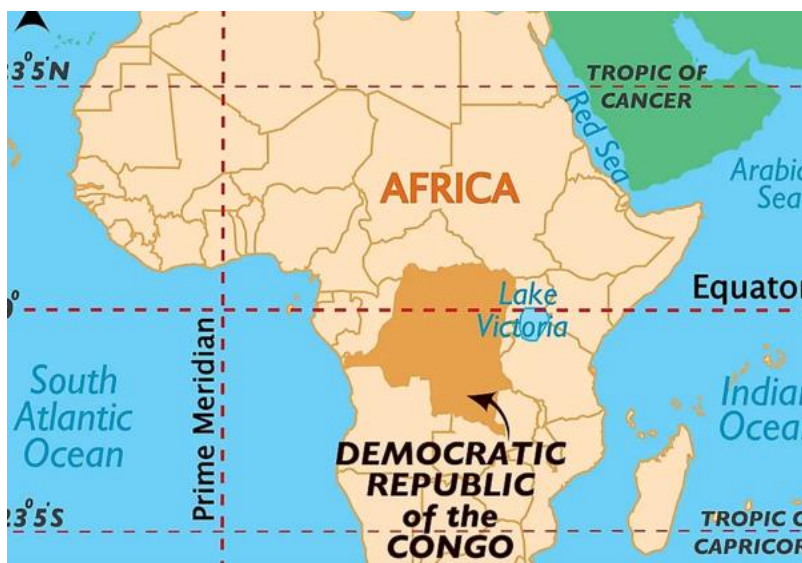
While not all Karen Burmese are Christian, the Karen who are admitted into the United States are overwhelmingly Christian with fewer Muslim Rohingya refugees admitted (Refugee Processing Center(b) n.d.). Refugee admissions from Burma are overwhelmingly sects of Christianity with 61% of the total refugees admitted between 2015-2019 identifying as Christian. Between 2015 and 2019 the Muslim Burmese comprised 22% of the total admitted in this time span with Buddhists at 11% of the Burmese admitted (Refugee Processing Center(b) n.d.).

It is difficult to name the specific ethnic groups as they arrive in the United States as this data is not readily available through agencies who conduct statistical data collection such as the Refugee Processing Center (only religion is indicated at the state level and is not tracked based on where the refugees resettle). However, some estimates indicate that Milwaukee, Wisconsin may likely hold one of the largest Rohingya Muslim refugees resettling in the state (Files 2019). While there are some Muslim Rohingya refugees living in West Michigan, there is little data available on how many and where they reside.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is located in sub-Saharan Africa. It is centrally located in the continent, sharing borders with Central African Republic and Sudan to the north, Uganda, Rwanda, and Tanzania to the east, to the southwest is Angola and the southeast is Zambia. Figure 3.3 shows the location of the Democratic Republic of Congo in Africa.

Figure 3.3—Map of Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)



Source: World Atlas DRC

The Congo has endured decades of colonialism under the Belgian rule that began in the early 20th century and lasted for nearly a century, which results in economic, political, and social instability. Specifically, Belgium colonialism exploited the resources of the Congo including the people in which they were subjected to extreme forms of violence, mutilation and killing as tools to access rubber, precious metals, and labor (Dunn 2003). What is more, the Congo has faced decades of instability and internal conflict due to dictators and many western nations upholding close political relations with these dictators (Shaw 2018). The First Congo War began in 1996 and ended in 1997; the Second Congo War began only a year later in 1998 and lasted until 2003 (CDC, Congo n.d.). More violence arose as a result of another armed conflict in the eastern part of the DRC that began in 2004 and continued through 2009. As a result of these wars, the people of the Congo have experienced staggering levels of death, violence, and famine with estimates of 5.4 million dead resulting from the years of violence (DRC Background, n.d.). Adding to this instability, after the Rwandan genocide in 1994, many Rwandan refugees fled to the Congo but were thought to be perpetrators of the genocide by Rwanda and Uganda. As a result, the Rwandan and Ugandan armies invaded the Congo in an attempt to locate these perceived perpetrators producing even more violence in the region (CDC, Congo n.d.).

Over the past few decades, the continued instability and conflict has created staggering numbers of Congolese refugees and asylum seekers. Many have sought safety in neighboring countries in Africa. Tanzania (lying to the east of Congo) is a major receiver of refugees with estimates of over half a million fleeing to Tanzania alone since the mid 1990s (Dick 2002). Additionally, Uganda, Burundi, and Rwanda also received a bulk of Congolese refugees during these conflicts (CDC, Congo n.d.). Congolese admissions into the United States began in 2000 with the first influx occurring between 2008 and 2014 with nearly 10,000 individuals admitted

(CDC, Congo n.d.). Between 2015 and 2019, however, the United States admitted a record number of Congolese refugees with nearly 54,000 admitted in this time span (Refugee Processing Center(b) n.d.). The Congolese participants in this study are placed primarily in the Grand Rapids area and surrounding suburbs including Kentwood, which houses the highest number of Congolese refugees.

The Congolese religious majority in the region are Christian resulting from the Christian missionaries that proselytized and converted the Congolese during the 19th and 20th centuries. Close to 80% of Congolese identify as Christian with over 50% as Roman Catholic; 20% Protestant; 10% Kimbanguist; and the remaining 10% comprising other religions (Uzokike & Whetho 2008). Refugee admissions of Congolese into the United States reflect this demographic as approximately 94-95% of Congolese admitted to the United States identified as Christian. Furthermore, of the 95% who identify as Christian, about 80% are Protestant (CDC, Congo n.d.). While the majority of the Congolese living in the Congo identify as Catholic, the participants in my study in West Michigan identified as Methodist.

There are estimates of around 250 different ethnic groups in the Congo today. Some of these ethnic groups include the Mongo, Luba, Kongo, and Mang-Betu-Azonde as the largest four groups in the country. There are over 700 languages spoken in the Congo but only four major languages are spoken broadly, including Lingala, Kikongo, Swahili, and French. French and Swahili are the official languages (Congolese Culture n.d). The Congolese participants in this study did not indicate their specific tribal group when asked their ethnicity, but instead named Congolese as their ethnicity. Most of the participants in this study also spoke between four to six languages with French and Swahili being the common primary languages with several additional tribal languages.

Congolese culture values respect, especially as it relates to behaviors of youth towards elders. The discipline of children is seen as crucially important as they are a reflection of the entire family (Parenting in a New Culture 2009). If children misbehave the parents and extended family can be shamed by the community. Once children are born, they are seen as belonging to the community and as such are integrated within large networks of family and non-family members (DRC n.d.). Gender roles are rigid, and women often tend to the domestic sphere while men take the role as provider and protector (DRC n.d.), and fathers tend to be the overall decision makers (Parenting in a New Culture 2009). With rigid social roles among many Congolese families, this lends insight into how this rigidity might shift (or pose problems) in the United States where gender roles are less rigid. Likewise, it may also reveal insight into how individuals mesh with the host society when there are key differences between Congolese and United States norms surrounding childrearing.

Summary and Conclusion

The western part of Michigan houses more Burmese and Congolese than other areas in Michigan. West Michigan is a highly politically conservative region. The conservative ideologies in this area have been shown to foster less acceptance of immigrants, which can affect refugees' adaptation when they are faced with anti-immigrant sentiment. The participants in this study live primary in the city of Kentwood, which has a population of just under 52,000 and is adjacent to Grand Rapids. Many factories in Kenwood offer blue-collar jobs for immigrants and refugees who often have limited employment opportunities because of their lack of language fluency and an education from the United States. Newcomers usually live in apartment

complexes that have diverse residents, while some save up to purchase homes in predominately white areas.

Both Myanmar and the Congo have seen decades of instability due to conflict, violence, oppression, and colonial occupation. Myanmar has experienced civil war, ethnic conflict, dictatorial military rule, and oppression of its religious minority groups. The Congo has experienced severe instability due to a history of exploitation of its resources in addition to decades of dictatorial rule that has created wars and violence, leaving millions dead or maimed. The Congolese, however, have faced more ethnic oppression than religious oppression. As a result of these factors, both countries have produced a significant number of refugees who have sought safety in neighboring nations and resettling in countries outside of Asia, including the United States.

Various factors affect how Burmese and Congolese form social relations as well as how they perceive community. Burmese and Congolese Christian refugees both belong to the religious majority in the United States, but many Burmese have experienced religious persecution in Myanmar, a Buddhist dominant nation—something the Congolese have not experienced. This may influence the Burmese refugees' willingness to incorporate with the host society as there may be a lack of trust developed and more emphasis on social relations within their ethnic group. While the Congolese may feel more inclined to form relations with other Christians in the United States, their ethnic origins may hinder that ability because of their African heritage—something the Burmese may experience differently as they belong to the Asian race category that is stereotypically perceived as a “model minority”. These differences may shape how the two groups forge relationships with the host society and how they are viewed by the native-born community.

An additional factor that may influence how and if the Congolese and Burmese refugees form relations with others is the common cultural elements of respecting the elderly and discipline of children. As United States society places high value on individuality and its youth culture, the elderly population is often devalued. Additionally, there are differences in childrearing practices between the United States and the cultures of the two refugee groups that emphasize parental authority. As a result of these differences, the two groups may harbor hesitancy in forming relations with the native-born population because of their desire to preserve traditional family cultures. Consequently, the Burmese and Congolese refugees living in the United States may place more focus and value on forming relations within their own ethnic group. While there may be a strong sense of community, it just may not be with the native-born population.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH METHODS AND SAMPLE

This study focuses on the ways in which two ethnically distinct refugee groups form social relations in West Michigan. This research addresses Burmese and Congolese refugees because they are understudied populations. To answer my research questions, I utilized in-depth interviews as my data collection tool. Data collection for this study began in August 2020 and was completed in April 2021. I interviewed a total of 25 refugees, including 17 Burmese and 8 Congolese individuals. In this chapter, I first discuss the recruitment process for my data collection. Next, I describe the research methods used to collect data, the informed consent process and the details of the interviews. I also describe the confidentiality of the data, ethical issues, and demographics of the sample. Lastly, I outline the data analysis process.

Recruitment

I conducted all 17 Burmese interviews in the home of my Burmese key informant and the eight Congolese interviews were conducted in the homes of each participant. I accessed the refugee participants through two individual key informants—one from each refugee group. My Burmese key informant was a woman in her mid-forties with whom I was put in contact by the refugee assistance agency I worked with in this study. The key informant initially contacted me via email, and we set up a time to talk. After a brief phone conversation, we arranged a day to meet to discuss my research. From this point, she recruited all Burmese participants for this study through her networks and opened her home for me to conduct the interviews. She has two sons, one of whom is a senior in high school and the other recently graduated from high school.

She and her husband both work in the same factory. My Congolese key informant was a middle-aged man in his late forties with four children. He and his wife both work in factories. I first met him when I was conducting my master's thesis research nearly a decade ago and have stayed in touch since. He was able to connect me with the majority of the Congolese participants. The two staff interviews were conducted via WebEx and the interview with the Burmese realtor was conducted in person at a local library.

Snowball sampling is an effective sampling technique where one participant connects the researcher to others interested in interviewing where there may be a difficult group to access based on other sampling methods (Bernard 2017; Denzin & Lincoln 2011). In particular, refugees are usually difficult to approach as they are a vulnerable group and often cannot be selected based on other sampling techniques.

Informed Consent

Due to the nature of qualitative data collection that includes working with human subjects, an Internal Review Board (IRB) approval was submitted prior to commencing this project. After initial communication was made with refugees, a few other individuals expressed interest in participating and were given the option of when and where to schedule a session to go over the informed consent document. Copies of all consent documents can be found in Appendix C. At the time of the interview, the participant was given the informed consent document and I answered any questions they had.

Interviews and Subjects

I conducted 28 in-depth interviews for the study, including 25 refugees. Burmese participants comprised 17 members of the sample; eight of the participants were Congolese; two were refugee agency staff; and one was a Burmese realtor. There were only two workers currently active at the refugee agency who were interviewed with the few volunteers who assist in programs on temporary leave due to Covid. In fact, the agency was closed for the duration of my data collection due to Covid and the church they operate out of being closed. While the refugee agency operates out of a church in Kentwood, they are independent of any religious affiliation. The refugee agency is also a supplemental agency and does not complete the initial resettlement but helps those needing additional assistance during their first few years in the United States. They offer services such as citizenship exam tutoring, green card application assistance, and general assistance with daily needs such as food, housing items, and transportation. The interviews with the two refugee agency staff provided insight about how the refugee group experienced resettlement as well as perceptions about the role of the agency in assisting refugees. Interviewing the agency staff helped to contextualize how assistance took place during refugees' resettlement process and helped reveal their perceptions of barriers for assisting refugees' resettlement. See Appendix D for a full list of agency staff interview questions. Additionally, I interviewed one Burmese realtor (also a refugee) who has assisted many Burmese refugees with purchasing their homes. This interview helped provide insight into how the Burmese participants were able to purchase homes at such a high rate and relatively early in their resettlement period.

Consenting adults who participated in the interviews met with me for 45 to 60 minutes of discussion and interview questions. A demographic survey was given at the beginning of the

interview after consent for the interview was provided and took approximately 10 minutes to complete. The demographic questionnaire can be found in Appendix E. I also informed the individuals they may be invited to participate in one or more follow-up interviews, which would be no more than 30 minutes in duration. For those who consented to being audio recorded, a digital recorder was used on my laptop during the interviews. Five of the Burmese participants gave consent to audio record the interviews, while twelve did not. Of the twelve that did not, I took rigorous notes in a Word document on my laptop while the interview took place. All of the Congolese participants consented to audio record the interviews, which may have been due to having better rapport established with this group since I have known the participants for more than nine years.

Through the process of interviewing, researchers can reveal the ways individuals are active agents in constructing identity and what individuals think about the resettlement process (Ruben & Ruben 2005). In this way, in-depth interviewing helps uncover what refugees think about their experiences during resettlement as well as barriers they may face. From this point, in-depth interviews provide insightful information that can produce valuable data not only to researchers but for the general community (Ruben & Ruben 2005). Interviews also help to provide information about the perceptions that individuals hold—in this way interviews are about learning—about the internal experiences and perceptions that humans feel (Weiss, 1994). In preparing for these interviews, I constructed a list of open-ended questions that address the research questions (Weiss 1994). I utilized a semi-structured interview for this study and included questions such as: 1) How well do you know your neighbors? 2) What are some obstacles you face in getting to know non-refugees? 3) How do you get to know other refugees?

4) Have you faced discrimination based on ethnicity, race, refugee status, or nationality? A list of interview questions can be found in Appendix F.

As refugees are considered a vulnerable group, special caution was taken to avoid provoking trauma which can induce a resurfacing of past trauma. Trauma from past experiences living with war and violence has the potential to be awoken when individuals begin talking about family or what family life was like back home. Since both Myanmar and the Congo have seen decades of war, conflict, and violence, I took precaution in the way questions were framed. For example, I began the interview with questions that were broad and general allowing the participant to guide the direction of the conversation.

Because of the emotional aspect of talking about life events, emotions can come to the surface and refugees may find themselves with feelings such as “loss, shame, or longing while telling a part of the story” (Atkinson 1998:33). According to Atkinson (1998), the avoidance of these emotions is not necessarily desired; this is because if the person does not want to discuss a topic s/he will let you (the researcher) know and while sometimes uncomfortable for the interviewee, the pausing and stopping and starting is okay. This was the case in several interviews with refugees when we covered topics such as discrimination. As a result, I paid close attention to verbal and non-verbal cues that indicated discomfort such as switching the topic, facial expressions and/or exaggerated body movement. In a few instances, I changed the topic and switched to different interview questions based on visual cues when the participants appeared to express discomfort. In no instance did I have to discontinue the interview or provide transportation for counseling support services.

I utilized two different translators for Burmese interviews with 11 of the 17 needing interpretation services and the remaining six conducted in English. However, having an

additional person present to translate may have influenced the data that was gathered in the interviews. For example, if the participants did not have established rapport with the interpreter, this may have affected the participants' willingness to share information. Since my Burmese key informant located and arranged the interpreters for my interviews, I had little choice in who was selected as the interpreter for this group.

Additionally, I collected demographic information from the staff in the agency and from refugees in the form of a short survey for the participants to complete. The demographic survey included questions such as age, gender, ethnicity, education, religion, employment status, marital status and number of children. The participating individuals were given the demographic survey at the beginning of the first interview. This survey was given in English and was translated by the interpreter for non-English speaking refugees. This demographic data helps provide a general understanding of each person's life, which in turn helps contextualize the information that was collected during the interviews.

I also collected data through short observations before, during and after the refugee interviews. When I interviewed Burmese individuals, I conducted two to three on the same day and thus was in my key informant's home for up to three or four hours at a time, which allowed me to take notes on interactions before, between and after interviews were completed. Additionally, after my third visit my key informant began offering me foods she prepared which allowed time to interact with some of the participants before the interviews began. Observation time with the Congolese participants also occurred in their homes before and after interviews based on interactions, which helped provide context into their lives. Due to having established rapport with the Congolese refugees from prior research years earlier, this also allowed for extra time spent in their homes before and after the interviewing. In other words, having maintained

social relations with the Congolese over the years made the visits more than just interviewing—we often caught up on each other’s families and life events. However, this rapport may have hindered my ability to access more interviews from this group as I faced difficulties in gaining Congolese participants for the study. In short, since I had maintained friendships with members of the Congolese community over the years, the key informant and participants may have felt less pressure to spend time finding others in their community who were willing to participate since we had a well-established relationship. It may also relate to hesitancy in wanting to meet during a pandemic; I do not fully know why there was difficulty in gaining more interviews with the Congolese as rapport usually aids in this dilemma.

While I asked several participants for referrals through snowball sampling, this did not turn out to be fruitful. Again, this may be due to the close ties I have with the Congolese community, but another factor could relate to the significant restrictions on social gatherings that were in place due to the pandemic. Congolese participants noted that they were hesitant to hold social gatherings due to fear of being reprimanded by authorities for breaking the rules. Thus, other Congolese individuals in the community who did (or did not) know me may have felt less inclined to meet with me. Likewise, a lack of available time may have prevented others from participating since most of the participants work full-time and all have families.

There were some difficulties that arose during data collection in this study. I was unable to collect follow up interviews with the Burmese informant after I had completed the initial 17 interviews with the participants. While I am unsure of the reason that the key informant was unwilling to help me conduct follow-up interviews, it may relate to our last interaction in her home when the discussion of politics and presidential candidates came up. As a fervent supporter of Trump, she appeared to withdraw from conversation after she asked who I supported in the

2020 election and was informed that it was not Trump. She appeared troubled (or offended) by my answer as I quickly discovered both she and her husband were supporters of Trump, which she explained was because Trump was Christian, and his policies were in support of Israel—something that appealed to her and her husband.

Participants

I conducted all interviews in participants' homes where I wore a mask and social distanced because the data was collected during the Covid pandemic. Out of 17 Burmese participants, 10 (59%) were men and 7 were women (41%). Their ages ranged from 30 to 73 years of age and 13 of the 17 (76%) had lived in a refugee camp between two to ten years prior to coming to the United States with Malaysia being the only country of secondary resettlement named. While there are several different Burmese tribal groups resettled in West Michigan (including Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayan, Shan, and Rohingya) my participants were comprised of Karen and Chin only. The ethnicities of the Burmese in West Michigan are difficult to determine with any certainty since government agencies do not track the location of resettlement of the various ethnic groups resettle—only the ethnicity and numbers admitted into the United States. The demographic survey given at the beginning of the interview provided the ethnicity of each Burmese participant. Twelve of the participants are Karen and six are Chin. All Burmese participants are married and have children, except for one single man in his late 30s. Thirteen of the seventeen individuals (76%) were resettled in the Grand Rapids area and four (24%) were settled just outside of the Grand Rapids city limits. Of the four placed outside of Michigan, three were resettled in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and one in Utica, New York. Of the thirteen resettled in Grand Rapids, twelve received resettlement services from Bethany Christian Services

and one individual through Lutheran Social Services (now called Samaritas). Both resettlement agencies are religiously affiliated. The other four Burmese individuals who relocated from out of state were resettled through Nationalities Services Center's refugee division in Philadelphia and Mohawk Valley Resources Center in Utica. Only two of the individuals received extra help from a secondary agency in Grand Rapids other than the initial resettlement agency. All of the individuals arrived between 2008 and 2014 with the most arriving in 2009. The Burmese ages ranged from 30-74 years of age.

The family living arrangement of the Burmese are nuclear with parents and children living in the same household. All participants except two lived in this household arrangement. In one case, an adult single man was living with his uncle and in the other case, a 70-year-old woman I interviewed was living with her two adult daughters in the same apartment. In terms of education prior to arrival, the levels varied from none (3), middle school (3), high school (7), and a college degree (4). Of the four with college degrees, three were female and one was a male. Out of this group, the one man received a mechanical engineering degree, two of the women had nursing degrees, and the third woman held a degree in accounting/auditing. All higher education for these four individuals was obtained in Burma and all were above middle age. Of the four individuals with college degrees, three were ages 70 or above and one was nearly 50 years old. The levels of education received in the United States were minimal. There were 12 participants who received no formal training outside of ESL classes (English as a Second Language) in the United States. One individual received her GED in the United States and two were working on completing their bachelors' degrees in seminary. One other individual had completed his bachelor's degree, also in seminary, in the United States and was working on his masters in seminary. One retired individual (74-year-old mechanical engineer) had taken some community

college courses, but never received any formal certifications nor finished an associate degree. Although six individuals had some ESL training in their first year of resettlement, 11 spoke minimal English, three were completely fluent and three had moderate English fluency. There was a translator present for eleven of the interviews. Table 4.1 shows the demographic information for the Burmese participants. All names used in this study are pseudonyms.

Most of the participants worked in factories (named in Table 4.1 below) which appears to be the goal of the initial resettlement agency—to get refugees working as soon as possible. This allows them to be considered self-sufficient and not dependent upon state assistance.

Additionally, the assistance offered to refugees, especially financial, is limited to three to six months (usually only three) and thus getting refugees working is critical. While the agencies do offer education in the form of English as a Second Language (ESL) services through local schools, there are limitations to accessing these services beyond a few months due to heavy work schedules, a lack of childcare, and lack of transportation. Only a few of the participants were able to attend some vocational training and higher education in the United States. The role of the resettlement agency in encouraging education beyond ESL is limited to non-existent due to the short period in which they provide assistance to the refugee. Table 4.1 shows the demographic information for the Burmese participants. All names used in this study are pseudonyms.

Table 4.1: Burmese Demographic Characteristics

	Name	Age	Ethnicity	Gender	Marital Status	Children	Arrival in U.S.	Location of arrival	Previous refugee camp	Employed, FT/PT	Employed where	Education	Occupation in Burma
#1	Khin Kyi	49	Karen, Burmese	Female	Married	2 (ages 16 & 21)	2013	Grand Rapids, MI	Yes, 5 years	Yes, FT	Novares (factory)	GED (in U.S.)	Was a primary teacher
#2	Hla Myint	45	Karen, Burmese	Male	Married	2 (ages 16 & 21)	2009	Grand Rapids, MI	Yes, 10 years	Yes, FT	Monro (factory)	Highschool in Burma	n/a
#3	So Win	32	Chin, Burmese	Male	Married	2 (ages 4 & 12)	2009	Philadelphia, PA	None	Yes, FT	JBS (factory)	Highschool in Burma	n/a
#4	Aung Win	50	Karen, Burmese	Male	Married	1 (age 16)	2009	Utica, New York	Yes, 6 years	Yes, FT	Novares (factory) & Pastor	Bachelors (US), Masters in progress (seminary)	n/a
#5	Tun Shwe	39	Chin, Burmese	Male	Not married	no	2013	Grand Rapids, MI	Yes, 5 years	No, can't find work	n/a	Bachelor's in progress (seminary)	n/a
#6	Than Tun	54	Chin, Burmese	Male	Married	6 (ages 11-26)	2008	Grand Rapids, MI	Yes, 5 years	Yes, FT	Steelcase, (factory)	Middle school in Burma; Bachelor's in progress (seminary)	farmer
#7	Tin Hla	44	Karen, Burmese	Female	Married	3 (ages 14, 19, 21)	2014	Grand Rapids, MI	Yes, 10 years	Yes, FT	Amway (factory)	None	n/a
#8	Mya Than	70	Karen, Burmese	Female	Married	2 (ages 32 & 34)	2011	Grand Rapids, MI	No	Yes, 40-55 hours/week	Hope Network (janitor)	Bachelor's in Burma; ESL	Nurse
#9	Nay Win	73	Karen, Burmese	Male	Married	2 (ages 41 & 42)	2009	Grand Rapids, MI	Yes, 8 years	Retired Aug. 2020	n/a	Bachelor's in Burma; ESL	Mechanical engineer
#10	Yi Yi Win	71	Karen, Burmese	Female	Married	2 (ages 41 & 42)	2009	Grand Rapids, MI	Yes, 8 years	Yes, PT	Accountant for Burmese church	Bachelor's in Burma; ESL	Accountant/A auditor
#11	Tin Hla	34	Karen, Burmese	Male	Married	2 (ages 4 & 7)	2014	Grand Rapids, MI	Yes, 10 years	Yes, FT	Rosscamp (factory)	Highschool in Burma; ESL	n/a/
#12	Win Kyi	30	Karen, Burmese	Female	Married	2 (ages 4 & 7)	2014	Grand Rapids, MI	Yes, 10 years	Yes, FT	Rosscamp (factory)	Middle school, Burma	n/a
#13	Hla Hla Win	37	Chin, Burmese	Female	Married	3 (ages 2, 4, 5, & pregnant)	2009	Philadelphia, PA	Yes, 2 years	No	n/a	None	n/a
#14	Khin Maung Than	49	Karen, Burmese	Male	Married	2 (ages 16 & 24)	2011	Grand Rapids, MI	Yes, 5 years	Yes, 50-65 hours/week	SunMed, Amazon (factories)	ESL; High school in Burma	n/a
#15	Mya Mya	49	Karen, Burmese	Female	Married	2 (ages 16 & 24)	2011	Grand Rapids, MI	Yes, 5 years	Yes, 50-60 hours/week	SunMed, Amazon (factories)	ESL; High school in Burma	n/a
#16	San San Win	33	Chin, Burmese	Female	Married	5 (ages 6 mo., 2, 5, 7, 10)	2011	Philadelphia, PA	No	No; stay at home mom	n/a	none	n/a
#17	Than Oo	35	Chin, Burmese	Male	Married	4 (ages 6, 8, 10, & 12)	2013	Grand Rapids, MI	No	Yes, FT	Ventra (factory)	7th grade in Burma	n/a

In addition to the Burmese interviews, I also interviewed eight Congolese refugees in the fall of 2020. There were four women and four men who participated, and the majority were

initially resettled in the West Michigan area with two participants who relocated from Maryland to Michigan. The Congolese ages ranged from 24 to 62 and all self-identified as Christian. All the participants in this study identified as Methodist except for a married couple who initially attended the Congolese Methodist services, but later switched to the Church of Latter-Day Saints. Because the religious affiliation of the Congolese refugees is also not tracked by government agencies, I do not have access to the religious affiliation of the Congolese in West Michigan—only what my sample reflected. All but two participants lived in a Tanzania refugee camp between 10-16 years prior to resettlement in the United States. Two participants lived in a Ugandan refugee camp prior to arrival in the United States. Only two individuals received formal training outside of ESL (English as a Second Language) classes and neither held a certification or trade schools training. All Congolese participants were married and had children. There was no use of translators during the interviews with the Congolese as they were all fluent enough in English to conduct the interviews without an interpreter. Two of the individuals were currently self-employed and one had been in the past. One individual completed his training as a certified nurse assistant (CNA) and also earned a child development certificate (CDC) for his in-home day care. Another individual completed her CDC as she also ran an in-home daycare. One other participant went to the community college for about two semesters. Another individual received his CDL license to drive trucks. Table 4.2 shows demographics for the Congolese participants.

Table 4.2: Congolese Demographics Characteristics

	Name	Age	Ethnicity	Gender	Marital Status	Children	Arrival in U.S.	Location of arrival	Previous refugee camp	Employed, FT/PT	Employed where	Education (in U.S.)	Occupation in Congo
#1	Tuwife	47	Congolese	Male	Married	8 (ages 8 months-12 years old)	2012	Grand Rapids, MI	Yes, 12 years	Yes, FT	In-home day care	CNA; Child development certification	None
#2	Chlemba	28	Congolese	Male	Married	3, (ages 4, 1, & 2 weeks)	2010	Grand Rapids, MI	Yes, 12 years	Yes, FT	Novares (factory)	Some community college	None
#3	Esengo	43	Congolese	Female	Married	4 (ages 15, 19, 21, 23)	2012	Grane Rapids, MI	Yes, 10 years	Yes FT	In-home day care	ESL	None
#4	Disanga	33	Congolese	Female	Married	5 (ages 16, 14, 10, 7, 4, 2)	2012	Grand Rapids, MI	Yes, 16 years	Yes, FT	Ventra (factory)	ESL	None
#5	Njowga	39	Congolese	Male	Married	5 (ages 16, 14, 10, 7, 4, 2)	2012	Grand Rapids, MI	Yes, 16 years	Yes, FT	Amazon (factory)	ESL	None
#6	Mpenda	45	Congolese	Male	Married	4 (ages 15, 19, 21, 23)	2012	Grand Rapids, MI	Yes, 13 years	Yes, FT	Kergstra (factory)	ESL; Trade school	Pastor
#7	Makembo	24	Congolese	Female	Married	3 (ages 4, 1, 2½ month)	2013	Maryland	Yes, 8 years	No, stay at home mom	n/a	ESL	None
#8	Sanga	62	Congolese	Female	Married	10 (4 living in U.S. 6 in Africa)	2013	Maryland	Yes, 8 years	No, "disabled"	n/a	ESL	None

Table 4.3 and 4.4 shows the grouped demographic information of the Congolese and Burmese subjects.

Table 4.3—Grouped Social and Demographic Characteristics of the Burmese and Congolese Participants

Characteristic	(n)	(n)	(n)	
Age	<i>30-39</i>	<i>40-69</i>	<i>70+</i>	
<i>Burmese</i>	7	7	3	
<i>Congolese</i>	2	4	0	
Gender	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>		
<i>Burmese</i>	10	7		
<i>Congolese</i>	4	4		
Marital Status	<i>Single</i>	<i>Married</i>		
<i>Burmese</i>	1	16		
<i>Congolese</i>	0	8		
Children	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>		
<i>Burmese</i>	1	16		
<i>Congolese</i>	0	8		
Length of Time in the U.S.	<i>0-5 years</i>	<i>5-10 years</i>	<i>>10 years</i>	
<i>Burmese</i>	0	10	7	
<i>Congolese</i>	0	8	0	
Max. Level Education Received	<i>Elementary/middle school</i>	<i>Jr./Sr. high school</i>	<i>College or higher</i>	<i>None</i>
<i>Burmese</i>	2	7	4	4
<i>Congolese</i>	2	6	0	0
Education Received in U.S.	<i>GED/High school diploma</i>	<i>Some college</i>	<i>Bachelors</i>	<i>None</i>
<i>Burmese</i>	1	3	1	12
<i>Congolese</i>	0	3	0	5
Religion	<i>Christian</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>None</i>	
<i>Burmese</i>	17	0	0	
<i>Congolese</i>	8	0	0	
English-Language Ability	<i>Minimal</i>	<i>Moderate</i>	<i>Fluent</i>	
<i>Burmese</i>	11	3	3	
<i>Congolese</i>	0	3	5	

Table 4.4—Comparison: Burmese and Congolese Arrival Years

Arrival Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
<i>Burmese (n)</i>	1	6	0	4	0	3	3
<i>Congolese (n)</i>	0	0	1	0	5	2	0

Confidentiality of Data

Confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms in the field notes, interview transcripts, and in the empirical chapters. The data is kept on my personal password-protected laptop device. All audio recordings and field notes are kept in accordance with federal regulations. Only I have access to these recordings and notes. While in the field, the data remained on a password-protected laptop in a locked trunk during transportation.

Ethical Issues

Because of past trauma that many refugees have endured, having resources available for these individuals is critical. In the event traumatic memories resurfaced during research, I had counseling resources available for my participants. These included the names and contact information of area counselors. Additionally, I was willing to offer participants travel to counseling or other services should the need arise (or would arrange someone who was able to do so). Risks to informants were minimal. Refugees were asked questions regarding their experiences in the host country rather than the questions about their home country or any traumatic experiences prior to immigration into the United States. While no interviews were discontinued, there were two instances where I shifted the questions and redirected the interview when I noted participants disengaging with the topic which I took as an indicator of discomfort. In this case, emotional discomfort was gauged based on the hesitation in answering questions and body language. For the two staff interviews, there were no indications of discomfort and no indicator of discomfort for the Burmese realtor informant.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for interviews began during data collection as suggested by Charmaz, (2014), Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Weiss (1994). I utilized grounded theory during interview data analysis as it calls for a simultaneous data collection with analysis where codes are created from the interview data itself and not from previously constructed assumptions (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Furthermore, grounded theory makes use of the “constant comparative methods” in which a focus on theory development throughout the data collection and analysis process is a goal (Charmaz 2014; Glaser & Strauss 1967). By beginning analysis during the interview process, I was able to discover new questions to be asked as well as to reframe existing interview questions (Spradley 1979).

My first step began with transcribing the recorded interviews and examining the non-recorded interviews that were written in a Word document. For the non-recorded interviews, I examined my notes directly after the interviews were conducted and filled in areas where I had written in key phrases, which were expanded upon after the interviews were conducted. For example, I often wrote short phrases in the documents (such as “could not get work” or “moved because of family and work”) and then filled in the gaps in the conversation since the information was fresh in my memory. These phrases were used instead of typing all the information during the interview, so I did not miss other information as the interview progressed. I also removed all misspellings and errors from my notes. For the recorded interviews, I listened to each recording on my laptop and transcribed the entirety of the interview word-for-word into a Word document by hand. This way, all of the interview data was transcribed, and I could approach the analysis with the intent to read everything in its entirety. Transcribing recorded interviews often took three to four hours to complete per interview with the duration of each

interview lasting 45-60 minutes. Transcribing interviews in their entirety also helped me become familiar with the data.

After transcribing the interviews, the analyzing began using two steps. First was in preparing the transcripts—the finding, refining and elaborating on content, themes and issues. This initial coding step began with reading the transcripts fully and then re-reading them again in order to familiarize myself with the data and to locate categories of information. The step of open coding was conducted to find categories on which to focus (Cresswell & Poth 2017). Open coding also included jotting notes in the margins that helped indicate the categories that were mentioned in each interview. For example, some of the notes included types of work, the role of the church and obstacles that individuals faced.

Next, I re-examined all interviews and notes to clarify meanings of concepts and themes in order to “synthesize different versions of events” (Ruben & Ruben 2005:207). This re-examination process, or axial coding, of the data allowed me to refine the concepts that arose from the open coding in which I was able to create additional categories from the initial coding. This step in the coding process took place by highlighting the content that was relevant to my categories and included codes such as factory work, English fluency, discrimination, living arrangements, and neighborhood interaction which were “tagged” in each transcript. The tagging included the use of highlighting the content by a color-coding scheme. For example, orange highlighting was used as it related to the category of “obstacles faced” that included discrimination or neighborhood strife, while yellow referenced the category of “types of work” and included stories associated with work experiences. I also wrote the codes at the top of each transcript after this step was complete to create easy comparison among the participants in the same ethnic group as well as to compare across the two ethnic groups as I conducted analysis of

the transcripts. In this way, coding was used to link what my participants revealed to some of the concepts that arose out of the interviews (Weiss 1994).

After completing axial coding, I used memoing to help organize the codes that were revealed through the examination of the codes (Cresswell & Poth 2018). I then began the process of sorting the excerpts of data into the final categories. These excerpts were highlighted in the actual documents and marked with the appropriate concept or theme. I began sorting each interview in this manner to help uncover larger connections to other interviews and to create more clear categories out of the interview data.

Finally, the codes that were tagged from the concepts in the interviews were organized in a Word document. This step in the analysis occurred after I located and integrated all of the concepts from the interviews. In this coding stage, I began to determine the labels that were to be applied as I marked them in each transcript (Ruben & Ruben 2005). While my initial codes from open coding included 20 different categories, out of these categories I had six themes arise. These six themes include: discrimination, types of work, neighborhood interactions, church environment, co-ethnic activities, and native-born interactions. These themes were then synthesized into four major domains including: ethnic community; church community; neighborhood community; and workplace that all connected to the overarching theme of social relations and social interaction. A list of the codes and coding scheme including the initial 20 codes, the revised coding scheme, and the final coding scheme is outlined in Table 4.5 below.

Table 4.5—Coding Scheme

Initial Codes

Code #	Description
1	Discrimination—language, ethnicity, race
2	Work exploitation
3	Church
4	English fluency
5	Transportation issues
6	Resettlement agency struggles
7	Isolation
8	Neighborhood interactions
9	Relocation
10	Education—barriers/access to
11	Native born interaction
12	Jobs available
13	Physical work/factory jobs
14	Residence patterns—homeowners, apartment complexes
15	Social gatherings
16	Religiousness/spirituality
17	Covid
18	Co-ethnic support/socialization
19	Self-employment
20	Pastor status

Revised Coding Scheme

Category Themes	Description
Discrimination	Language, ethnicity, race, nationality, refugee status
Types of work	Job type, exploitation, exclusion
Neighborhood Interactions	Hostility, discrimination
Church Environment	God, spirituality, frequent interactions
Ethnic Relations	Support systems, networks, relocation
Native-born Interactions/living in the U.S.	Absent, hostile, neutral, minimal

Final Coding Scheme

Domain	Overarching Theme
Ethnic Community	Social relations & development of social ties
Church Community	
Neighborhood Community	
Workplace	

Summary

I used in-depth interviews to understand the experience of Burmese and Congolese refugees in this study. Data collection took place during the fall of 2020 and spring of 2021. I conducted 28 in-depth interviews, including 25 refugee interviews and three supplementary interviews. I recruited participants through an informant from each ethnic group who put me in contact with the participants. A total of 17 Burmese interviews and eight Congolese interviews were completed; additionally, I conducted interviews with two agency staff and one Burmese realtor to help provide context for the refugee participants' interviews.

Data analysis was conducted using grounded theory which began during the interviewing of participants. After interviews were completed, I began by transcribing the audio recordings into Word documents and then read the transcripts multiple times while jotting notes in the margins. I open coded the transcripts to create major categories and then completed axial coding to help identify other content relevant to the major categories. Out of these categories I arrived at six major themes that included types of work, neighborhood interactions, church environment, co-ethnic relations, and native-born interactions/living in the United States. From these categories, four main domains were constructed that included the ethnic community, church community, neighborhood community and workplace in which social relations and the development of social ties was the overarching theme under examination.

CHAPTER V

BURMESE SOCIAL RELATIONS

In this chapter, I examine how social relations are formed and maintained within four domains: ethnic community, church community, neighborhood community, and the workplace. I document varied ways in which social relations are formed among the Burmese in each of the domains. First, I discuss the ethnic community. While not geographically bound, it is a realm in which the Burmese rely on others in their ethnic group for accessing resources such as employment opportunities, relocation information, and social networks. Next, I discuss the church community as a space in which Christian Burmese maintain close social relations as they are established within the church and through religious devotion. The church is a foundational source in forming and reinforcing close social ties for Burmese refugees as it serves as not only a place of worship, but also a place to interact with others who speak the same dialect and share the same cultural background. In the third domain of the neighborhood, I discuss the variations in social relations that are formed based on the specific neighborhood community in relation to where individuals live and the demographics of the neighbors who live among the participants. Finally, I discuss the nature of social relation between the Burmese and their native-born coworkers and supervisors in the workplace. The social interactions that take place in the workplace are often strained which creates little motivation for the development of close social ties with others.

Ethnic Community

The Burmese have a robust ethnic group in the West Michigan area with many maintaining social ties through events, gatherings, and family interactions out of state and in their home country. Many also found ways to connect to other Burmese through various methods such as the resettlement agencies, social media, community engagement, and through technology. The Burmese in this study live primarily within the same city limits or cities adjacent to one another. For participants who may not have had family or relatives in the West Michigan area, they often found other Burmese individuals on their own during their early resettlement months.

For some individuals, they actively searched for other Burmese to help establish social ties and to extend their networks. For example, in a discussion with Than Tun, a 54-year-old Burmese father of six children who arrived in Michigan in 2008, he indicated that he found other Burmese on his own, “I would hear people speaking Burmese in the [resettlement] agency and go to them.” For this participant, finding other Burmese was a critical aspect in the formation of social relations within his ethnic community that helped him extend his social networks. Many other participants in this study also established social connections through the English as a Second Language classes (ESL) they were enrolled in where they actively searched and sought out other Burmese. Others arrived with family and friends in the area making barriers less salient.

For one participant, social relations were forged through actively seeking other Burmese within their ethnic group. Khin Kyi, a 48-year-old Burmese mother who arrived in West Michigan with her husband in 2013, told me that she intentionally opened her home (after they purchased it two years earlier) to feel less isolated and to help connect with other Burmese

refugees in the area. She made her home a space where other Burmese could visit and interact with others and form networks, which was accomplished through hosting dinners, Bible study, and other social activities that kept each other bonded. Because of the intentional way in which she sought to form social relations by opening her home, she and her husband had established a large network within their ethnic group in the area. These interactions took place as often as once or twice per week depending on work schedules and varied from just one family visiting to as many as four families. Khin Kyi indicated that when she opened her home she did so in order to establish a larger group with which to interact. The individuals who visited Khin Kyi's home were from the Kentwood area and were either from church or friends and family in the area. Khin Kyi created a network with her co-ethnics that may have helped her family and other families with more social support. She and her husband were also prominent members of the community, and her husband would often guest preach at their local church.

In another case, Tun Shwe, a single 39-year-old Chin man with no children, told me that he is only connected to the Burmese community and receives help from other Burmese friends with day-to-day needs. He also indicated that he relies on his Burmese community for help to complete the paperwork to get his citizenship and passport so he can travel to Myanmar to marry his longtime girlfriend in order to bring her to the United States. Additionally, Yi Wim and Nay Win, a married couple in their early seventies, indicated that they wanted to move out of their apartment to be even closer to another family member. Yi Wim, the wife, told me, "Sometimes we want to move. We want to stay with my sister—we want to stay together." For this couple, they lived about a 10-minute drive from her sister and visited often, but they both wanted to live in the same household to provide additional support since the sister has a daughter with a mental

disability. The desire to live with extended family is indicative of the ways in which others do (or want to) provide social support for each other—both family and friends.

Some individuals relocated to Michigan to expand their networks. This was the case with four of the participants in this study who were initially settled outside of Michigan and then later relocated to the West Michigan area. Three of these four participants were initially placed in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and one in Utica, New York. Each participant noted that they moved to West Michigan to be closer to other Burmese as well as to access a more robust network. “In Michigan there is a bigger [Burmese] community... we moved because there are not a lot of Burmese [in Philadelphia]. That’s a problem because I’m not good in English and transportation,” said San Wan, a 33-year-old mother of five. She indicated that she is much happier living in Michigan because there are many more friends and relatives nearby. These instances show that many are willing to relocate from out of the state because they place high value on living in an area that has a more robust Burmese community.

San Win, a 33-year-old mother of five children who moved from Philadelphia to Michigan in 2013, similarly noted that there were more friends and family and a larger network of Burmese in West Michigan. When I asked how she got to know the Burmese community in Michigan, she laughed, dropped her head and shyly told me she got to know them through social media. “Every time I have a[n] [online] contact, I found others and they connected me to [others in] Michigan... so I moved here with my family,” she said. “Here we have more friends and relatives and [my husband] got a job through [our] friends. The resettlement agency didn’t help at all.” I also asked her if she felt more connected with the community in Michigan and she said she was much happier. She indicated that it was another Chin friend who helped her find work when she and her husband first arrived in Michigan.

The two other Burmese participants who relocated from Philadelphia to Grand Rapids also expressed similar sentiment about the lack of Burmese network in Philadelphia in addition to noting that there were no Burmese churches in the Philadelphia area. So Win, a 32-year-old Chin father of two young children who moved from Philadelphia, indicated that the “main reason [for moving] is, of course, is there are [Burmese] family and friends here [in Michigan].” Likewise, Aung Win, a 50-year-old father of one son and the pastor of the local Burmese church, told me that his connections were more plentiful in West Michigan than in Utica since Utica had a much smaller Burmese community. The relocation of Burmese from state to state is indicative of the desire to expand their social networks within their ethnic group in order to establish stronger relations on which they can rely for support.

An additional aspect of Burmese social relations existed in the reliance on their ethnic network as they went through the process of purchasing their own homes. Eleven of the seventeen participants in this study had purchased their own home (and in one case, a participant gave his first home to his eldest son and purchased a second home for himself and nuclear family). Every individual who bought a home relied on a local Burmese realtor during the process and for all aspects of the home-buying including translation, financial paperwork, and other legal paperwork. This realtor was a critical social tie for the Burmese community and provided participants an easier process when deciding to purchase their homes.

For the Burmese refugees who have family in Myanmar, most of the participants made mention of missing their families. Fourteen participants discussed staying connected to family back home, but three indicated that they missed nothing about Myanmar. However, several participants noted they felt a loss due to their family members living in Myanmar and the fact that they are unable to visit or live close to them. So Win commented that he hadn’t seen his

mother for 20 years and the deep pain this caused him since he was not able to visit and did not know if he would ever be able to. Tun Shwe said he missed his parents and especially his girlfriend who he had been dating for seven years and who was still in Myanmar. He had hopes of bringing her back to the states after marrying her in Myanmar. Than Tun told me that he misses the “land, my people, my family, brothers and sisters and my mom.” Likewise, Hla Win mentioned, “My younger sister. I really miss her. I really want to see [her] and my mom badly. I really want to see [them].” While these participants couldn’t physically visit their families in Myanmar, they kept in touch via social media and telephone calls as a way to maintain social relations through the vast geographic distance.

For three of the participants, they indicated they missed nothing about their home country. Even though there was nothing said, their body language pointed to something else. When I asked Mya Than what she misses most about Burma, she stumbled with an answer and ultimately responded that there was nothing she missed; however, as she tried to think of an answer her body slumped over when this question was asked indicating there may have been some sensitive feelings about her home country. Similarly, Yi Win paused for about ten seconds when I asked her about Burma. After the pause, she also said, there was nothing that she missed. Yet, there may have been more beneath this question that she was unwilling to open up about as indicated by the very long pause. For those who named family as something strongly missed, the social ties that most Burmese participants hold with their families in their home country may help provide a foundation of support or a line of connection to help ground them while in the United States. While the participants deeply miss their families in Myanmar, most have not been able to travel back to Myanmar.

Several noteworthy behaviors during the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 occurred while the study was conducted, which reveal the closeness of social ties among Burmese. Many of the Burmese subjects did not follow the mask mandate or social distance with others who they considered family or close friends. During one interview with a Burmese woman, my translator had his mask down just resting over his chin for the duration of the interview. I later discovered he knew my interviewee from church and had closer social ties with her. Right after this interview, when the second interviewee came into the room to begin the interview, my translator promptly pulled his mask up over his nose—something I took as an indicator that he did not know her and was taking extra precautions. The closeness of social relations among Burmese was evident in these encounters where, when social relations appeared to be close, individuals felt less likely to wear a mask whereas when the social relations were more distant and there were no social ties, individuals wore their masks. Similarly, when entering my key informants' home, if there were guests they usually did not have their masks on. While I always wore my mask upon entering my Burmese key informant's home, my key informant never wore the mask in the home, although her husband would usually have his on when I came in or put it on shortly after my arrival. Similarly, some of the Burmese participants wore a mask in my presence, yet others did not. Since these issues were not discussed with my participants, this in an area that needs further exploration.

Close social ties are apparent among the Burmese ethnic community in West Michigan. They help to create a network of social support that is critical for refugees. Some individuals moved from out of state to West Michigan specifically to live among a larger community of Burmese. Having a larger community not only creates more opportunity for developing close social ties among a larger group of individuals, but it also provides more support. Some

individuals opened their homes to create a space in which to form closer social relations through gatherings and others actively sought other Burmese through community events. Others maintained social relations with family back home through technology, while some relied on social ties with the local Burmese ethnic community to help with home purchases and finding work. For the Burmese participants, their ethnic group was key in providing the base for navigating barriers as well as accessing resources that were otherwise difficult to do. For example, many were able to purchase homes with a Burmese realtor, get assistance with citizenship and legal paperwork, or find employment in the area.

Church Community

Church is a foundational source in forming and reinforcing close social ties for Burmese refugees. It serves as not only a place of worship, but also a place to interact with others who share a similar language and cultural background. Burmese refugees identify as Christian, which situates them as members among the dominant religious group within the United States since the majority of individuals identify as Christian in the United States (65%). According to an informant, there are roughly six to seven Burmese churches in West Michigan that serve the Burmese community with members who are of various ethnic groups including Chin, Karen, and Kachin. However, only two churches appeared in an online search, and I was only able to learn from the informant that there were more than these two churches. One of the two churches that I discovered online is called the Chin Christian Church of Grand Rapids and has about 140 members and a Chin Burmese pastor. The other is Christian Myanmar Church, which was established in 2011 and has approximately 200 members. This church serves primarily Karen, but also welcomes other ethnic groups such as Chin. Both churches are located in Kentwood,

Michigan and are the larger churches of the six or seven in the area. Church is like an anchor for the Burmese in which they maintain their relations with others to help secure stability and support. Sundays are often the only day in which they are able to interact due to heavy work schedules and thus this day is important not only for religious reasons, but for maintaining their social relations and bonds with one another.

Every participant in this study named church as a source of community, support, or spirituality. In addition to the community connection that church offers, faith was an outlet for stress due to physically exhausting work and resettlement., “I was thankful to God and the Bible and that is my life... the word of God is precious. God has helped me get through this process... I myself don’t have money, but when I pray, God helps me, and God is with me,” Khin Kyi, a Karen woman in her mid-forties, mentioned when discussing the difficulty with work and life in the United States. For another participant, the social ties developed within the church helped her leave physically demanding factory work. Yi Win, a 71-year-old woman, was able to leave a strenuous factory job and became the auditor and accountant for her church. “For me it’s good. Good for the heart. I want to work, but my body [can] not (do the physically demanding factory work),” she stated. In her case, the connections she had with church members provided the opportunity for work when she was not able to sustain the physically demanding factory work that is commonly filled by refugees. Because church is a foundational aspect in the lives of the Burmese, I have included an image (see Figure 5.1) of a Chin church located in Kentwood.

Figure 5.1: Chin Christian Church of Grand Rapids—Burmese Church



The Burmese participants noted that they attend church every Sunday and some held additional gatherings on Saturdays in their homes, though this occurs much less often as many of the participants work overtime in their factory jobs on Saturdays or are busy with their own nuclear families. Thus, the church is not only a place of practicing faith, but also one that provides a space for connecting with other Burmese refugees. In one case, Than Oo, a 35-year-old father of four, told me he quit a factory job because they required overtime work on Sundays. After requesting Sundays off for over a year without success, he quit. As he recalled, “I don’t want to work on Sunday because I have church. That’s the only time I get to connect with the community is through church. I did it (worked on Sundays) for three years and I kept telling [management] that I want Sunday off, but they didn’t give it to me.” The importance of being around other Burmese on Sundays was also expressed by others. In another case, Hla Win, a 37-year-old mother of three and currently pregnant, told me that church was part of the reason she and her family relocated from Pennsylvania to Michigan. She explained, “The church services [aren’t] really good [in Pennsylvania]—it’s not the same and not as good [as they are in Michigan].” While Hla Win noted she did not like the services in Pennsylvania, she did not

indicate the specifics of why other than they were small in size. Like Yi Win, Hla Win also indicated the importance of a vibrant church community in helping to provide social support, including finding employment and housing, that she and her husband both relied on when they relocated to Michigan.

For others, such as Mya Than, a 70-year-old mother of two adult children (living with her), church on Sundays is the time to socialize with other Burmese in the community. Similarly, Tin Ha, a 34-year-old father of two, indicated that his social connections with other Burmese occurred at church and that the social relations were robust, though the interactions were limited to Sundays due to heavy work schedules. However, Tin Ha mentioned that when special occasions arise, such as the birth of a child, they often visit their church community outside of Sundays. Social connections that were formed within the church also led to increased interactions outside of the church as 49-year-old Mya told me when explaining how she got to know my key informant. Because of the social ties formed in the church, they were able to form a close bond and had become friends even before they became neighbors. Mya and her husband Kin Maun Than also indicated that many of the members were friends who often have dinner together and hold gatherings. San Win, a 33-year-old mother of five, told me that when she was initially resettled in Philadelphia, there weren't any Burmese churches they could attend. They tried visiting an English-speaking church, but they could not understand the sermon and felt uncomfortable in the white church; she also noted that she and her husband were much happier to be able to attend a Burmese church in Grand Rapids. Thus, the social relations formed within the church are profound and long lasting and the ability to sustain these social ties in turn provide a solid security network especially when facing obstacles.

As we talked one Sunday afternoon, Hla Myint, a 45-year-old Karen father of two, discussed that he is very involved with his church community and is considered an “elder” who gives occasional guest sermons. Hla Myint also indicated that the church was the foundational place where community involvement occurs with other Burmese. He helps plan events, cooks occasionally, and addresses issues that arise with congregation members. This prominent role has allowed him to establish close ties with members in the church community, which he indicated was critical during his initial resettlement period—it provided support to him and he in turn can assist other newly resettled Burmese in the area. I also interviewed the pastor of one of the local Burmese churches, Aung Win, a charismatic and outgoing 50-year-old father of one teenage son. He is currently working on his master’s degree in theology and at the time of the interview had only one more semester left to complete the degree. Aung Win was a political activist in Burma during the military government rule and was placed in a refugee camp in 2003 prior to being resettled in Utica in 2009. He then relocated to Michigan in 2012. As the pastor of the local church, Aung Win is extremely well connected with other Burmese individuals and is considered to be a leader and mentor in his community. In addition to his graduate studies, he also works a full-time factory job, so he too has little time outside of church on Sundays to socialize. However, the title and role of pastor in his community has provided the ability to generate strong and plentiful relationships with other Burmese as well as non-refugee native-born individuals—something that was rare among the participants in this study. Aung Win told me that because their family is Christian, this has allowed him to connect with other religious institutions. He explained, “I just went to see the pastor [at the] American Baptist church,” and began a relationship. “Pastor Joe was the first [white] person I connected with, and we are closer than friends.” If Aung Win needs help with church or government related documents or even advice,

he goes to this pastor, “so I have a new community” with the Baptist church “and the other pastor Ross, he lives in [Battle Creek] and I am close with him as well and we have contact every three months.” Aung Win explained that he was able to “connect with all ethnicit[ies] through the Baptist Church”—something else that other participants weren’t afforded that most likely related to his level of English fluency. He also mentioned that his status as a pastor provides benefits with the Christian high school his son attends. “That school gave me the pastor discount!” he said laughing as he told me that his status conferred advantage that others did not possess. Aung Win’s community extended outside of his ethnic group due to his status as a pastor and was the outlier among the Burmese participants as the only individual who was able to form close social relations with non-Burmese local residents. For the other Burmese participants, they did not share Aung Win’s non-Burmese connections and held the closest social ties to others within their own ethnic group and within the church.

For the Burmese refugees, there also appears to be cohesion among different tribal groups based on a common religious affiliation. Many, who were either Chin and Karen, noted that they worshipped together, and the members were welcoming of other ethnic groups: “This is a good thing to [have] fellowship for each other so we know more about the other groups,” Khin Kyi, a Karen woman in her late 40s who arrived in Michigan in 2013, commented about the other ethnic group members in her church. She was a teacher in Burma before being placed in a refugee camp in Malaysia for five years prior to being admitted into the United States with her husband and two sons. She has been a member of the Burmese church for seven years—since arriving in the United States. While she noted that they see one another primarily on Sundays at church, they also visit others in their community to offer support in other cases; for example, “when people died, we support each other to get through. If they are sick, they drop me off and I

pray and share the word of God and pray for them.” The use of faith and their networks with other Burmese provides the social support during important life events such as births, deaths, and marriages.

The church community serves as a foundation of support as well as the domain in which close social ties among Burmese participants are formed and sustained. The church itself serves multiple Burmese ethnic groups and the faith is the base with which they share common cultural backgrounds and shared identity. Social ties are reinforced through activities within the church and sometimes in the homes providing even more social interaction and enhancing their close social ties. The social interactions within the church also led to an increase in interaction outside of the church where many individuals had become friends and thus social ties became even closer. Those who hold social ties within the church community would also attend life events such as deaths and births in the community. Social relations with others in the church also helped the participants access resources through this network, as was often the case with finding employment and housing. Strong social relations and a vibrant church community were factors in several participant’s relocation to Michigan as well. Establishing a larger church community and network of Burmese was a driving factor in why these individuals moved several states. Clearly, the church is a foundational aspect of the Burmese ethnic community and provides a robust network with which to access social support and resources that help when individuals make life changes or face barriers. The social ties formed in the church are crucial for the well-being of the Burmese community in west Michigan.

Neighborhood Community

Neighborhoods are common places where social relations are formed and maintained with others. However, the closeness in social relations among the participants in this study varies depending on the neighborhood demographics as well as the neighborhood location itself. The neighborhoods in which a majority (65%) of the Burmese resided were in residential housing developments in Kentwood, a suburb of the greater Grand Rapids city limits. Five participants lived in apartment complexes in Kentwood and one in the city of Grand Rapids—the largest city in West Michigan. Social relations appear much different for participants living in apartment complexes where the demographic makeup is primarily other refugees. Conversely, the participants who lived in residential housing developments resided among a white native-born demographic group with few to no refugees in the area. As such, the social relations are much different than those among individuals living in apartment complexes.

Six of the participants reside in apartment complexes with five of those six living within the Kentwood city limits and one outside of Kentwood in the greater Grand Rapids area. For all but one of the participants who lived in apartment complexes, their neighborhoods were racially and ethnically diverse. More refugees and individuals of color live in the apartment complexes whereas more white people live in the suburb residential housing areas. For the Burmese participants living in these residential housing neighborhoods, many noted that their neighbors appeared mostly friendly and many waved as they left their homes, yet there were no participants who expressed that they held close social ties with their primarily white native-American born neighbors. Social relations among other refugees or Burmese refugees in their apartment complexes was different in terms of the social relations forged, with many more social interactions and in turn closer social ties. Mya Than, a 70-year-old nurse and mother of two adult

children residing with her, indicated that it was primarily Burmese refugees who live around her and “she really likes her neighbors” but that “it’s mostly Burmese” who she interacts with. These interactions were in the form of frequent conversations and get togethers where they would often “cook together and eat together.”

Nay Win and Yi Win, an elderly married couple, currently live in an apartment complex with other refugees and held close ties with their neighbors. They indicated that they interact with neighbors “from all over; Somali, Nepali, all refugees [there is] only one black man and one white man in the complex.” They also indicated that because of the higher number of refugees around them they felt more comfortable among their neighbors, even those who were not necessarily Burmese refugees. This illustrates that having a shared refugee identity may help create closer social ties among neighbors even when the spoken languages are different. In one case, a participant noted that he lived in an apartment complex with no other refugees or Burmese. Aung Win, the local pastor, stated that he had no interaction with his neighbors. His neighborhood was an apartment complex with a mix of individuals, both native born and some refugees, and he was the only individual who lived outside of Kentwood. He and his family had even moved to North Carolina the year before the interview took place but moved back in under a year because his son wanted to be closer to his social network. This participant was one of a few who noted not liking the apartment complex he lived in due to the demographics of his neighbors being primarily native-born individuals and there being very little interaction. These moves indicate a desire to be closer to a robust Burmese community but that neighborhood relations matter less if there is a large enough Burmese community in which to create social ties in other domains such as church or ethnic community. Figure 5.2 shows an example of an apartment complex that houses refugees in Kentwood, Michigan.

Figure 5.2: Example Refugee Apartment Complex in Kentwood, Michigan



The majority of the Burmese participants owned their own homes and lived in areas where the demographic makeup was predominantly non-refugee, native-born and white. While ten participants owned homes in the residential housing areas of Kentwood, there was one additional participant living in a single-family home that was purchased by his uncle. In these residential housing neighborhoods, the participants who bought homes expressed that they had minimal or no connection to American-born individuals, other English-speaking folk, or other ethnic groups (if they existed) in their neighborhoods. If there was any social interaction that did occur with native-born American neighbors, it was largely dependent upon the participant's level of English fluency. With eleven of the Burmese refugees speaking minimal English, this created a formidable barrier for engaging with the English-speaking population. Several expressed a desire to get involved with the neighborhoods, but with the inability to communicate, this left many unable to interact or reach out. For example, So Win told me about the very short 'hellos' or waves when leaving or arriving home due to his lack of English fluency. He did note that there was one other Burmese family in the neighborhood that he and his wife are close with

(having a shared language and culture) and one African American and one white American who say hello. But beyond these two non-refugee neighbors, the interactions with other neighbors were absent. For others, there was zero interaction with any neighbors. Tun Swe, a 39-year-old single man, told me about the neighborhood where he lives with his uncle, his wife and their children. The neighbors are “mostly English and Spanish neighbors,” he pointed out. “I try to interact and try to speak in English, but [it is] not that good.” Though he likes where he lives, his interaction with his English and Spanish speaking neighbors is limited. Many others noted that they also held few relations in their neighborhoods. “They know us, but we don’t talk,” said one Burmese man about his neighbors. In another case, the interactions were brief but minimal. “I don’t speak much English, or sometimes we say hi and smile and bye. But no big conversations,” she said gesturing with her hand and waving and laughing.” Than Tun, a 54-year-old father of six, laughed when I asked him how well he knew his neighbors. “I don’t! In the morning they say hi. [It’s] ‘hi...bye’ in the morning and that is all.” Than Tun lives in an English-speaking community and also indicated that a lack of English fluency makes it difficult to get to know his neighbors.

Another couple, Khin Maung Than and his wife, Mya, said they purchased their home so they could have more room for their children, not because they didn’t like their apartment. “[The apartment] was so quiet because there were many old people. We were the only refugees in the whole apartment. We didn’t have other friends or refugees [in the apartment complex].” When I probed further and asked if anyone talked to them, Mya explained, “sometimes...not a lot. But sometimes.” I also asked if any of the neighbors were unkind (they lived among mostly older white neighbors), she said, “Sometimes. Sometimes when we walked, yes,” and broke eye contact with me as she shifted uncomfortably to one side of her seat setting her gaze to the

opposite corner of the room. I took this body language as a sign of her discomfort and moved to a different set of questions. For a few other Burmese participants, neighborhood interactions were also unpleasant. “There is not a lot of interaction with neighbors when I was living at the apartment. I didn’t like them because the [neighbors] were loud and drunk,” Hla Myint commented about his neighbors in his previous apartment. Though he and his wife recently bought a house with the help of a Burmese realtor in the area (as did many others), they found very little interaction with their native-born neighbors except for the brief ‘hello’ or ‘goodbye.’ The exception was one other Burmese family that lived a block away who were good friends with his wife, Khin Kyi. Figure 5.3 shows an example of a Burmese residential homes in Kentwood, Michigan.

Figure 5.3: Example Burmese Residential Home in Kentwood, Michigan



Time was an additional factor for many when it came to developing neighborly social relations. For some of the participants, the language barrier was less of an issue than was the time available to connect with the non-refugee families in their neighborhoods. As Khin Maung Than and Mya noted, a lack of time left them unable to forge social relations with their neighbors. “We work a lot. That makes it difficult to have the time to get to know other people from the community.” Even though most Burmese held few social relations with the native-born or the English-speaking community, they tended to follow this discussion by noting that the opportunities were more plentiful in the United States when compared to Myanmar. Many of the participants named schools (better education for children), healthcare (regular medical checkups), and jobs (more jobs available) as being factors that make living in the United States

better. In this way, they appeared to be hesitant in speaking negatively about the United States or their circumstances in a negative light.

There was one instance where a participant was forthright about her dislike for her neighbors which ultimately influenced her social relations. In this case it was bias against the Black community as she noted when describing her African-American neighbors. Hla Win, a mother of three, explained: “When we first came to Michigan in 2013, we live in an apartment, which a friend helped us find. After that we bought a house...but the first apartment in Michigan, we didn’t like...the apartment it is crazy. The black people they live upstairs, and they shout at me. And also, my kids play around, and they’re not allowed to. It was a little bit difficult, and I was afraid [of these neighbors].” From this excerpt, it is noteworthy to mention that she most likely was expressing internalized prejudice against the African American community in which she articulated a dislike for her black neighbors who were “loud” and who she was “scared” of.

I was able to interview one of the three area Burmese realtors in the West Michigan area, who provided insight into the process of home purchasing including how credit was established, why location was chosen, and how they dealt with barriers. Khan Tun Kwey is a Christian Chin man in his late thirties who has been a realtor in West Michigan for over seven years. He first arrived as a refugee from Myanmar in 2008 and began a real estate career in 2013. His first clients were Burmese, and he primarily assists Burmese (mostly Christian) clients with buying homes. On average, Khan Tun Kwey’s Burmese buyers make up about 75% of his annual home buyers with the others including Nepalese, Congolese, Burmese or Bangladeshi Rohingya, and a few white individuals. Khan Tun Kwey also noted that most Burmese owned homes in Myanmar and have a goal to purchase a home shortly after resettlement in the United States. During the interview, he told me that in his community “all want to own a home. We have that

mindset. If you own a home, then you are normal. So that's why everyone who is in the apartment [here] will buy a house eventually. Some people might take a little longer than two years and some people might be five years or seven years. But eventually they will buy—90% will want to buy.”

One of the first things that Khan Tun Kwey tells individuals interested in buying homes is to establish credit—pay everything on time and get a credit card. While refugees establish some credit in the process of paying off their travel loan (the airfare for travels from home country to the United States) it is minimal. He also helps individuals with this process, even applying for credit cards online for them. Once Burmese refugees open a secure credit card where they put money down and use the card for a year, they can qualify for an actual credit card, which Khan Tun Kwey urges them to use in order to establish even more credit. The second thing he tells his future clients is that they must have two years of work history at the same location. After individuals have reached this point, he can help most purchase a home. Khan Tun Kwey noted that it takes individuals anywhere from two to seven years to prepare for a home purchase with most falling in the three-to-five-year mark. Once credit and work history has been established, Khan Tun Kwey told me he is able to get close to 99% of his clients to purchase their own homes. Even for clients who have low income or individuals who have not been at their job for two years, it did not matter the circumstances—he told me he is almost always able to find a cosigner for his clients so that even those who may not meet the minimum requirements for homeownership will be able to buy.

Khan Tun Kwey also works diligently with about five different banks in the area and has connections with some banks that help him with his lower income clients. For example, one bank provides a \$5,000-\$7,000 grant towards a down payment for individuals making under \$36,000

annually while another bank covers all closing costs if individuals purchase within a specific area in Kentwood. He also works directly with a few mortgage companies for those who have lower credit scores. Additionally, Khan Tun Kwey will usually charge one percent less on his commission for his clients in order to help them and to help spread word around the Burmese community. In turn, this has given Khan Tun Kwey the largest client base when compared to the other two Burmese realtors.

Location is a factor in Burmese home purchases with the majority buying in Kentwood. When I asked Khan Tun Kwey why he thought the majority of individuals chose to purchase in this area, he told me it was to be close to other Burmese: “Mostly they want Kentwood. [...] When we start to resettle, we resettled around Kentwood. That’s why they like it. Even though we don’t visit much after we buy homes, like when we used to in the apartments, we want to stay not too far from each other. In case something happens. In case I have to put my kids in your house or my friend’s house—they want to be close to each other even though they don’t visit too much. But if they have a problem or hardship then they are there to help each other.” Khan Tun Kwey noted that school and work was a factor in living in Kentwood as the public schools offer translators and most work within the Kentwood city limits at area factories. I also inquired about individuals living in housing areas with few to no other Burmese around them. He indicated that as long as they were within 10-15 minutes of others and had their church as a home base, the specific neighborhoods mattered less, “so even though they live without [other] Burmese and they don’t have interactions with neighbors, but they still go to the church to socialize.” The specific neighborhood they chose didn’t have to have a robust Burmese community as long as they had their connections through their ethnic community as well as their church community.

The Burmese primarily reside in residential housing with very few living in apartment complexes. For individuals who purchased homes or were living in residential neighborhoods, they held more neutral, though extremely limited, social relations. The data suggests that Burmese refugees hold close social ties with neighbors when they live among other Burmese and other refugees in general, but those who have purchased homes in primarily white neighborhoods hold social relations that are not close and do not include much social interaction beyond waving and hello/goodbye's. The participants who lived among other refugees—both Burmese and non-Burmese—were more likely to hold closer social ties than the Burmese living in residential housing developments. Thus, participants living in the residential housing areas may feel a sense of isolation due to a lack of interaction and in turn rely upon their ethnic community and church community as sources of support to a greater extent than those living among other refugees in their apartment complexes. This finding suggests that geographic integration—living alongside native-born neighbors—does not automatically translate into actual social integration (or integration of social relations).

Workplace

Burmese social relations are significantly different in their places of employment than among the neighborhood and church community. Many of the Burmese participants experience workplace discrimination from both co-workers and supervisors that creates tension in the relationship and hinders interaction. This can lead to less motivation to develop close social ties. The work relations that were strained were primarily with non-refugee native-born co-workers or the supervisor. Discrimination, while named by several participants, was not always the reason participants felt different from others at work. Lack of English fluency was another primary

reason given for ill treatment in the workplace by coworkers and supervisors. In a few cases, exploitation was revealed in the workplace, which also led to the absence of close social relations. In the discussion below, I outline barriers that the participants faced that led to a lack of close social relations as well as the way in which hostile interactions with coworkers and superiors led to greater stress and discomfort in the workplace.

The Kentwood area holds various manufacturing factories from industries including paint, foods, furniture, and auto parts production. In fact, there are dozens of factories in this area alone that hire immigrants and refugees making this type of work the primary place of employment for most refugees in West Michigan, including the majority of the participants in this study. While factories are scattered all across West Michigan, there is a higher concentration in the Kentwood area when compared to other regions in West Michigan. Twelve of the Burmese participants in this study worked full time (with two of the twelve working full time plus an additional part-time job) in factories. One person (over the age of 70) was newly retired; two women with young children were not working and did not intend to work until the children were a little older; and one man was unemployed but looking for work in a factory. Seven participants worked at a meatpacking factory at some point (or currently) in their work history and two participants had spouses who worked at a meatpacking factory. All of the employed participants worked at factories for paint, food production, food processing, furniture production, or auto parts production.

For many participants, a lack of language fluency was identified as the underlying reason they felt differential treatment from their co-workers and supervisors, though this was sometimes linked with discrimination. Than Oo told me the following about his work experiences: “They welcome us, but we don’t speak English and at work they kind of look down on us a little bit

because of the language barrier. There is slightly a little bit of, not like racism, but they look down on us. Every job. Not a lot, but a little bit in every [job].” In Than Oo’s case, the lack of English fluency created a barrier in forming social relations that was then exacerbated by other workers holding him at a lower social status that left him feeling unwelcomed. Because Than Oo was both a refugee and not fully fluent in English, he experienced being othered which is indicative from his discussion of being “looked down” on as an outsider. While hesitant to name the different treatment as a form of prejudice, he linked the behavior to his lack of English fluency, but there may be other factors including ethnicity and national origin that play a role in producing feelings of being unwelcome.

For many, social interactions were incredibly uncomfortable and often stressful when dealing with management or supervisors. As Mya explained, “We didn’t know the policy, but [management] didn’t give you time off. I missed time and they gave me a point. If you get too many points, then you get fired.” This created animosity towards the supervisors because this participant in particular did not understand why she was unable to take time off to go to a necessary medical appointment. Mya was working at a meatpacking factory at the time and showed me her hand and knuckles during our interview, which were still stiffened from the repetitive motion that was required to skin the animals at this job. She also explained other injuries, including when someone threw a bone that hit her in the head and landed her in the hospital. As a result of missing work to go to medical appointments, she received “points” which accumulate and result in being terminated if too many accrue. This story was painful for Mya to discuss, and she was still visibly angry because of the predicament she was in—she needed to go to medical appointments yet felt that management punished her for it—something that she held against the supervisors especially since she was helping to financially support a family. Mya was

also sensitive to being able to support and provide for her children because she and her husband had to leave their children in a Malaysian refugee camp in order to come to the United States as refugees. They were not able to bring the children to the United States until years later after she got her citizenship. “[It was] so, hard.. so hard (nervously laughs). So hard. I didn’t see [my children] for eight years. I didn’t see them for *eight* years.” Another individual, Than Tun, had strained relationships with supervisors at work as he told me about an injury he acquired on the job and his family doctor’s note regarding the incident. “I gave this paper [doctor’s note] to my friend to give the [meatpacking plant] supervisor because I couldn’t drive myself to the office. I found out later that the supervisor threw it in the trash—it didn’t [even] get to the manager’s office.” He continued, “When I went back, they fired me...the supervisor withheld the paperwork and that [meant] the supervisor fired me. So, the office thought I quit. So, I didn’t get the unemployment [benefits].” Than Tun’s struggle with this individual left him with much animosity towards not only the one individual, but other supervisors as he told me about their recommendations for his work-related injury was to take pain medication and ice his injury. He was also told he could not go to his family doctor when he had his injury but had to go to the company physician—an order he refused to listen to and ultimately went to his family physician who wrote him the script to rest for a week. Than Tun did not indicate that he took this issue up with the union but may have not done so due to not knowing he could or because of the language barrier.

In another case, where language was named, Aung Win explained that when he came to Grand Rapids, he had an instance at a technology factory where he felt discrimination that led to strained social relations. “It’s a good company and there are some [good] supervisors there,” he stated, but “if you do not understand English very well and you work on the assembly line

[where] we all work together, [the refugees] can't speak English so when the supervisors and boss came to our [work] location, the leader and those who understand English [...] don't do what they were supposed to do" according to their job responsibilities. Those who spoke English, both coworkers and supervisors, held more power which afforded them the ability to evade their work responsibilities whereby placing more burden on refugees like Aung Win. He also noted that many supervisors would complain about the refugees and not act as a representative for all the workers. "They don't try to understand [us refugees], they only listen to those who speak English and don't believe the refugees who have a different story." Aung Win felt the supervisors did not listen nor want to understand when complaints were brought to their attention by the Burmese refugees. He also indicated that this type of behavior is not good for the office or the company. "Some people pretend to be good moral people but push others down," noting that the company should do something to make the work atmosphere less hostile, though he never indicated if he took his concerns to Human Resources or to management. Here, Aung Win brought up the issue of morality among his coworkers and that their ill-treatment of the non-English speakers was bad for business. While it was framed in this way, it also illuminates the tension that exists for refugees who are not fluent in English and who face hostile interactions with others at work.

For others who experienced difficulties at work, they framed the instances less as discrimination and more as a language barrier issue as it occurred with coworkers. In one situation, when So Win was asked about whether he felt discriminated against, he prefaced the discussion with a statement: "I believe if I am good, everything else is good." He then continued to tell his story that working with white and African Americans was different than what he expected. Not having the language fluency to express his anger at work he became frustrated

when coworkers (American born) would “bully” him and other refugees. He explained that he disliked the part where he was given a lower paid and physically harder position because he didn’t speak English as was true for other refugees who were less fluent or not fluent at all. When I asked, “Who are these bullies you mention?”, he replied, “[native] English speakers are the bullies—of all ages—young and old. Of all ethnicities.” The perception was that his language ability was the primary marker for being given the worst positions in the factory at his meatpacking job. However, because he has remained at the meatpacking plant for seven years when others quit within weeks or months, he was promoted to “team leader” this past year in which he now assists the new people who are under supervision. In a similar sentiment, Hla Myint told me, “All refugees experience discrimination.” He added that if you “didn’t finish high school, you don’t get paid as much as those who did. So the refugees [who didn’t finish high school] have to work harder than those who had a [high school] education.” For this individual, he said the discrimination he felt was connected to work. He experienced it at several jobs including his first job in the United States at a meatpacking plant. Since he wasn’t fluent in English he struggled to communicate and was placed in the most difficult positions as well as getting paid one dollar less per hour for the same position and same amount of work. He would repeatedly ask for a raise, and it took four requests before they agreed to pay him the same as his coworkers in the same position. Due to his disadvantaged position as a non-native English speaker and lower level of education, he felt discrimination at work at the hands of the supervisors who exploited him by paying a lower hourly wage.

What arose for many of the Burmese participants was an absence of any meaningful social relations as a result of discrimination. In some cases, the negative relations led to animosity or tension in the daily interactions make it an uncomfortable environment for the

refugees. For example, when asked about feeling discriminated against as a refugee, Hla Myint, told me, “They (coworkers and supervisors) verbally broke us down, since we were refugees, ...[through] the verbal attacks... but I don’t let that go into my head...I keep working and fighting with my strength—I don’t let the verbal [insults] get to me because even if [other] people are working 8 hours, I work 12 hours... but some people don’t understand what we have to go through to do this. They just see us and don’t understand us.”

Hla Myint detailed another experience at a second job where he worked at a Thai restaurant run by other refugees (Laotian) who had resided in the United States longer than he had. Hla Myint worked at this restaurant for approximately four years, working 12 hours a day, seven days per week, but was only paid \$3 an hour, while others (non-refugees) were getting paid more than he was. He worked every day of the week with no vacations and no raise, and even though he tried to tell the resettlement agency about feeling exploited, they did not help him with the problem. The primary issue that Hla Myint had (and was still extremely upset about) was that for one year the restaurant assured him they were taking taxes out of his check for the government, but they “didn’t do the taxes right.” He stated that the restaurant owners said they were paying the government with the withheld money for taxes, but he later found out that they pocketed the withholdings instead. He told me in an angry tone, “They did this to many people,” and he was disappointed because he had helped recruit well over 25 Burmese refugees to work at this restaurant. Unfortunately, he said the same thing happened to them: “The workers kept quit[ing]; the restaurant would deny it if they said anything about the lack of paid wages. The restaurant acted like they didn’t know anything.”

Hla Myint also had an accident where he was burned with hot oil while in the kitchen one day, which required him to have surgery. He stated that the restaurant owners told the doctors

that he burned himself at home: “they lied to the doctors about the burn saying it happened at home even though it happened at the restaurant.” When I told Hla Myint that it sounded like they broke the law, he replied, “The restaurant was dirty, but they cleaned it all up quick, they lied to the government too.” For Hla Myint, exploitation at the hands of the owners caused an incredible amount of stress, which was apparent in how he told of his experiences at the restaurant and the animosity he expressed during our discussion—he was still quite disgusted with what happened to him.

For this same participant, language was named as a factor in discrimination while working in a local furniture company. This created distress and in turn strained social relations with his coworkers. When I brought up the issue of discrimination at work, Than Tun said there was nothing overt, but still something was there: “There’s no physical [discrimination], but it’s inside (gesturing inside towards his heart)...the [coworkers] look down on our race, [down on] the refugees because we don’t know English,” indicating other English speaking supervisors mistreat them at work “because they put people who know English in the good spots and for those who don’t know English in the not so good jobs.” When I asked him to elaborate on the good versus good jobs, he said that the “supervisor [he had] brings the people who know English to easier places to work—less physical. [But] a good supervisor allows the guy who’s working hard to switch with the guy whose work is easy.” He experienced this type of favoritism at all his jobs, even the one he is currently in. He suggested that the employers or the government should cover the learning fees for English training so “we’ll be more happy. We will be more happy to talk to other people and our supervisors. Because if we don’t know the language, we’re not happy because of discrimination.” Than Tun named language as a factor in discrimination as well as the favoritism granted to the native-born population in work positions. Than Tun would

have benefited from the better positions that were less physically demanding due to his age, as he was almost 55 years old. The preferential treatment given to others forced him into the harder positions and led to resentment towards his supervisors.

In contrast, several participants named their higher levels of English fluency as the reason for better treatment. This improved treatment usually brought about better social interactions. For example, Win Kyi and Tin Hla, a husband and wife who work in the same job, explained that English was the barrier that hindered them until they became more fluent and were able to secure better positions. Tin Hla elaborated, “I worked in the assembly and while I was at work I learned [English] in there... and now [I] know a little better and after that some [other] people get hired, but because I’m the first I’m a little bit senior.” In this statement, Tin Hla was implying that her seniority over others and higher level of fluency provided her with better relations at work. Win Kyi agreed, stating, “They [supervisors] asked me, they ask me to do more... so if you know more about English you can get higher money.” These participants experienced more difficulty in forming social relations due to a lack of English fluency, yet as they learned more English, they were able to communicate with the supervisors and had opportunities arise for better positions.

Another participant, Than Oo, explained that the discrimination was not experienced by him directly, but he witnessed other refugees at work who were not listened to when they brought up work issues to the Human Resources department. “They probably don’t understand what [the refugees] are saying. Let’s say I had an argument with this one white guy, they would believe him before they believe me. That kind of discrimination I’ve experienced.” This initial hesitancy to discuss discrimination led to a long conversation about his work relations. “I don’t want to say it’s like discrimination, mostly it’s the language barrier. I don’t speak English [well].

Like at the [meatpacking plant], the reason why I quit, is that [when] they did training, they trained me in English. And it's hard because I don't really understand [what] they said. When they (refugees) messed it up, the [supervisors] keep commenting that you're not doing the work right. Blah blah. It's kind of frustrating...sometimes you're trying to do the right thing but then you don't really know what the [supervisors] are telling you to do. And that kind of stuff—I don't want to say it's a discrimination—it's the language barrier, like I don't speak [well and] when you don't do things right and they pull you off the job. They look down on you but [the supervisors] could have called a translator.” Than Oo clearly felt tension with the supervisors when there were no accommodations made in his language so that he could understand and complete his work correctly.

The experience of discrimination also fueled strained relations at work. When I asked Mya Than about discrimination, she indicated, “Yes, a little bit. I've felt [it, but]...I don't care.... I—don't care [about it], but I let it go. I don't care.” When I asked her if it was due to being a refugee, she indicated that it was that and because she couldn't speak very much English and that it happens at work, not in her neighborhood. When I probed on the feelings, she said she felt judged by coworkers at the last two jobs she held and that she felt this from “white people mostly—[they are the ones] who discriminate.” It was at this point in the interview I noticed her body language shift as her small frame slumped at the waist and she began playing with a piece of the laminate desk that was peeling off the edge of the desk as her head dropped down. Noticing the abrupt shift in body language, I transitioned to a different set of questions.

For Mya, when disagreements arose during work (she noted there were many) she indicated, “[I] didn't care about that ... I just go on. I don't care about anyone, maybe they're against me, but I don't care ... some people hate me some people love me, it's the world. That is

the earth.” In this discussion, Mya Mya articulated that the issue of conflict dealt with some coworkers perhaps not liking her, something to which she said she did not give much attention. This passage also points to the possibility of toxic social relations with these people who “hate” her, while those who “love” her might include closer social relations. The method of not caring about others’ negative feelings towards her is most likely a mechanism in order to deal with the uncomfortable social relations experienced at work, though she would not go into detail about what they were.

Among the work relations, there appears to be little motivation to form close social ties because of perceived discrimination in its many forms. When the language barrier arises, this creates strained relations since it hinders communication, which is necessary in the formation of close social ties. In some instances, participants noted that it was both language and discrimination that caused strained social relations at work. When individuals were not fluent in English, they often felt discrimination in conjunction. From being “bullied” or viewed as “less” due to language, ethnicity, or refugee status, the participants made no indications that social relations were a positive experience. In fact, the interactions were often negative at work with both coworkers and supervisors and may have left many unwilling to consider forming close social ties. Thus, the Burmese participants in this study may reject any attempt to form close social relations due to their environment. Instead, they may withstand the various forms of mistreatment out of necessity, and in turn cling to their ethnic and church community to provide close social relations and to buffer against or provide an outlet to the unpleasant conditions at work.

Outliers: Social Relations

In one case, Khin Maung Than and Mya Mya, a married couple in their mid-40s, told me of an “adopted mother” they had developed close social relations with who wasn’t Burmese. Towards the end of our interview when I asked about who helped them during resettlement, the husband excitedly told me as he pulled out his phone, “I want to tell you something. I have a second mother. She helped me so much with everything here,” as he showed me pictures of a middle-aged white woman who was a prominent figure during their first few years of resettlement. Janet helped both Mya Mya and Khin Maung Than with paperwork including government and health documents as well as some material items for their home. She appeared to be someone who was considered a friend of the family in the excited way that Khin Maung Than told me about his relationship with her, though their contact with her was less frequent in the past several years than it was during their initial few years of resettlement in West Michigan. This couple spoke English, though slightly broken, with the wife speaking more fluently than the husband, which may have been a reason they were able to connect with their “adopted mother”—language opened a door for them that others couldn’t access who were not fluent in English. In this case, the social relations existed outside of the domain of work, ethnic group, neighborhood or church but developed through a volunteer with the resettlement agency. This particular case was an outlier in that most Burmese did not interact much with the native-born community. Yet, questions remain that need further exploration, such as how it came to be that this couple was able to forge a strong bond with Janet and why Janet spent so much time and energy to help the couple.

Conclusion

Social relations among Burmese vary in closeness depending on the domain and the group in which interaction takes place. Among their own ethnic group, social ties are extremely close, and many rely on one another for social support that is both local in the Kentwood area and expands beyond the Burmese's geographically bound locations, including with family in Myanmar. The ethnic group was one of two domains in which Burmese held close relations with others. Very close social ties have also been forged among other Burmese refugees within their church community and is the leading domain for creating and sustaining close social relations.

Social relations with the native-born population are minimal to non-existent within both neighborhoods and workplaces, with a few exceptions noted in this chapter. In many cases, Burmese experienced exploitation at work at the hands of supervisors and co-workers leaving many experiencing high levels of stress at their places of employment. In other cases, the participants experienced social exclusion due to lack of English fluency, which also translated into stress. Within the neighborhood community, Burmese relations with others did not include exploitation as with the work community; however, there was some level of exclusion experienced for those living in the residential housing areas with primarily white neighbors. In these areas, there was minimal to no interaction with neighbors who were primarily white. With the majority of the participants owning homes in residential areas, this left most with minimal contact with neighbors. For some, they said the "neighborly" hello, but little beyond this. However, for the participants living in apartment complexes, they noted that interaction was higher due to other refugees living among them. This was the case for all but one individual living in the apartment complexes.

There are still questions that remain, however. For example, I did not have enough data to confirm why it is that the Burmese chose to purchase homes in the neighborhoods that they did, and especially in locations where there were very few Burmese in the area. While I have data from the interview with the Burmese realtor that suggests geographic location matters less as long as the Burmese live within close enough proximity to others in their community, this area needs further exploration since living among non-Burmese may create more social isolation. However, when location is less of a factor in choosing the location of residential homes, it appears that the school district and the proximity of employment to place of residence may also play a role in where homes are purchased, as was corroborated by the realtor, Khan Tun Kwe, interviewed in this study. Furthermore, he noted that church was by far the most prominent domain for Burmese to connect with the community suggesting that home location matters less if there is a robust church community.

We might consider neighborhoods as places where social relations matter less due to having a robust network of social ties within the Burmese church community and their ethnic community. In this way, there may be a heavy reliance on these two communities to provide the bulk of social support. Another area that is less understood is the process the Burmese took in being able to purchase their homes. Most Burmese work factory jobs, which are known for low pay, but they are able to gain credit and financial sufficiency to purchase homes. Additionally, most of these homes were in the middle-class areas and newer; several participants lived in homes that were in housing divisions where values ranged from \$250,000-\$300,000 and most built in the early 2010s. It is difficult for many native-born individuals to purchase homes, thus the examination how Burmese refugees-- who arrive with little to nothing--have accomplished this feat deserves attention. While the interview with the Burmese realtor lent insight into this

matter, understanding the Burmese refugee participant's reasoning for the location of purchase also needs further exploration.

Likewise, the workplace is a place that is a struggle for many of the participants, but an area that needs further examination is in whether there were social relations with other refugees in their places of employment. What is more, I also do not know the types of relations that the Burmese held with their white co-workers and supervisors prior to experiences of exclusion and exploitation and whether or not Burmese socialize with co-workers outside of work. Due to the limitation of the data available, these topics were not explored in this chapter, but should be examined in future research to help understand in further detail how Burmese form social relations at work at multiple points in their workplace employment history.

CHAPTER VI

CONGOLESE SOCIAL RELATIONS

In this chapter, I explore how social relations are formed and maintained among Congolese within four domains: ethnic community, church community, neighborhood community, and the workplace. I document varied ways in which social relations are formed among the Congolese in each domain. I first discuss the ethnic community, which is a realm in which the Congolese rely on others in their ethnic group for accessing resources such as support during resettlement, relocation, material and emotional support, and establishing a robust social network. Next, I discuss the church community as a space in which the Christian Congolese participants maintain close social relations as they are formed within the church and through devotional services. The church is a foundational source in forming and reinforcing close social ties for the Congolese participants as it serves as a place of worship as well as a place to interact with others who speak the same language and share the same cultural background. In the third domain of the neighborhood, I discuss the variations in social relations that are formed based on the specific neighborhood community in relation to where individuals live and the demographics of the people who live among the participants. Finally, I discuss the nature of social relation between the Congolese and their native-born coworkers and supervisors in the workplace.

Ethnic Community

The participants in this study experienced extensive ethnic group cohesion with other Congolese refugees in the West Michigan area and were each other's source of support in many

ways. Support is offered in the form of material items, financial help, and emotional support during difficult times and the social relations that underlie these support networks is crucial for the community. In a few cases, participants also offered support by assisting others to relocate from out of state. For most of the participants, they had family or friends who were already settled in West Michigan while others arrived in the states with their immediate family (or within a few months of each other) as was the case with five of the Congolese participants. This helped newly settled individuals easily connect with others already in the area. Having family already in the area also created a ready-made network in which social ties could be developed with ease. The participants in this study maintained social relations through various social gatherings including births, deaths, and holidays yet these gatherings have been hindered due to the coronavirus pandemic and the restrictions that have been put in place on group socialization.

Many participants noted the importance of their community in West Michigan for providing various forms of assistance. Makambo, in particular, explained, “We [will] have parties for daughters who want to get married, so you go there and the Congolese they help cook. That’s the thing that makes me feel comfortable. That [we] help each other. When you have a problem, and you can’t [fix] it by yourself you go to the Congolese so they might come and help you for as much [as] they can. Those are the things that I feel very comfortable with.” She noted that she and her mother (and siblings) were initially resettled in Maryland and that they used their Congolese network to gain a foundation in West Michigan that ultimately helped them during the relocation process “They (Congolese in Michigan) gave us advise that we should come to Michigan. So, we came to Michigan for better opportunities” (the pastor of the church in West Michigan being the key person that helped them move). While the Congolese community was strong in Maryland, Makambo noted that the jobs were limited which was the driving

decision behind her and her mother's decision to move. The types of jobs available in Maryland are factory jobs in various industries, including food and chemical manufacturing as well as factories producing metals and plastics. The primary difference is that factory jobs are much more abundant in Michigan than in Maryland, making it easier to find employment and support their family.

Others noted the importance of their community for emotional support, as one individual indicated one Saturday morning while I was in her home. Esengo, a 43-year-old mother of four young adult children, explained to me that she and her husband (the local pastor) had been at a friend's home the morning of our interview because of a death in their Congolese community to which Esengo and her husband were offering emotional support while the family grieved. While Esengo came back specifically to meet me for the interview, her husband, Mpenda, who I was also supposed to interview that day, stayed with the family. This was not uncommon among the participants, as they indicated offering various forms of emotional and material support for other Congolese. For example, Njowga, a father of five young children, reported that he has helped other Congolese furnish their homes over the years, has lent money, and moved an entire family of four from West Virginia to Michigan early in the summer of 2020. Mpenda, the local pastor of the Congolese Methodist church, also noted that the Congolese community in West Michigan is very close and they rely on one another for support. In fact, he too helped a family move from Maryland to Michigan a few years prior. Mpenda has also helped with material items for his community such as home goods, furniture, and food items, and provides assistance with reading and filling out documents including government paperwork and bills for individuals early in their resettlement period.

Tuwife explained that support from the Congolese community was critical because of the struggles that he (and many other refugees) faced during the first few years of resettlement. Tuwif noted that some of these struggles, including minimal language fluency and lack of recognized education, led to barriers in accessing gainful employment. “In the beginning I faced many struggles. First was the language, second was when I came I was thinking that I have knowledge and even my high school diploma should help me to get to a better place and a better job. But that was totally different. So, I had to restart. To restart, but the barrier was still there. I wanted to do some training that wouldn’t take a long time so I can manage my life and to feed my family. But the barrier was still there. So, I had to learn English first. Go to English class and go do all the things [necessary].” For Tuwif, the unexpected barriers he faced early in his resettlement translated to relying heavily on the Congolese community to navigate around the barriers, such as assistance with transportation, finding employment, and childcare.

Mpenda, the local pastor, noted that the Congolese in his community frequently have large social gatherings. Since Covid, he noted they do try to social distance, but it’s difficult. “They try, because you know [culturally] it’s hard. People from my country love parties so much. Everywhere they have parties and meet. Now because of the Coronavirus, they say no. On one hand, they take it serious, but on the other hand, they say why? Sometimes they meet, but it’s not like before. You know the problem is the government. They don’t worry about the virus; they worry about the government. *They* can put you in jail. If it was not that, they don’t care about [the virus]. It’s nothing.” The Congolese used to enjoy frequent social interaction with others in their community, but the virus—or rather their fear of reprimand from authorities—was the driving force hindering their ability to interact with other Congolese.

In a unique case, one participant, who came to the United States at 18 years old, was placed in foster care for the first year, which created unpleasant experiences and difficult social interactions. While the interaction with the foster mother was sometime hostile and isolating, Chilemba found ways to connect with his community. He initially made some friends through his high school but mentioned that he relied more on a Congolese friend. This friend was in the same refugee camp as Chilemba in Tanzania and had been resettled for a year longer in West Michigan than Chilemba, which provided a critical support person. “My foster mother never tried to help me to be independent, so I had to go ask for help from other people. [My friend] was already independent and [he] helped me figure things out here.” Had it not been for his friend, Chilemba noted his isolation may have been much worse and he may have faced even more difficulty in navigating through resettlement barriers.

An interesting aspect to note among the Congolese was their response to Covid restrictions put in place during 2020. When I visited the homes of my Congolese participants, no one wore a mask, except for one individual who ran an in-home daycare business. This exception was Tuwifé, who had his mask on even before I entered his home for our interview and kept the mask on for the duration of my visit, but his family members who were home at the time did not wear masks. In another case, Njowga observed the social distancing guidelines and commented that when his wife hugged me we had “violated the rules,” but neither wore masks. On another occasion, I visited the home of Chilemba, whose wife had just given birth to their son. I wore a mask as I entered the home—taking extra precautions because of his new child and wife who had just had a caesarian section. He exclaimed immediately that I did not need the mask because we are like family—almost insulted that I would do so in his home. I have known Chilemba for nearly eight years and have been present for the birth of his three children and his

wedding, which may be in part why he suggested that I not wear the mask. He also stated that because he did not know anyone who had Covid, he was not at risk.

The Congolese community rely heavily on each other for various forms of support including emotional and material assistance. Through this support of one another in their ethnic group, close social relations were formed and in turn sustained the process of helping others. The participants in this study indicated that their community helped provide support during celebrations such as marriages or times of struggle such as deaths in the community. They also noted that they relied on their community for help with employment, finances, and material items for the home. The community was the foundation by which they helped each other navigate resettlement barriers such as isolation and relocation. The Congolese ethnic community maintains its strength through these strong social ties that often arise through the process of supporting one another and are critical for individuals at any point in their resettlement journey.

Church Community

For the Congolese, church is an integral part of their lives and a crucial domain for the formation and maintenance of social relations with others in their ethnic community. It acts as a way to establish networks that result in various types of help including material as well as emotional support. There is one Congolese Church in the West Michigan area which offers services in Swahili and is located just outside of the Kentwood city limits. The Congolese church services were established in 2013 and began by offering a few services in Swahili. The church currently has over 150 members, though this number is now lower due to Covid, and services being held on Zoom. The Congolese belong to the United States religious majority as they identify as Christian, and many belonged to a Methodist church in Africa prior to resettlement in

the United States. Their church in the United States is also a Methodist church and serves as the primary space in which individuals interact and provides the space to both create and maintain close social relations with others in their ethnic group through religious services and church activities. Because of the importance of the church for the Congolese community in West Michigan, I include a picture of their church (see Figure 6.1)

Figure 6.1: Restoration Community Church—Congolese Church



Many of the Congolese participants in this study already had family established in the area prior to their arrival but found and extended their social networks through their local religious community. The majority of the Congolese refugees formed social ties with other Congolese refugees through their church community. Chilemba, a 28-year-old Congolese father of three, connected to the Congolese church through the networks he gained at other African churches that he attended during his initial years in the United States. He was able to find a Kenyan and Nigerian church early in his resettlement, stating that he “didn’t understand the

language, but [felt] connected.” Chilemba noted that he did not like having to move from church to church, but this process is what eventually led him to the Congolese church as well as meeting his future wife. He also indicated that he has become more serious about his church attendance after he married his wife in 2015, saying, “She loves to go to church and I don’t, but I go [more often now].” Similarly, Sanga, a retired 62-year-old woman, noted that the relations in the church are crucial for helping other Congolese in the area. “The relationship that we have in [the Congolese] community church is like...we serve God and try to help people in the community and if there are members sick [we] go see them and pray for them. We collect [resources], if there is a certain problem [the community] pulls together some money to help them out.” In this way, the church was foundational for creating a network of support for those in need.

While the Congolese hold strong connections within their church and with members of their congregation, they do so, in part, because there is only one Congolese church in West Michigan. While there are several other African church services, the Congolese church congregation is the only one that offers services in Swahili. Chilemba noted the importance of having a Congolese service to attend. “We connect through the church, and if there is a death, birth, celebrations, marriage or engagements, that’s where we connect with others in the community,” articulating the critical role that church plays in providing a strong social support network. For Tuwif, a Congolese father of four, his interactions with other Congolese were also primarily within the Church where his cousin is pastor and where he participates in guest sermons occasionally. Njowga also noted that he and his family were connected to other Congolese primarily through church. “Yeah, I met the other refugee families when we came here. So those people introduced us to other families in the church. We meet a lot of people at the church.”

While Njowga was a member of the Congolese church for several years, he and his family left the Congolese church due to conflict with the pastor (his cousin) approximately five years prior. While he did not elaborate much for the reasons for his departure, he noted that he had a major disagreement with his cousins (Mpende and Tuwive) and felt unsupported in the church. There were a few instances where Njowga asked for help from the congregation and his cousins during some financial struggles and did not receive any assistance. Furthermore, an informant (non-African refugee), who was with Njowga around the time this incident occurred, explained that Njowga witnessed some financial corruption in the church as well as instances where other members of the church teased him for his clothes being out of style or slightly worn. This was the incident that caused Njowga to erupt and helped fuel his decision to leave the Congolese church. Ultimately, the informant noted that Njowga felt unsupported and disrespected in the Congolese church and he urged him to find another church that would offer better support. Since this incident, Njowga still has not spoken with his cousins and has been a member of The Church of the Latter-Day Saints for over six years. His new church is primarily an all-white congregation with services in English. Njowga and his family and one other family are the only Africans in the church. Njowga noted that he has received much more help from his current church in both material and emotional support. Furthermore, the informant noted that when he saw Njowga about a year after the incident, Njowga noted that he was extremely happy because “the pastor [at the new church] called me,” indicating he felt a sense of connection and inclusion, and that the pastor cared by taking the time to reach out to him.

Esengo noted that her network was also established through the local church. She connected with a Congolese refugee resettlement caseworker (not her assigned caseworker) early in her resettlement who introduced her and her family to other Congolese families and led to her

husband, Mpenda, forming the Congolese church in West Michigan. “In Africa, my husband is pastor and when he came [to the agency] he asked people where is the [...] Church and some people showed us to a [local] church where he is [pastor] now.” While they initially joined a white Methodist church, with the help of the white pastor (Mary) and her husband (Dan), Esengo and her husband, Mpenda, formed the congregation and the Swahili services provided to the local community. Yet this process was encumbered with barriers as Mary and Dan noted in an interview. They had to pressure the white congregation to get Mpenda’s ordination recognized by the church since his ordination was received in Africa. Dan noted there was immense resistance from the board and other trustees in the church (all white members) to recognize the ordination and the services as a legitimate church. “I was always pushing them to say, you can in fact make this work. It was always, yes, let’s try. [But] the [board] went from wanting them to be members and fully integrated [into the church] to treating the [Congolese] as a tenant [of the church].” He also noted that it took a lot of pressure on his part to get the approval and recognition to even form the Congolese church under the United Methodist Church (UMC) umbrella, but eventually one of the district superintendents, who was leaving his position, granted the recognition both for the ordainment and for the church to be officially established. Dan also noted emphatically, “I’ve written notes to them and said some of the things they did [were not right]. They did not see [the situation] the way that I did, and I felt that [their behavior] was racist...I called them out on [their behavior] and they were not happy with me. (laughing) They’re still not happy with me. I might not have been as diplomatic as I could have been. I thought if can’t get these folks to support [Mpende] in the way he needs, then I don’t think I have a place in the UMC.” To this day, Dan and Mary have close relations with Mpenda and his wife.

The details of why the board was against his recognition had to do, in part, with church bureaucracy in getting Mpende's congregation deemed what they call a "mission church." This status is what gives the church official recognition within the United Methodist umbrella. Dan told me the following:

"It's a long story. Part of it was that UMC has a system on starting new churches and it wasn't until I became a trustee (which means that right now all the churches that close I get to sell them—it's part of my real estate background) it comes in handy [when] they are selling property. So, I always had my hand in a lot of churches in helping and that was my responsibility as a trustee."

Being granted the "mission church" status was critical in becoming officially recognized by the UMC and was one of the barriers that Dan noted. Dan's recognition of the racial element as an impediment in Mpende's ordination is worth noting as well. While he mentioned that the board was racist in their handling of Mpende's situation he would not elaborate when I probed but explained that he did not think that the board wanted an African church in "their" space. However, he explicitly told me in a prior conversation that race does play a role in Congolese's experiences in the United States in general (and in turn, their church interactions):

"And we are we have such a group of helpful people who are trying do good and we have an [political] administration which is not. That bothers me a lot and I don't know what to do about that. I guess not to be that towards our new neighbors (refugees). That takes a little bit of...that's hard on me. I go between feeling really sad, trying to change people's minds and spending time on reading and being involved in the church side. [...] The other thing is that as I mature in these [refugee] relationships, some of these [relationships] are ten and eleven years and the same issues have been chronic in relation to [poverty] and the black and brown people in our communities ... it is now the same [issue] and spilling over into the refugee community. And so, the same issues that we've been dealing with race...are the same issues now [for the refugees]. I mean for them, it's race and housing ... where they are with their employment. It's like they've just been put in [an unfair and racist system]. I always felt that they were special. We wanted to take them in because they were our new neighbors. They are getting put into [an unfair system] because of our politics, and into the same [racial] category [as other groups of color]. Through their hard work, [they] are still vulnerable. And it's not

because they haven't worked their butts off and done everything they could, it's because of what we have got going on in the U.S. [racially]. They were all glad they came here. And maybe some are still glad they're here. You can see that same look on their face that we've seen with racial injustice. I'm just on my own as I think about that. What is it that we can do, what can the church do? What can groups do?"

In a discussion with Mpenda about getting the church to recognize his ordainment, he noted a different rationale: "[The church board] realized because of the [great] job I was doing and the work I was doing—they were very amazed and said we have to do something. I think only that, because I didn't go to [a recognized] school. Because they said I didn't have any certification from here. [They said] it's very hard to recognize you as a pastor, so I said okay. So then [I think the board] said this is not good, [we need] to give you something to be recognized officially." In this instance, Mpenda saw his efforts as a good pastor as the primary reason for the church recognizing his ordainment and congregation—he did not know of the difficulty that Dan faced in challenging the board. Mpenda didn't mention any feelings of discrimination yet did not appear to understand the process it took to get him recognized by the white board members of the church.

When forming social relations and connecting with others in the community, Mpenda indicated that the church is the primary source of community support for other Congolese in the area. When we spoke, he said, there were approximately 150 members who regularly attend the Congolese service; however, at one point, Mpenda told me his church had over 200 members. Mpenda began the church services about one year after his arrival in West Michigan in the summer of 2012 with just a few families attending. "When I started the church, here, that was something easy for me because [it was started] one year...just only one year [of me being] in the US." Mpenda was ordained in Africa in 1999 and practiced in the Tanzanian refugee camp

prior to his arrival in the United States in 2012 with his family. When I asked about his primary relationships, he indicated that they do extend beyond the Congolese, “but mostly it’s Congolese, I always say that the relationships with Africans, it’s like we’ve always been together [in the U.S.]. I don’t count that [relationship]. But here it’s a new country, so to make new relationships I enjoy so much—the new relationships [with non-Congolese].” Mpenda counted the relations with Congolese individuals as a given and not recognized in the same way as relations with the native-born community.

Mpenda was unique in that his relations extended beyond the Congolese community, even if limited, while the majority of the participants in this study did not hold relations with the native-born community. Mpenda was an outlier among my sample in that he held many more relations outside of his ethnic group which were established primarily through his role as a pastor and via the church. since the church where he held services also held a non-Congolese sermon every Sunday for primarily native-born white members. These relationships were most likely fostered through his pastor status and connections to the white church community since he interacts with white church members more than others.

Another important aspect to note is the impact of Covid on church gatherings. For many in the Congolese community, they struggle to understand the reasoning for what they perceive as “extreme” Covid precautions. According to Mpenda, the Congolese community does tend to adhere to the no-contact social isolation, but this is more out of fear of reprimand from authorities and not the potential threat of the virus. Mpenda adamantly told me about the insignificance that Covid poses to the Congolese community:

“... you know in Africa, we have this Coronavirus. It cannot shake African people because we [have had] *a lot* of viruses in Africa. Very deadly ones...Like Ebola, it’s very bad...it’s more dangerous than Corona. Because when you have that [Ebola] virus you go [die]. There is no treatment. You go [die]. But people were just free,

going to church. Even malaria—malaria kills a lot of people in Africa. Every single day. Every single second. So, [Congolese] people here say, ‘why? Corona? Why they lock down?’ It’s nothing, it’s like a fever—no, this is nothing!”

Mpenda laughed as he explained how he and his community have struggled with the restrictions that have prevented his congregation from meeting for many months. Additionally, he expressed discomfort with the thought of having to wait until mid-2021 to meet as a group. “That’s too far. African people they say, ‘why’? We have to go to Church.” For Mpenda—who did note that these were his perceptions but explained that most others in his community felt the same way—the lockdown and restrictions in place due to Covid appeared to be completely irrational and a great hindrance to their religious community in terms of their social gatherings and religious attendance. When I asked what he meant about fear of being reprimanded for breaking social distancing guidelines, Mpenda noted that it was fear of getting in trouble with the government or from the authority figures. In this way, fear of the native-born community arose out of fear of reprimand; yet this shared sense of fear of the established rules may act as a binding agent that brings the Congolese together with others in their community through the shared experience.

The Congolese church is foundational as a domain for the participants to form social relations and, in turn, networks. These networks are critical for the Congolese community in offering support to others. The interactions that are forged and maintained through weekly interaction at the church services help provide a network of support for emotional and material needs. Networks formed in the church also provide individuals with the ability to form close social ties and participate in gatherings outside of church, such as celebrations and family events. While the relations with other Congolese are strong, only one participant holds relations with non-Congolese in the church and that is the pastor. His case is unique in that his pastor status has

afforded him more interaction with non-Congolese. These relations are perceived by the individual as warm with the white members and church board members, but, in fact, are strained and nearly blocked his ability to form a congregation in the first place. While Mpende was not aware of the resentment that the white congregation and board had towards his church, members, and himself, the husband of the white church's pastor, Dan, played a key role in pushing the board to recognize the Congolese congregation. The impact of Covid has taken a toll on the Congolese community in the sense that they have been more isolated and less likely to attend church via Zoom. The in-person services are a critical aspect for maintaining social relations for the participants and the restrictions that are in place have created barriers for maintaining these relations.

Neighborhood Community

Neighborhoods can be places where social interactions take place for the Congolese. However, depending on location and the demographic make-up of the neighborhoods, they can also be sources of immense stress and discomfort. All but two of the participants in this study lived in the same city, Kentwood, during their first years of resettlement, and as resettlement time passed several participants moved to adjacent suburbs outside of the Kentwood area. The two participants who were not initially settled in West Michigan relocated from Maryland and the remaining six were resettled in West Michigan and never relocated outside of Michigan. The participants in this study who live among other refugees or other Congolese helped to make social interactions easier and more comfortable as a result of shared culture and language. The shared cultural background and language not only helped make social interactions more comfortable, but much more frequent as well. Many of those living among the native-born

community, where few other refugees or Congolese resided, experienced struggles and conflict. While six of the participants were initially resettled in the Kentwood area, four purchased homes outside of Kentwood and one participant currently rents a home outside of the Kentwood city limits. In Figure 6.2, I show a picture of a typical Congolese residential home in Kentwood.

Figure 6.2: Example Congolese Duplex Rented in Kentwood, Michigan



Three individuals (two of the individuals are a married couple) noted that they had difficulty in their home purchasing process and struggled to find homes in the Kentwood area. The married couple had several offers fall through; some were due to not having enough credit or lacking adequate job history. In one case, the seller pulled the home off the market. While the true reason is unknown, the couple speculated that it was due to the sellers finding out they were African. It took this couple over five years of searching to find and purchase a home. While the husband did not want to purchase in the town adjacent from Kentwood originally, he noted that there were limited options due to few homes on the market, unaffordable listings, and several offers falling through on homes closer to Kentwood. He and his wife initially struggled to

recover their credit score (not fully understanding the credit system in the United States during their initial resettlement period) and to maintain consistent work history while they were searching for houses, leaving them with barriers in their home purchasing journey. This couple was connected to a white realtor through a non-African refugee who helped them for several years. For the other individual who purchased a home outside of Kentwood, he also struggled to find homes in his price range due to poor credit during early resettlement years and a lack of knowledge of credit while being taken advantage of by “easy loans” with high interest rates and penalties. These damaged his credit early in his resettlement and took some time to recover from—impacting his ability to purchase a home.

The only individual who purchased a home in Kentwood noted that he had lived in various apartments in Kentwood and wanted to purchase a home in Kentwood because of location, schools, and proximity to work. He did not want to be in the Grand Rapids area school district since he was a student there for a year. He also noted the location was important in terms of finding someplace quiet. He arrived as a young adult and was in his late twenties when he purchased his home, while the other participants were well into their forties. He had only one child at the time of his home purchase, which perhaps made it easier for him to find a home in Kentwood since the other three individuals had large families of four or more children. This individual noted that he found a white realtor through Dan (at the refugee agency) who helped him in his home-buying process. He learned all other aspects of home buying on his own: he fixed his credit that was damaged when he was in his early 20s, saved over \$12,000 for a down payment, and went through the process of loan approval through the bank. Because he came as a young adult, he had time to prepare for a home purchase for several years, so when he was ready to purchase the process took less than a month.

The couple renting a home outside of Kentwood noted that they chose to rent because they wanted more physical space for their children (as their home is closer to the rural area), but in the future they would like to purchase a home. This couple had previously lived in apartment complexes in Kentwood and talked of many neighborly and warm interactions, yet also noted they felt uncomfortable by those who were noisy or smoked in front of their children. Similarly, the participants who lived in homes (either purchased or rented duplexes) both in Kentwood and outside of Kentwood tended to experience difficulties with their neighbors. In a few instances, there were some positive interactions noted with the native-born neighbors, yet these were both brief and infrequent.

For the participants who lived among other refugees in their neighborhoods, they found their communities and location to be comfortable in terms of social interactions. Every Congolese participant indicated that when they lived among other refugees they felt more at ease. “We were living like this [happily] because a lot of Africans [were] from our country—we were together in the apartment [complex] together,” Makambo told me about living among other African refugees. Likewise, Mpenda indicated that his first residence was in an apartment complex with many other refugees from Africa including the Congo and was a good place to live because of high level of refugee interaction in the complex. He also found social support through the daily interactions with his neighbors, including help from a Somali refugee man in one of the duplexes he rented when troubles arose with a neighbor who was native-born. Tuwifé also noted that he enjoyed his first residence in Kentwood prior to purchasing his home in a neighboring suburb, stating, “In my [first] neighborhood we were with many people from Africa, Burundi, Rwanda, so because all are African we are just in harmony.” This first location was in an

apartment complex, but after moving out and renting duplexes, the interactions were infrequent as a result of the neighbors being primarily native-born Americans.

The positive experiences of the Congolese participants living among the same or similar ethnic group was in part due to similar culture and same language. One participant noted, “We had good neighbors. [There] were a lot of refugees there from Africa in the apartment. We were understanding each other and speaking the same language.” This participant, Chilemba, also noted that he was able to integrate with other African refugees in his first few apartments. “We were all African and we just go up and down between our apartments. It was like a community.” The social relations were much more intimate with neighbors when there were other Congolese refugees as well as other African refugees in the complex. However, the apartment complexes appeared to be the only places where interactions like this took place. When participants owned their own homes or rented duplexes they were surrounded by primarily other native-born individuals, which created very different experiences.

The Congolese participants often experienced strained social interaction and more conflict when they lived in neighborhoods that were among primarily native-born residents (including white, African American, or Latino). In fact, the relations that many experienced were racially or ethnically charged as the participants indicated that both white and African Americans had treated them poorly. One participant, Esengo, stated that at her previous residences in rented duplexes, some of the neighbors were unkind and created conflict. “Ahhh...my neighbor was bad to me. Ooohh! He used to let his dog poop in the yard and didn’t pick it [up]. One time, we accidentally parked in his driveway, and he was banging on the door and threatened to hit my husband. The other neighbors were rude too. The other woman who had daycare [across the street and] was always looking in our house. She kept reporting me [to the state] because she had

daycare like I do.” While Esengo did not note race or ethnicity as a factor in this incident, she told me that she thought the reaction was based on “competition” for her neighbor’s daycare business. The conflict subsided with the neighbor after several weeks, but left Esengo with the experience of having a social worker visit her home on two different occasions. During both visits, Esengo noted that the social worker “found” nothing and was kind to Esengo after she explained the situation with her neighbor. Both neighbors discussed above were white and the male neighbor had also threatened violence against her husband in another instance. In their first home (an apartment), Esengo indicated that she did not know anyone, but also did not speak English well at that time so she could not interact with the neighbors who were primarily native-born. However, there were several other Congolese refugees living there whom she was able to interact. While she had minimal to no contact with the white neighbors in this apartment, her relations with the few Congolese that lived there were close and more frequent.

However, even at Esengo’s second home (another duplex she and her husband rented), she had unpleasant experiences with the native-born neighbors who were African American. “We once had a neighbor flatten my tire. She put a nail in the tire and cussed my husband. She was African American. I think it’s because we parked on the roadside, and she didn’t like [it]. She came out and was loud because she was fighting with her husband, and she was mad. She put a hole in [her] husband’s tire [too].” Esengo noted that when conflicts arose with neighbors, she would often remain silent because she did not want to involve authorities or make the situation worse for her and her family since the neighbors could retaliate. As she stated, “They (neighbors) can make things worse for me [if I report them].” While there were a few positive interactions with some neighbors, these were primarily with other African or Congolese refugees if there happened to be any residing in the area. “[In] the duplex [where we lived], the [one

neighbor] was from Somalia. She was cool to me. On the other side she was American. We don't talk, but my English was little [at that time] so we didn't talk." Esengo indicated that she does want to get to know the neighbors in the new home they recently moved into, which is outside of Kentwood city in an adjacent suburb. Since she and her family had moved into their new home in the week prior, she did not have much time to explore the relations with her neighbors yet. Regardless, she mentioned that creating "neighborly" interactions would be beneficial for their family in the sense that it might help mitigate any conflict with others in the area. She believed that creating a few close bonds had the potential to lessen the impact or likelihood of hostile interactions arising with her new neighbors.

When I brought up relationships with African Americans in general with one participant, Tuwifé, he indicated that they were not great. He did not understand why there was resentment (at least in his perception) towards African refugees, and told me the following:

"African Americans do not like us. And they know. As you say, I think [...] the problem is in the history. Before they came in America as slaves, they were being sold by the chief of the tribes ... if you were a chief in a community, you know your people. You know who is criminal, you know who is good and who is not. So those chiefs were choosing those kinds of people who are (witches) witchcraft and taking those kinds of people then and selling them to whites. So, it's kind of those [are the] people who come to America. So, I guess the African Americans have been told that their own brothers sold them to the U.S. So, when they see us to come to America, their memory refers to what their parents told them—that our brothers left in Africa, sold us, so they didn't want us to stay there. So now they see us coming to America and they have that memory, so they say, 'oh you sold us to the white people—we struggled a lot and we cultivated and make this country great, so now you come here?' So, they have that in their [minds]. But, they know, sometimes they can call you "hey brother." They know [we] are brothers, but they still have that thing in[side] (in their hearts). So, you can feel it. And it hurts a lot."

Tuwifé's discussion about feeling disliked by African Americans indicates his perspective based on African American's long-time presence in the United States. He feels this has created

resentment towards African refugees when they resettle and perhaps receive assistance. His perceptions are important to note here. Tuwifé considered those who were sold into slavery as “witches” and “criminals” in Africa. Although Tuwifé mentioned that African Americans disliked African refugees, he seemed to recognize a sense of “brotherhood” shared by African Americans and African refugees when he used the word “brother” to describe their relationship.

Mpenda, Esengo’s husband, also noted that he experienced many negative interactions in most of the neighborhoods he lived in, and these were with primarily native-born Americans. “My first place was nice, not hard. Not bad. But then I moved to [Standard Street]. Ohh. I had a neighbor lady, she was single, she was very, very bad. She was a black lady, she was insulting me. [But] I don’t fight and ... [don’t] talk so much, if it was a different person they might fight with her. Sometimes she was coming and knocking on my door if someone parked in her driveway. It’s like she almost broke the door...why why...it was very bad. Sometimes she was cursing and insulting.” This particular neighbor is also the one who placed nails in Mpenda’s (Esengo and Mpenda are married) tires. while he was at work (his wife witnessed the event and informed him). Mpenda told me that his Somali neighbor, who was also a refugee and with whom he was close, told him, “Nobody [else] can do this but her” –a comment indicating that other refugees in the neighborhood help enhance social solidarity and support when poor relations occur with the native-born neighbors.

Mpenda had other detailed stories of painful interactions with native-born Americans. After moving out of his first apartment complex, he experienced hostile encounters with the native-born population. When I initially asked him about struggles with any neighbors currently or in the past, he laughed and reflected on his past living situations, “Th[ey] were bad. That was tough for me. Oooh. Because my first place [I lived in an apartment]... was nice, not hard. Not

bad, but then I moved.” He indicated that the apartment complex he was first placed in was a nice place and there were other refugees including Congolese refugees living nearby. However, when he moved into residential housing areas into duplexes around the Kentwood area, things changed. He detailed one of these interactions at a duplex that he and his family lived in, naming this location as: “the worst one”:

“There was a white man. Very, very, bad...a racis[st]. He called the police on me...I was even afraid for me and my family. I was afraid that he had a gun he might kill me. One day I was at work, and my wife called me, [she said] we don’t have power. The neighbor had power, but we didn’t. I knew it was him. He did something. I called him (the neighbor). [I said], ‘What happened?’ He started insulting me. Because our landlord...showed me where the breaker is, it’s in the garage.. the breaker was in his garage. Yeah. So, he did that. (He flipped the breaker). Then while we were discussing [the issue], he called the police. The police came, and one of the police came and he was very bad too (A white guy). He came and started asking me why I was fighting with the white guy. The [other] one police was a good guy and said wait, wait. What did he (the white man) do? I said, ‘HE shut off my power’. So, this is not the first time. He used to do this all the time. The last time I checked it and he did the same thing. Ahhh. It was bad. He was a bad guy.”

With one officer taking the side of the white neighbor, Mpende was fortunate that the second officer probed into the situation further, but ultimately neither officer was able to solve the conflict and merely mitigated it by telling both Mpenda and the neighbor to go inside after talking to both of them. For Mpenda, this particular middle-aged white neighbor was a source of fear in both the physical and psychological sense. This neighbor was also confrontational with Mpenda and his family. In another event, Mpenda explained that an accident happened with Mpenda’s visitor who accidentally put his car in “drive” instead of “reverse” and pulled into Mpenda’s neighbor’s garage door. This did not bode well and the neighbor—who was not there at the time of the accident—became irate with Mpenda and the landlord (who was a friend of Mpenda’s and a fellow pastor) after he learned of the incident. While a police report was filed and the driver’s insurance took care

of the damage, the neighbor accused Mpenda of doing the damage. Mpenda told me what the neighbor said:

“[The neighbor] said, I know that guy, ‘it was Mpenda that did that. That Mpenda . That’s not the first time’. He (the neighbor) came [home] and thought that everything was damaged....After, the police came and finished and left. The [neighbor] came back and asked for the ID of the driver. I said no, this is not okay”.

Mpende also noted what he felt as discrimination when his landlord gave him little notice to vacate his rental home. Mpende later found out that the landlord (the fellow pastor) lied and told him he was selling the duplex when in fact he did not and re-rented to new tenants:

“The [neighbor] guy changed my landlord’s mind. The last time [Jack] didn’t even like me to explain what happened. It was like he was leaning towards the guy (neighbor). The last time, he came and said I want to sell the house. So, he gave me 15-20 day’s notice so I can move. Yeah. So, people came, and they look through the house. So, when the people coming, I was so curious and amazed that all the customers just to check my [side of the] house. So, for [the neighbor] no.. I said, ‘why’? Why just my side? But I realized that [Jack rented] our house but the [neighbor] guy, he stayed.”

Even in their current home which they purchased in December 2020, they have minimal contact with neighbors. A few waves and “hellos,” but not much beyond that. Mpende noted that at their newly purchased home there was a neighbor next to him who was Indian who appears to be kind. “He came one day to say hi,” Mpende recalled. Another neighbor from one block away gave him a housewarming gift and welcomed him, but the white neighbor on the opposite side of him was not someone he wanted to get to know. Mpende was avoiding interaction with this neighbor, so he did not run the risk of hostile interactions with him. “[The neighbor] doesn’t talk. He’s quiet. But he’s different. Maybe I [am able] to go over there, but I don’t want a problem. We need him to be like that (not interacting with us). We don’t want him to come to us with problems. He can do his stuff. I can do my stuff.” Mpende told me that he felt that this neighbor

did not like the fact that he and his family moved into the area but did not note if it was related to his ethnicity or refugee status.

While most individuals did not necessarily fear the native-born community, they also did not understand why they held few to no relations with the native-born community. For example, when I asked Tuwifé if he felt welcomed by the community, he said, “Some of them. Like I can say your husband (who was a refugee and is involved with the refugee community) or say your family. Like I can say Dan [from Resettlement Assistance Agency] and my host family. So just a few families [have been] very, very nice and very, very good. But we maybe we would [have] liked to have many people to be friends with. We would like to be friends with white people, but how can that be?” For Tuwifé, the concern was with having few relations outside of his own ethnic group and something he did not understand fully.

When Tuwifé was discussing interactions within the neighborhoods where he has lived, he told me that in their first two apartments in Kentwood the refugee community was close, but that they were not close with whites. They were connected to the Congolese and other African refugees, yet Tuwifé told me, “But, it was still problem with white[s]. So, I don’t know why there is still a problem... Whites, I don’t know why we don’t have any relationship or friendship with white people.” He did not understand the disconnect with white people and asked me to explain this at the end of the interview. I briefly explained the ways in which the United States has been founded on racial inequality. I discussed the history of race and racism in the United States as well as the racial hierarchy as it relates to both overt and covert forms of prejudice and discrimination towards non-white individuals and groups (including refugees). I also provided examples of historical and contemporary forms of structural racism such as interracial marriage

being illegal until the mid-20th century as well as the issue with inflated home values in white neighborhoods and undervalued homes in neighborhoods of color.

Tuwife, said he had gotten to know only two neighbors who lived on the same side of the street; one family was white while the other was an interracial couple. One of the households recently moved to another town in West Michigan, but the parents still brought their son to play with Tuwife's children occasionally. Tuwife told me that this couple is "mixed," the wife is white American and the husband Asian American, and that "their children were coming here and playing with our kids. Even now that they moved, and their child still comes to visit." However, Tuwife has had no interaction with the other neighbors beyond these two cases. In another conversation about neighborhood interactions, Tuwife said he didn't interact with any African Americans and explained his understanding of racial groups in the areas he's lived. "I can say white people are good more than bad. They have their anger and that's not good. [But] white people can think before they act. They think first. But them [African Americans], they don't have that thing." In this instance, Tuwife appeared to be basing his views about African Americans on having fewer negative interactions with white people and more with African Americans. This example may also reflect strained relations between African refugees and African Americans. He also appeared to have internalized whiteness as superior over being African American with his comment that whites were "good".

Race was brought up again when I asked Tuwife if he could tell me about a few of the tough things about living in the United States. He laughed and said the following, "The tough things, in America? Yeah, the problem with dealing with white people. That is the tough thing that I don't know how to deal with it." For Tuwife, his interactions with the native-born community were difficult. He did not understand the resentment nor the embedded racism in the

United States and why he did not have friendly relations with his white or African American neighbors. Tuwifé noted the struggles with both white and African American individuals in his neighborhoods but placed more value on whiteness and whites as being “good” when compared to African Americans. While Tuwifé has poor relations with both groups, he explicitly made the distinction that whites were superior in their ability to “think before they act”—something that he noted was lacking among African Americans. While most likely an unconscious bias, it appears that Tuwifé has learned to value the way white individuals behave over the way he perceives African American individuals in their conduct.

Tuwifé also recognized the racial hierarchy that placed Africans themselves at the bottom rung with his discussion of how Latino children treated his children. There were issues with the school district in his new neighborhood that were negatively impacting his children. “When we moved from Kentwood to here [new house], they faced another challenge because there were many children from Spanish families [and] they [thought] that [my children] are not good. They had sometimes ...in their memory that Africa is a bush like somewhere that there is nothing... or something good can’t come from Africa. And they are still taking [like] African[s] are not human. Kind of animals. This is in the [Parkridge] Schools, not Kentwood. Now the children ask that they can go back to Kentwood. I said no, you have to endure. You have to be patient and keep learning. And because we don’t have any other choice, you have to handle those programs and make sure you do good in school.” When I asked if he faced any barriers in the previous school district in Kentwood, he said, “No. we were in harmony with the teachers, and they were calling us and talking to us parents... it was good in Kentwood.”

The difficulties that Tuwifé’s children face relate to the negative perceptions of Africa and Africans from Latino children in the schools, both in the elementary and high school. He

also indicated there was no relationship with the Parkridge school teachers and that they are primarily white teachers. Part of the reason that his family moved out of the Kentwood area when they were looking to purchase a home was due to affordability and struggles with credit scores. They may have not had the option to move again (when their children expressed their school struggles) due to financial reasons or due to the in-home daycare services they provided in which moving might have disrupted the income source.

In another interview, Chilemba told me of interactions with neighbors that were racially charged, and both he and his wife mentioned the discomfort associated with these interactions. Chilemba, who had recently purchased a home in Kentwood, had a painful example of discrimination when his white neighbor called law enforcement on him. He told me, “Nooo, no, this guy down the street he called the police on me. He says [my] music was too loud. The music wasn’t too loud, but two police came and said one of your neighbors called. I said, ‘what music!?’ I put up a [surveillance] camera now so that I can record everything. This guy is no good.” He also told me that this neighbor throws junk from their yard into his back yard constantly. Chilemba’s wife, Makambo, made note of where the neighbors live, saying, “Most are nice, but some are not nice. The thing I feel uncomfortable with is the people who are so quiet they don’t want to talk to you.” For Makambo, this “silence” may have been perceived as her neighbors not wanting to engage with her because she is a refugee or African. She may have viewed the silence as a form of social exclusion.

The two exceptions to the above discussion were with Njowga and Disanga—a married couple who moved from their apartment in Kentwood in late 2018 to rent a home in a suburb next to Kentwood, where they have resided for a year and a half. They indicated that they wanted more room in order for their kids to “be free to play” since they had just had their fifth child.

When discussing their neighbors, Disanga told me, “They are nice. And they stay to themselves. I like to be able to stay away. No problems. More peace. I love that, especially.” This couple was unique as they framed their disconnect from their neighbors as a positive experience and highly valued as they both noted they liked not being around others all day. In response to a question about how well Njowga knew his neighbors, he said, “I like it here in America. I can just stay in my home all day watching movies, reading books. It’s not like Africa... [where] you go wake up, go there, go there, go there, go to see the neighbor, go to see my brother. I like here [in the US]. (Pausing.) [In the last apartment] it was even hard to see your neighbor. You just wake up and go to work and come back to [home]. So even [in] one month, I don’t see anyone. So... *it was good* [because of the privacy]” (italics added). Njowga also indicated that he didn’t like living in the apartments in the city because he felt some of the residents weren’t respectful, they were “just doing whatever they feel to do” including drinking and smoking with no consideration for the families with children who lived there. Both Njowga and Disanga told me they did not want their kids around that environment. The desire for Njowga and Disanga to remain disconnected from others in their neighborhood might be in response to the bad experiences they had in the apartments, as well as their desire to separate themselves from problems, which is apparent in their stories about their desire to disconnect with others in both Africa and in the United States.

Njowga and Disanga also indicated that their interactions with their white neighbors in their current residence were not negative; however, they were minimal in the frequency. Njowga went on to describe their interactions: “A woman [neighbor] she just came to say ‘hi’. The other one from the other side he just came here with his baby and say[s], ‘I’m your neighbor and my name is ... and I’m from here, and I’m your neighbor and you’re awesome.’” Njowga was

pleasantly surprised by these warm interactions from his neighbors. He noted not one unpleasant experience since they had moved into their new home, but their interactions did not extend beyond these two cases. However, Njowga and his wife are also a couple who do not appear to crave high levels of social interaction.

In one instance, Njowga explained that his refugee non-native status in the United States was a hindrance when dealing with an apartment complex landlord. When Njowga and his family moved out of their apartment, the landlord refused to refund the deposit even though there were no damages, dues or late fees. Njowga called Dan, one of the staff members at Refugee Services Center, to help address the issue. While his deposit was ultimately returned, Njowga stated: “So why they didn’t give us [the deposit] directly when we asked them? I talked to them, and they say, no. no. So, when you are a refugee, you can miss some of your rights because you don’t know the rules or the law.” In this case, Njowga was acutely aware that he was being taken advantage of and that his refugee status created more barriers for him during resettlement.

An additional outlier was Chilemba, as his first year in the United States was in foster care since he arrived as an 18-year-old young adult. He noted his isolation was so bad in his first year in the United States that it caused trauma that he carries to this day. He was placed with a foster parent for a year upon arrival and received minimal to zero help learning how to navigate the culture or how to connect with others in the area. The foster parent also inflicted what Chilemba alluded to be unreasonable and irrational rules such as a curfew of 8:00 pm and no showers after 10:00 pm. “I can’t take a shower after 10:00 pm. Even if I go to play soccer and we come back [at] nighttime, and I want to take a shower [I can’t]. I say, ‘why?, why?’ man. Too [many] rules in the house.” Chilemba wanted to be independent and to have a network of people around him to help ease the struggles of resettlement, but the foster parent restricted his mobility

requiring that he come directly home on school days. “She wanted me to [go] to school and then home and go to school and come home. There’s nobody at home all day! She wants me to stay in the house all day. No TV, it’s boring [...] it’s not good.” The foster parent also did not help him learn the basic skills. “She never tried to help me figure anything out. She showed me how to take the bus at *night*. How can you teach somebody nighttime is the time to catch the bus? Oh my God. The next day she said, ‘you can go by yourself.’ Oh. Man. Wow. One time! So, I got lost. So, I go pick up the bus [on my own]... My foster mother never tried to help me ... [to] be independent, so I had to go ask for help from other people.” For Chilemba, this experience early on in his resettlement stayed with him as he mentioned he had recently driven by his foster parent’s home, not to meet her, but just to see the house from a distance. This foster person appeared to be a prominent obstacle in Chilemba’s first year of resettlement hindering his ability to connect with anyone in the community. On the other hand, Chilemba may have been challenging the rules in place, which actually created the obstacles he faced.

While Chilemba’s foster parent isolated him with stringent rules and offered him little assistance, she did attempt to connect Chilemba with her church community, but this ultimately failed. The foster parent was a Seventh Day Adventist and attended church on both Saturdays and Sundays every week. She also imposed this regime on Chilemba. “She made me go both days, [but] I don’t feel nothing...no connection at all for me [at the white church]. I feel I’m at church, but not the spirit of being in church. I was just there because [she] had me there.” It was extremely difficult for Chilemba during that first year and he indicated that his foster mother made it so much harder. “I used to cry myself at night. I say, why do I come to this country—America—I hate it here.” In his current residence he does not interact with his neighbors except

for one white man who lives across the street from him, though the interaction is limited to the non-verbal waves when they are outside.

Many Congolese participants mentioned that time was a factor in getting to know their neighbors. “We all work so much, so there’s not a lot of time left,” Chilemba noted about his ability to engage with his neighbors. Njowga also indicated time was an issue in participating with community activities both within and outside of the Congolese community. When I asked Njowga how often he was able to get together with the Congolese community before Covid, he told me, “Maybe one day a week at church. You know...what happen[s] Monday, Tuesday, Friday...busy...busy...[it’s] Work. Home. Home. Work. Taking care of the family. There’s not time to get see my sister here (gesturing to the neighborhood behind them). There’s no time. We just meet at Church on Sundays.”

The Congolese appear to have much closer social relations with neighbors when the neighbors are other Congolese or refugees from other ethnic groups. Location matters as the participants who lived among primarily native-born Americans (both white and African American) tended to have more hostile interactions. Overall, the Congolese are not well connected with the native-born community, which may be due primarily to the conflict and hostility coming from the white and African American neighbors. While some of the apartment complexes housed more Congolese refugees and often led to closer social ties with other refugees, all of the participants moved from these apartment complexes to live in duplexes or to purchase their own homes in areas where the residents were mostly native-born residents. In a few cases, participants were able to form comradery with other refugees in these areas, but these cases were minimal as there were few other refugees who lived in the residential housing areas (non-apartments). In some cases, there were positive interactions with native-born neighbors, but

these were usually very brief—not extending beyond a few minutes of interaction. Overall, the social interactions tend to be hostile with native-born individuals leading to an absence of any relations with this community. The Congolese instead typically form and maintain social relations with other Congolese and non-Congolese refugees if they live among them—even if there were only one or two individuals. In two cases, however, language was noted as a factor for inhibiting interaction with neighbors.

Workplace

The workplace for many participants is a domain in which social relations with native-born individuals are difficult and sometimes hostile. The struggles with native-born individuals in the workplace vary from minor to overt cases of discrimination that leave participants unlikely to develop close relations. A few participants were able to become self-employed in childcare, but many others struggled to establish good relations with co-workers in the workplace. Most participants had worked in factories at some point with four currently working in either the food packaging/processing industry, concrete, auto parts manufacturing, or in shipping. Two others owned their own in-home daycare businesses. One was retired (due to injuries) from the physical demands and repetitiveness of her factory jobs over the years, and another is a stay-at-home mother of three young children.

For the two self-employed participants, they were daycare providers and offered in-home daycare services for mostly other Congolese children and a few non-Congolese African refugees. This arose out of a need for working parents to have daycare from providers who were of the same cultural background. Tuwifé, one of the daycare providers, told me that when other Africans come to the United States, they “don’t want to take their children to the American

daycare because of [American] culture,” and having the same or similar culture as other African refugees has created the need for daycare service providers for the community. Similarly, Esengo works as a full-time daycare provider for other African refugees. She told me that the resettlement agency they used to work with asked if she and her husband could get the certification necessary to take care of refugee children because they saw the children not getting appropriate care with other daycare providers due to language and cultural barriers. Esengo told me about the American daycare providers, stating, “[The] person taking care of them [children] didn’t understand the language and [the children] don’t eat their food, so the [refugee] kids would just cry all day.” Esengo noted that prior to her self-employment, she struggled with jobs due to language and “get[ting] picked on.” Likewise, Esengo’s husband’s prior jobs left him with resentment towards management when he needed to take time off for an injury. Esengo also indicated that she had very few white American-born friends. “Yeah [it’s] you. And [Dan] from Refugees Assistance Agency. And some other people who were in charge of the daycare stuff; I’ve [been] working with them for six years and most of [them] are my friends.”

When Tuwifé initially discussed the reason he left a nursing assistant position at a nursing home a few years prior, he framed the narrative as having left so he could become self-employed. However, later during the interview, he explained an incident where an older white woman told him she did not like black people. “She said that she hate[s] me and doesn’t want me to help her so I was not going in her room anymore.” The nursing home addressed this issue and indicated that the resident could leave and find a different facility; while she ultimately did not leave, it left a mark on Tuwifé. “Yeah it was just hard. I changed [caring for another patient], but since then, I started to feel like I can’t continue. So, that was one of the reason[s] that pushed me to feel like it’s not my place [to work]. Ultimately, after four months, it was what pushed me

out.” Tuwifé had to complete a few more months on his contract but left the job shortly after that. “I was thinking maybe I can intern, but they (residents) know me. [Maybe] they don’t like me but cannot express it. They can’t show it. Maybe they can hide it, but it’s still in their heart.” Tuwifé was discouraged by this incident and left his position to work at an auto parts factory even though he had completed training to become a certified nurse assistant, “I started at [the auto factory] and I was making the same salary [as in the nursing home] so I changed to a new company, and I make the same amount of money.” For Tuwifé, the experience wasn’t worth staying in the field and he went back to factory work where he did not have the overt racism since he worked with mostly other African co-workers in the auto parts factory. However, even at this place of employment, he explained that there were some issues with prejudice. “The [supervisors] are white and [only some of the] workers. The [supervisors] even if they have discrimination they [have to] hide it. They can’t show it. While you are working for them they hide it because they need you. But you can feel it sometimes. For instance, when [something happens] between you and white or black and white you can feel it when [the supervisors] come to resolve the problem. You can see how everything is going [unfairly]. It’s still there.”

For Disanga, poor work relations were discussed about her time working at a meatpacking factory. She was moved to a different line that was supposed to pay more, but she found out she was being paid the same as her position before. “The [supervisor] would say sometimes go work on [that] line, but that line they [are] getting more money than me. So, when I go work in the line they don’t want to pay me the same. They pay me the same as I used to get. I found that out. It wasn’t right for me.” In this case, she felt slighted by the supervisor and treated unfairly based on the unequal pay. Disanga’s husband, Njowga, indicated poor work relations as well. He explained that there were many cases where people who were hired in his

same position after he was promoted or given more opportunities. “Sometimes you can’t get the chance to be a little bit up [promoted] than other people. But you [realize you] can’t have it and you see somebody come [after] you and take it. Why. Why. Why?? But it’s not something big.” By framing this experience as “not something big,” he was implying that he could not change the conditions and thus was able to cope better with the unfairness he saw. He noted that he saw people promoted over him time and again at most of his jobs. For example, he’s currently working at Amazon as a package handler and has a year and a half of experience driving Hilo. He was told by his supervisor, who he noted is Mexican, that he must take their test and pass with 80% to become certified to drive Hilo for Amazon. He passed all the test sections with the required 80% and yet was told he had to retake it again. He retook it and was told yet another time to take it one more time. “They took [the test] to the office and they told me you have to do it again. I say no, I’m not doing it. They said, no, this is the last time. I did it and I passed. They just were quiet for a month. The office said you have to do the test again. I said, no I’m not doing it again. Stop playing with me. This is the fourth time you’ve [had me] take the test. So, I mean some of them [other workers] they did it once and right now they are driving Hilo. So why [not] me? Why four times, for Hilo? I say, no. I’m not going to do it again. No, I’m done. I don’t know why.”

Njowga’s experiences created tension with his supervisors and also complicated relations with coworkers. Njowga was acutely aware of what was occurring but saw little way to change the problem as this occurred at most employment positions. Njowga was reluctant to name discrimination as a factor in this particular incident. When I asked him if he thought the incident was racially motivated, he said, “I can’t say that. It just happens. You never know what people are thinking. I don’t know what they think about me.” However, he also noted that

discrimination does happen. “Even sometimes at work there is some discrimination. [For] refugees, with the sound of your language or when you’re talking [can cause discrimination]. The [position] they put me, they not gonna put you. I just have to do whatever they want me to do. It happens a lot, especially at work.” He was aware of his disadvantage yet was hesitant to name a reason for the inequities he noticed. However, he did mention in another discussion that he felt discrimination when he got a speeding ticket and was unable to go to the required driving school in Lansing (an hour drive from where he lived). The inability to take time off from work to attend “school about driving” caused the cancellation of his insurance. He was unsure whether the insurance company had solid ground to make the cancellation decision. As he said, “I don’t know if they did it right or not?” Njowga appeared hesitant to name discrimination as the cause for the cancellation of his policy, but he also noted that it did not seem right to require attending a driving school an hour away. He mentioned that the insurance company said they were in accordance with the insurance policies. However, in his discussion with me, he appeared somewhat hesitant in whether he believed it was actually policy or something else. Because the cancellation of his insurance was pending (not yet cancelled) at the time of our interview, he was still able to drive. Regardless, Njowga was fearful of the predicament he would be in if he could not resolve the issue. He also noted that his wife was also on the same policy that was about to be cancelled soon. Njowga did not understand why his wife would lose her insurance because she was not the one who received the speeding ticket. The couple was worried about driving without insurance as they must continue to work.

When I asked Makembo about work experiences, she explained that English, among other aspects, is a factor in her difficulties. “When somebody sees you are new, you don’t know everything, and they have to teach you stuff. So, you don’t know English or don’t understand,

and they might say things [that the] person don't know anything. So, you see? They try to make you feel uncomfortable." The discomfort Makembo mentioned was apparent when she told me about how she felt about other coworkers. "It's not every job that might happen, but some jobs you might go to work and not know English and they have to train you and some people are different and some treat you not the same as the others might treat you. They might be like, you know, have some bad attitude or disrespecting you because [you do] not speaking good English." What is more, Makembo noted her nationality and ethnicity as a factor in work discrimination, "because they know you are African, you don't know too much in America and they [don't] treat me like how they might treat an American. Because if that person sees if he's American, if he's in a new job, he can't do something, if he gets in trouble he knows everything [about American culture]. He knows [that] I don't know too much about America...he knows you are going to be quiet. It's ... too much stress." Makembo recognized that her place as a non-native born resident placed her at a disadvantage due to language and her unfamiliarity with the rules. She also recognized her higher risk of exploitation at work. For Makembo, it was all races and ethnicities she felt unease with: Hispanic Americans, African Americans, and whites. "Like the first job, that was Spanish people. Yeah. And then some Black Americans, I don't talk to the white[s]. Some of them are good to me and some are no good to me." While Makambo is a stay-at-home mother currently, these factory positions were areas where she found few close connections to either coworkers or supervisors. Makambo did not report these incidences to Human Resources. She only discussed the mistreatment with other refugees, both Congolese and non-Congolese (other African refugees), noting that she did not feel comfortable talking about these issues with someone who was not a refugee. This could be a result of feeling solidarity in shared experiences with other refugees.

For Esengo, being self-employed in daycare work provided a much more palatable work life and she expressed she was thankful to be able to do daycare instead of working in a factory. During a discussion about her work history, she expressed disgust with some of her previous positions in meatpacking and as a housekeeper. For example, she noted having been placed in a hotel, “they even made me work as a maid”, referencing the initial resettlement agency that places refugees in employment. When I asked about work relations, she noted many instances of hostile interactions and working conditions. When I first asked her about her work experiences, she paused for several seconds. And exclaimed loudly, “Ahhh!” while slapping her hands in her lap and laughing: “There was an African American man who insulted me in the company [I used to work for]. He said I *stink*. So, I went to the office [Human Resources], but they didn’t do anything. So, I called [the agency]. They sent a person down to the office and they had the guy apologize... there was a lot of stuff,” she told me, but declined to elaborate. She did mention that those who discriminated were all races and ethnicities, including Asians. She went into detail about Asians who were born in the United States or have been here for ten or more years, that “they discriminate on a whole bunch of African refugees.” She said she saw other issues in companies she worked for including an incident where a line leader selected the Asian and Hispanic women to stay on the line and work and told all the African women to go into the break room. “They said [the Africans] were lazy and didn’t really help.” She understood this as relating to English comprehension and said it may have been easier for the others to understand the directions, but ultimately, the African women were given brooms and told to sweep the whole company. Esengo noted, “Maybe the company was not happy that the Africans were there.”

In Mpenda's case, his "pastor status" also spilled over into his work sphere in that he formed valuable ties with management due to being a pastor. This came by way of a career fair held at the local community college where one of the factory representatives overheard a conversation in which he was talking to another representative about being a pastor. The interested company representative pursued Mpenda, making multiple offers for him to work. Mpenda ultimately took the position with the concrete company even though it was the most "undesirable" job since they do a lot of outdoor work in unpleasant weather conditions. Mpenda told me in great detail about how good his company is, "They gave me a favor. Just me. I was working three days and they pay me [for] five days ... the boss was very happy to know that I was a pastor, but [I told him] they [the church] don't pay me... so he said, you are very busy... okay, I will see how I can help you." He also told me that no one else in the company got the "favor" he did and was almost exposed when a coworker inquired as to why he only works part-time in a company that rarely hires part-time. Mpenda noted that this coworker was suspicious of him and why he was able to get special treatment—even noting that when Mpenda started to tell the coworker the truth, he quickly came up with a lie when the coworker appeared to become angry. Mpenda had made up a story stating that he volunteered for Habitat for Humanity—a company that his workplace has a relationship with and a program in place for the employees to participate—in order to avoid the confrontation and potential conflict with this fellow coworker.

Mpenda also gets more flexibility than others in his position, which he expressed with gratitude. He was almost in disbelief that a company would ever be so flexible, especially with his experiences in previous factories that were inflexible and harsh to the employees. Mpenda explained:

“I asked off for one month [to go to Tanzania for my mission trip]. But my vacation was only for two weeks. I said [to the boss] if you can give me two more weeks, I don’t need to be paid. [They told me] yeah, you can go for a month. Can you believe, that when I was in Africa, [I found out] they paid me for four weeks! They are very nice people. They are all white people and Christian...Nobody touches me. Nobody. Even the supervisors because they know [I’m a pastor]. I think they know that the COO of the company is my friend, and the owner of the company knows me well. Very very well. And he’s the one who gave me that favor.”

Mpenda also noted on several occasions that the owner and COO would often come looking for him and tell him to come visit during his lunch period—an offer he took up on a few occasions, but indicated he was uncomfortable doing that too often. The quote above reveals the extent to which this participant’s religion and position as pastor of his church helped him forge connections to the native-born community at work as well as outside of work.

Mpenda’s work experience was an outlier and quite rare for workers to be able to access such flexibility. His status as a pastor likely worked in his favor since the company appears to be heavily rooted in Christian values and service. However, Mpenda’s prior work experiences were similar to the other participants—few relations with the native-born staff and often tension and conflict among non-refugees. For the other participants in this study, the workplace is a place of hostility and tension among the native-born co-workers and supervisors. Not only does tension exist, but it is also a space in which prejudice and discrimination occur creating conflict with the native-born individuals. On the other hand, when the participants worked with other refugees and Congolese, the social relations were close and there was solidarity among them.

The workplace for many participants was not a place in which social relations were forged easily. In fact, barriers such as discrimination and prejudice expressed by the participants created hostile interactions. These interactions were with co-workers, supervisors, and in one

case a patient. Discrimination as experienced by the participants left many unwilling to engage with individuals at work and created an environment that reduced the likelihood of a network for social support to be formed. However, in one case a participant's status as a pastor created a welcoming and warm environment at work and helped form close relations with the supervisors and other management, though there were questions raised by other coworkers as to why he received preferential treatment. While this was an outlier in the sample, this individual's previous employment conditions aligned more closely with the other participants in this study. By examining the workplace, these interactions reveal that the participants face difficulty with most native-born individuals with whom they work. These relations appear to be strained among primarily white and African American co-workers, however, other groups were also named. The social relations at work were typically only close when other refugees were present creating solidarity among their ethnic group and with other refugees of other ethnicities.

Outliers: Social Relations

In one case, a participant noted that he had forged relations with a few individuals who helped him during his resettlement journey. Chilemba indicated that there were several key individuals who helped him during resettlement who were not Congolese: "The people who [helped]— my "brother" here [referring to my husband who also came as a refugee and had been helping Chilemba and other refugees for years]...And one [...] family, she (the mother) used to be my teacher in high school, and I got to know her family. And we are invited to the house every year now. This family helped me when I crashed my car. This family was good. She took the insurance [because] I was driving without insurance...so she took my name and put it on her insurance. She adopted a kid from Guatemala, Somalia and has a few children of their own.

Everyone is there, people from all over Mexico, Africa, Arab.” The close relations with another refugee reflect the sentiment of other participants in that refugees tend to form stronger bonds with other refugees even outside of their ethnic group. Yet, the relations that Chilemba formed with the white teacher is an outlier among this sample.

Conclusion

Social relations among Congolese vary in closeness depending on the domain and the group in which interactions take place. Among their own ethnic group, Congolese refugees’ social ties are extremely close, and many rely on one another for social support, including material and emotional assistance. They often hold gatherings during celebrations such as marriage and engagements to help maintain their support networks. Many help their ethnic community by offering assistance with government documents or financial help. Church is another domain in which the Congolese held extremely close relations with co-ethnics. The Congolese rely heavily on church as the primary place for social interaction, which helps create and maintain strong bonds within the community. While very close social ties have been forged within their church community, these relations have become less frequent due to church services being held via video conferencing platforms during the pandemic. Some noted feeling more isolated and others mentioned that church attendance rates were significantly lower since the pandemic. Overall, church and ethnic communities are the chief social domains in which the Congolese build and maintain close relations.

Within the neighborhood and workplace, the Congolese have much different experiences. Congolese social relations with the native-born population are minimal to non-existent within both the neighborhood community and the workplace, with a few exceptions. For most, the workplace is a place that offers little chance for developing relations. Congolese relations with

native-born Americans are either non-existent, strained, or in many cases hostile. In some instances, participants noted hostility at the hands of co-workers due to their African heritage. They also lacked promotion opportunities regardless of their qualifications and skills. Some participants experienced social exclusion due to their lack of English fluency. The workplace was a major source of stress for most individuals who experienced exploitation, social exclusion, discrimination, and prejudice in various forms. For those who attributed mistreatment to their refugee status, the sound of their voice and language barriers were often mentioned as the major causes. Within the neighborhoods, relations with both white and African American neighbors tended to be laden with prejudice and discrimination, leaving many participants unwilling to develop social ties with their neighbors. Four individuals owned homes, three of which were located outside of the Kentwood area. These participants struggled to purchase homes because of multiple factors such as poor credit, affordability, and availability of housing. As a result, many spent five or more years to be able to do so.

CHAPTER VII

SEGMENTED SOCIAL RELATIONS AMONG BURMESE AND CONGOLESE

The Burmese and Congolese have many similarities in how social relations are formed within the four domains outlined in Chapters Five and Six. There are also some differences that each group experiences. In this chapter, I discuss each domain and the subthemes that arise in examining both ethnic groups' experiences with developing social relations. Within the domain of ethnic community, I discuss the similarities that the Congolese and Burmese have with each other. Next, I discuss the domain of the church community with attention on the physical space of the church that provides opportunities for developing and sustaining close social relations as well as extensive networks that provide support for both groups. I also discuss the role and experiences of two pastors in each ethnic group and how the pandemic has shaped church services for each ethnic community. In the third domain of neighborhood community, I discuss the living arrangements of both groups and the type of housing—apartment or suburb residential homes—as they influence social ties among both groups. Additionally, I discuss the differences in how each ethnic group became homeowners. Lastly, in the domain of workplace, I discuss social relations within the work sphere and the role of discrimination and prejudice in shaping these relations. I also discuss how the participants experience and explain the mistreatment they face at work.

Ethnic community

There is extensive group cohesion and high levels of social interaction within the ethnic groups of both the Congolese and Burmese communities in West Michigan. As a result of close social ties, these strong bonds have created robust networks of support among the participants in this study. These networks are formed as a result of ongoing interaction and close social ties that help sustain relations with others within their communities. These social relations are the foundation on which both groups have created support systems that help sustain them during resettlement and beyond. Both groups rely on their ethnic community for various needs and social interactions are crucial for supporting each other through life changes and other events. At the same time, there are some differences among each ethnic group in terms of social ties and obstacles faced. Below, I outline in detail the similarities and differences between the two groups.

Close Ties in the Ethnic Group

There are well developed and very close social ties among both the Congolese and Burmese participants in this study. The Congolese participants develop and maintain social ties by assisting others within their ethnic group with material items, financial assistance, and emotional support in times of distress. From helping others relocate from out of state to being present during deaths, births and marriages, the Congolese are tightly bonded with each other and their frequent interactions reflect very close relations with one another. Similarly, the Burmese are also well connected with others in their ethnic community. The extensive relations with fellow Burmese help to create strong social ties in which they rely on during difficult times.

Several Burmese families also relocated to West Michigan from out of state due to the desire to be closer to a thriving Burmese community.

Support from co-ethnics was critical among the Burmese and Congolese in helping promote well-being—especially when faced with barriers. Some of the barriers that both groups dealt with included language fluency, employment struggles, transportation, and financial hardship, which in turn created a heavy reliance on individuals within each ethnic community for additional support. These barriers prove to be less salient when there is adequate support within the ethnic communities. Having close social bonds within each of the ethnic groups to help during trying times proves beneficial for the well-being of the individual and the community.

Having a larger ethnic community not only creates more opportunities to develop close social ties, but it also establishes a larger network that offers more support. Burmese and Congolese individuals created close social relations through various methods. Some opened their homes to create a space for more social interaction, while others actively sought relationships through community events, English classes and the resettlement agency. While many Burmese also maintained social relations with family back home through technology and social media, the Congolese reported less often that they were connected with family back home. However, this does not necessarily indicate that they are any less connected, but that it was reported less often.

The Pandemic and Social Relations with Co-ethnics

The Covid pandemic has impacted the Burmese and Congolese ethnic communities, but in different ways. For the Congolese, the pandemic hit especially hard in a way that hindered their gatherings. Because there was fear of reprimand for breaking the social gathering rules, many participants reported they were isolated from their ethnic community for much of 2020 and

2021 when data collection took place. This isolation was a direct result of the restrictions put in place and the community not wanting to break the rules—something that one participant noted they were taught even before they arrived in the United States. Most participants did not wear masks around each other in private spaces. Since fellow Congolese were viewed as family, masking would have signaled mistrust. As a result, wearing a mask around co-ethnics could damage close relationships. The Burmese participants did not report any struggles with isolation due to the pandemic. In fact, most continued to attend gatherings in each other's homes every weekend. Among those with whom I interacted, some wore masks and others did not. Mask wearing appeared to be dependent upon how well they knew others in their community. The Congolese and Burmese primarily did not wear masks during my interviews. Of the few who did, this was usually during our interview which took place in a separate spare room that was a smaller enclosed space than the rest of the house. When individuals had close social relations established with each other, they would most often not mask. The masking preferences may be rooted in trust that is established through close social ties, indicating a bond in which masking is viewed as unnecessary and may even inhibit the formation of a bond if worn among individuals who hold close social ties with one another.

The group cohesion that exists among the Congolese and Burmese is very similar in the sense that they are each other's primary support system. They both maintain close social ties through social gatherings such as weddings and engagements, opening their homes to others in their ethnic group, and helping each other in times of need. The impact of the pandemic appears to have affected the Congolese more severely in terms of limiting their interactions within their ethnic community whereas the Burmese did not mention Covid as an issue that hindered their

social interaction or gatherings. In Table 7.1, I summarize the similarities and differences of the two groups' social relations in their ethnic communities.

Table 7.1—Comparison of Burmese and Congolese Ethnic Communities

	Burmese	Congolese
Ethnic group cohesion	High social interactions & close social ties	High social interactions & close social ties
Impact of the Pandemic	<i>Minimal</i> impact on social relations	<i>Negative</i> impact on social relations

Church Community

The church is an integral physical domain for both the Congolese and Burmese participants in this study. They use the space not only as a place to practice faith, but also to create and sustain close social ties with each other. The interactions that take place in church are what drives the closeness of social ties and in turn helps to form solid networks that extend both within and outside of the church. The Congolese have one church in West Michigan offering services in Swahili while the Burmese have six or seven different churches. Sundays are often the only day in which each group is able to interact due to heavy work schedules and as a result it is important not only for religious reasons, but for maintaining their social relations and maintaining bonds with one another. Both groups rely on the church as the place for bonding and have many similarities in their experiences, yet there are some differences they experience within the West Michigan community.

Close Social Relations in the Church

Both Burmese and Congolese refugees attend church weekly on Sundays. Church serves as a crucial space for developing and maintaining social relations among each ethnic community. They each have a shared language and cultural background that bonds them in their Christian faith, and they share in this on a weekly basis during church services. The Congolese and Burmese are both members of the dominant religious group in the United States. There are six or seven different Burmese churches in the area, yet the Congolese have only one church in the West Michigan area. The much higher number of Burmese churches could be a result of the more diverse ethnic and tribal make-up of the Burmese. Because different ethnicities and tribes of Burmese speak different dialects, churches are usually formed along tribal lines (i.e., Chin, Karen, Kachin, Kayar, and Shan groups in the area form their own churches). However, there is one Burmese church that an informant indicated was “mixed” with various ethnic groups attending including Chin, Karen, and Kachin. The Burmese churches tend to be reformed churches and the Congolese church is under the United Methodist church umbrella.

The Congolese have one church in which they offer services in Swahili, which is their hub for developing close social ties among their co-ethnics. One participant met his future wife at church and others formed close relations because of celebrations held at the church such as weddings and engagements. Several found connections through other African churches before they were able to find the Congolese church. For the Congolese, Sunday is an important day to be physically present and to interact with their co-ethnics to form these relations and to maintain the ones already in place. Put simply, church attendance is critical for meeting others in their ethnic community. Likewise, the Burmese Church offers a space on Sundays to form social relations through weekly interactions, though there are more churches that offer services for the

Burmese community. Many noted that church is the place where they are able to socialize with others in their community and is the only non-workday. For some, they held “elder” positions that gave them special responsibilities within the church such as event planning and dealing with interpersonal conflict or issues among congregation members. Both groups also indicated that their close relations within the congregation extended to interactions and gathering outside of the church, but still within their ethnic group. Ultimately, these social relations led to better overall well-being among both groups.

Since the Congolese community has only one area church, this may cement social relations in different ways than the Burmese since the Burmese have more churches from which to choose. The Congolese community may hold closer relations to each other since they all attend the same church, even though they may or may not belong to the same ethnic group, while the Burmese may be more segmented and hold close relations only within the church they attend and not outside of their ethnic group. Additionally, if one decides to find another church, the Burmese have several choices whereas the Congolese do not—they either stay or find a non-Congolese church to attend creating different opportunities for social interaction and in turn social relations. At the same time, the Burmese may face limitations as well based on their ethnic group. For example, Karen and Chin speak different dialects and if individuals do not speak the shared Burmese language, this may create barriers in which church they are willing or able to attend (i.e., most will want to attend a service that is in a dialect that they understand). In the case of one Congolese family who left the Congolese church, they have more social interactions with the native-born community since they chose to attend a primarily white church.

An additional difference between the groups is that several Burmese participants specifically relocated from out of state to West Michigan to live among a more robust church

community. Many explained that there were few or no churches where they lived prior to relocating to Michigan. For them, the desire to live in an area that held more churches and better services was a major factor that prompted these families to relocate to Michigan. These individuals also noted that living among a strong religious community was important to them and was critical in expanding their social networks. Two of the Congolese participants discussed relocating to Michigan from out of state, but church was not the driving factor—employment opportunities were the primary reason. For the Burmese who relocated from out of state, only one participant noted that employment opportunities were an additional reason for relocating to West Michigan, but the primary motivator rested in the potential for extended social relations and networks due to a robust Burmese community.

Social Support through the Church

Close social relations developed in the church were foundational in creating networks and providing social support in both Burmese and Congolese communities. Because support during resettlement is critical, the Congolese and Burmese used the church as a space in which to develop the networks necessary to access resources. Each group provided support for others in their community in various ways. Many Burmese noted offering support to each other during difficult times. The networks they established in the church provided close social relations so that when individuals were sick, they had others to help them. Likewise, their networks provided emotional support during significant life events such as deaths. Another aspect of support comes in the form of assistance with housing and employment—when the Burmese were well connected via close social relations they were able to find housing more easily as well as

employment. In this way, close social relations developed in the church provided support that otherwise would be difficult to find.

The Congolese experienced similar social support among their church community. Many reported they had established relations through the church that helped them during celebrations and difficult times. They provide each other material and non-material assistance in the form of financial help through their networks established in the church as well as emotional support during celebrations and difficult times. Without these networks and the close social ties necessary for strong relations, the Congolese may also find themselves with fewer resources and less access to help. In this way, the church was foundational for creating networks and providing social support among both the Congolese and Burmese participants.

Pastors' Role

Pastors play a key role in both the Congolese and Burmese churches. The Burmese pastor I interviewed was working on a master's degree in theology, while the Congolese pastor struggled to get this church and ordainment (received in Congo) recognized by a local Methodist church. While the Congolese pastor faced difficulty for several years, the Burmese pastor did not face a similar predicament in his church. The lack of barriers for the Burmese pastor may be due to the fact that the Burmese church operates independent of a white church and thus does not have to deal with restrictions imposed by others, namely white members not recognizing credentials. Many Burmese churches exist independent of any other churches. One of my informants revealed that some Burmese churches used to affiliate themselves with white churches but have since separated and operate independently. However, he indicated that there are still a few that rent space from white churches. There are also two Chin churches who bought

their own church recently. In contrast, the Congolese church was housed in a white church and treated as a “tenant” for a number of years, until the ordainment was officially recognized. The strained relations between the white and Congolese congregations led to few interactions between the members, except for the pastor. However, the Congolese church was incredibly influential (and still is) among the Congolese community and at one point was serving nearly 200 members. The Burmese church did not experience interactions with any native-born individuals since they only had Burmese attendees and thus no interaction with any native-born individuals within the church walls.

A similarity among both pastors was in their ability to extend relations beyond their ethnic group—something uncommon among other members of the church and among the other participants in this study. These social connections were forged through their pastor status and were crucial in their connections to the native-born community. The Burmese pastor was able to forge connections with other white church pastors and the Congolese pastor had created close relations to a white pastor and her husband. However, the Congolese pastor’s social relations with the white congregation were somewhat strained, especially with the white church board. While the Congolese pastor was unaware of the underlying reasons for the strain in social relations and tension that existed with the white church board, these board members ultimately (with)held the power and were hesitant to embrace an African church and its congregation for a number of years.

The Burmese and Congolese pastors were both foundational in providing support for their communities yet had differing experiences in their social relations outside of their ethnic communities. While each pastor had created a few very close ties with others in the Christian religious community who were not from their ethnic group, the Congolese pastor faced far more

barriers in his interactions with whites in the church who withheld recognition of his credentials. As a result of this discrimination, he was unable to establish close relations with most of the white members of the church save for a few. The Burmese pastor had close social relations with a few white individuals from other churches but was not in a position where other non-refugee individuals were able to withhold a formal church or credential recognition. He also held a higher level of education as he was pursuing his graduate degree in theology—something which may have allowed for facing fewer obstacles. The close relations that each pastor did have with the non-refugee community were crucial in helping facilitate adaptation within their ethnic group. For example, with the Burmese pastor's connections to the Baptist pastor, he was able to garner support for his own church which, in turn, helped his congregation. Likewise, the Congolese pastor held critical relations with the white pastor and her husband which helped establish his church as an officially recognized UMC church in which more social support was offered to his congregation. Through these relations, both pastors were able to help the members of their congregations.

The Pandemic and Church

The pandemic influenced church services for both groups in that they had to hold virtual services instead of meeting in person. Prior to the pandemic, the church served as a powerful channel for members to form and sustain social relations that offered social networks and support, especially in times of need. These social relations have become affected since the pandemic, with increased feelings of isolation among the participants. While the Burmese did not report less social interaction during the pandemic, the Congolese pastor and other Congolese participants remarked on a lack of face-to-face interaction at church and some level of social isolation. The Burmese continued to hold frequent gatherings in their homes during the

pandemic; however, the Congolese were hesitant to do so. The major factor that was noted was the fear of reprimand from authorities for holding or attending social gatherings among the Congolese participants, which was not discussed among the Burmese. In fact, there was no mention of any change in social interaction, gatherings or church attendance for the Burmese due to the pandemic. The Burmese tended to ignore the social gathering limits in their homes while the Congolese were fearful of getting in trouble with authorities leading to more isolation since they were not able to gather in the church. The Burmese may not have reported fear in this study due to several reasons. First, they have somewhat slightly less interaction with the native-born community than the Congolese at church. Second, they belong to a less stigmatized ethnic group than the Congolese, which may create a sense of perceived safety from authority or reprimand. The Burmese participants may experience fewer negative interactions and/or less overt instances of prejudice and discrimination directed towards them.

In Table 7.2, I summarize the similarities and difference of the two groups’ social relations in the church.

Table 7.2—Comparison of Burmese and Congolese Church Communities

	Burmese	Congolese
Social Relations in the Church	Very close	Very close
Support via the Church	Extensive among Burmese	Extensive among Congolese
Pastors’ Role	Extensive connections with Burmese and native-born individuals	Extensive social relations with Congolese and native-born individuals
The Pandemic and Church	Social gatherings less impacted—social interaction not impacted	Social gatherings highly impacted— <i>reduced</i> social interaction

Neighborhood Community

Refugees typically live in apartment complexes during their early settlement period. For many, they are able to establish credit, work history, and save enough money to purchase a home. Some take longer to purchase homes than others; however, this often ties into the availability of in-group resources such as the presence or absence of realtors within their ethnic group. The apartment complexes that the participants live or lived in were places that offered a higher number of refugees and the ability for more social interaction based on shared cultural heritage, language, and experiences. There were many similarities in experiences when living in the apartment complexes for both the Burmese and Congolese. The residential neighborhoods where the participants either purchased their homes (or rented duplexes) offered a different type of landscape. For many, they were surrounded by non-refugee native-born Americans that limited the interactions and in some cases created hostile interactions for the participants. However, there were differences in the experiences in the suburb residential areas for the Congolese when contrasted with the Burmese.

Living Arrangements

The living arrangements of the Congolese and Burmese tend to be in nuclear families. Most of the Congolese live in close proximity to one another with most of the refugee community as a whole living in Kentwood. However, while all the Congolese participants in this study lived in Kentwood initially, at the time of data collection only three of the participants were living within the city of Kentwood and five resided outside of Kentwood. Four of the participants had purchased their homes with only one staying in the Kentwood area. In terms of the home purchasing process, those who purchased their own homes took on average five to

seven years to be able to become a homeowner and faced many difficulties. Since there are no Congolese realtors in the area, the participants were forced to rely on native-born realtors, which made the process a little more difficult in terms of comprehension and trust. The Burmese participants also tended to live in nuclear households except in one case where a participant was living with his uncle and his wife and children. All the Burmese, except one, live in the Kentwood area either in apartments or in their own purchased homes. The close proximity was very important for them in order to help maintain closer social ties. For those having purchased homes, they also had two area Burmese realtors to rely on during this process—something not available to the Congolese. While it often took the Congolese five or more years to purchase a home after resettlement, the Burmese in this study purchased homes within two to four years of resettlement. With the Burmese participants owning homes at a higher rate, having a Burmese realtor available created more reliance on their ethnic community social network to help with the process of home buying. On the other hand, the Congolese had to rely on others outside of their ethnic group to purchase homes, which may have led to more barriers during the process.

Apartment Complexes

All refugees are placed in apartment complexes by their initial resettlement agency. Where they are placed usually depends on availability of housing. When the Congolese and Burmese participants resided in apartment complexes, they engaged in more frequent interactions with their neighbors, which often led to closer social ties. This was primarily due to having more refugee residents—both within and outside of their own ethnic group—living in close proximity. The Burmese reported that when other refugees were living in their complex, they would interact much more frequently at house parties and other social events. Likewise, the

Congolese experienced higher levels of social interaction when they lived in the apartment complexes due to there being more Congolese refugees nearby. Both groups also noted that they interacted with refugees who were outside of their ethnic groups, and this was a positive experience leading to close relations with these individuals as well. The positive experiences of the Congolese participants living among the same or similar ethnic group was in part due to similar culture and language as many noted they had frequent interactions that were warm with both Congolese and other African refugees. The social relations were much more intimate with neighbors when there were other Congolese refugees as well as other African refugees in the complexes

In a few cases, there was mention of dislike in the apartment complexes but the reasons for these were different between the Congolese and Burmese. There were two outliers among the Burmese participants. One individual lived in an apartment in the city of Grand Rapids. He disliked where he lived, but this was due to there being primarily native-born neighbors with whom he had very little social interaction. In another case, a Burmese couple who had lived in an apartment complex prior to purchasing their home remarked they were extremely isolated as they lived among mostly white and older native-born individuals. They also noted there were negative interactions with their white neighbors who were unkind to them. A Congolese couple stated they did not like their apartment because it was not very child-friendly with smoking and alcohol use by other residents in the complex.

When Burmese and Congolese live in apartment complexes, their interactions with others are much more frequent. This level of interaction is a direct result of the high refugee population in the apartment complexes and the closer proximity of the living quarters. Both groups reported that they felt much more comfortable living with other refugees which was most likely an

outgrowth of close social relations based on shared ethnicity or refugee status. Except in the few outlier cases, the participants told of very close relations with others when they were living in the apartments. For the Burmese who did not like the living arrangements, this was due to living among primarily other native-born individuals and having no interaction or being treated poorly. Overall, both the Congolese and Burmese have not formed close social ties with others outside of their ethnic communities except for the pastors in each community. Similarly, both groups have developed very close relations within their ethnic groups that helped foster trust as well as an extended network of support. These networks can be helpful during difficult times, thereby enhancing the overall well-being of the individuals.

Suburb Residential Homes

Many refugees in this study are able to purchase their own homes, but the way in which individuals accomplish this varies among both ethnic groups (see page 49 in Chapter 3). Both groups see homeownership as a goal and something that provides a sense of accomplishment and stability. They see homeownership as a financial investment, yet the Burmese tend to place a higher value on homeownership as it is tied to financial stability. To them, owning a home in the United States provides a sense of financial steadiness as it represents an investment. Several participants noted that purchasing a home was intended to help their children with their financial well-being in the future as well as the financial stability for themselves (through equity). The Burmese also tend to take much less time, usually two to four years, preparing for homeownership. In contrast, it takes the Congolese longer--five years or more--to purchase a home after resettlement because of barriers such as poor credit, lack of available housing, and not having a Congolese realtor to assist through the process.

When Congolese and Burmese live in residential housing among native-born individuals, there is less frequent interaction and very little incentive to create close social relations. However, the Burmese differ from the Congolese in one area, which is they do not face the same level of hostile interactions with their neighbors as the Congolese in the residential housing neighborhoods. At worst, the Burmese in these areas faced no interaction with their native-born neighbors. Yet, the Congolese faced far more race-based discrimination and prejudice rooted in their African heritage as well as exclusion based on their foreign-born status.

When the Congolese participants lived in residential housing areas, some indicated there was either no interaction with neighbors or strained interaction. For most, however, there were hostile interactions with their native-born neighbors, including calls to authorities for minor or nonexistent issues. Others experienced hostility based on refugee status and national origins. In other cases, there was no interaction with native-born neighbors. Yet, in a few instances, Congolese participants noted friendly, albeit brief, interactions such as hellos and waves. The Burmese also experienced interactions with their native-born neighbors in the form of brief hellos and goodbyes, but little more. The Burmese, however, explained that the reason for the limited interaction was due primarily to their lack of English fluency. For both groups, there was a lack of incentive to form social relations with the native-born neighbors because of their lack of English fluency and their heavy reliance on their own ethnic group for social interactions and support.

The major difference between the Burmese and Congolese in these residential areas is that the Burmese may have been socially excluded based on limited language ability, but they did not experience overt forms of hostility or discrimination in the way that the Congolese did. The Burmese participants held very close social ties when they lived among other Burmese

refugees and non-Burmese refugees in the apartment complexes. Within the residential housing neighborhoods, they found minimal interaction but also minimal hostility from other native-born neighbors. In most cases, the participants had brief hellos/goodbyes but did not face prejudice or discrimination from the neighbors as the Congolese did. This lack of prejudice and discrimination among the Burmese may be due to Burmese having less English fluency than the Congolese and thus being unable to engage in interaction or comprehend prejudiced statements or discriminatory actions. It may also tie into racial categories in which Burmese may be viewed with more compassion than the Congolese participants, as Asian groups are situated within the “model minority” category and Congolese in the Black racial category based on their African heritage. Thus, native-born perceptions of Burmese versus Congolese may be vastly different based on racial classifications.

The Road to Homeownership

The path to homeownership was experienced differently for the Congolese and Burmese. The major factor that contributes to the difference between the two groups lies in the resources available to them, such as having a co-ethnic realtor in the area or not. Four of the eight Congolese participants purchased homes (one in Kentwood and three outside of Kentwood) and eleven of the seventeen Burmese purchased their own homes (within Kentwood)—a relatively high number in my sample. In general, most Burmese took two to four years to purchase their own home after being resettled in the area. They also had extensive support from a local Burmese realtor who aided in all steps of home buying—from offering advice on establishing credit and work histories to the logistics of finding and buying a home.

The Congolese, on the other hand, do not have a Congolese realtor within their community and must rely on native-born individuals in this process. For three of the four Congolese individuals who purchased homes, they noted difficulty in the home-buying process due to poor credit, affordability, and availability of homes in the current housing market. A married couple who had recently purchased a home told of several offers that fell through because of poor credit and a seller pulling their home off the market when the owners discovered that the buyers were African. All Congolese participants used white realtors during the home buying process.

The Burmese appear to have less difficulty in purchasing homes due to others in their community helping them learn the steps to be able to reach their goal. For example, a Burmese realtor told me that he assisted his Burmese clients with all aspects of home purchasing, sometimes years before they were ready to buy a home. He noted that offering guidance establishing credit and a work history is critical in the home buying process. This support, however, was not present in the Congolese community and many found themselves with poor credit in their early years of resettlement due to being taken advantage of by predatory loans and scams, or due to unfamiliarity with the credit system in the United States. Moreover, all Burmese homeowners purchased homes within the city of Kentwood, but only one Congolese participant chose to do so. The three Congolese participants who purchased houses outside of Kentwood expressed that they would have liked to own a home in Kentwood; however, they encountered some barriers, such as bad credit, high prices, and sellers' change of mind.

The neighborhood domain for the Congolese and Burmese has some similarities and yet are different in other ways depending on factors such as location and demographics of the neighborhoods. The apartment complexes tend to be diverse in terms of having more refugee

residents and a few native-born individuals. Subjects who live in apartment complexes usually have more interaction with both refugee and non-refugee neighbors. When individuals purchased homes or lived in residential housing areas, the demographics include many more native-born neighbors, which create different experiences than those in the apartments. Many experienced social exclusion and hostility in suburban residential neighborhoods. In other words, location, type of housing and demographics of the neighborhoods affect how social relations are created and the closeness that exists among neighbors.

Distant Social Relations with the Larger Community

Most of the Burmese and Congolese participants in this study had minimal to no interaction with native-born individuals in their daily lives. They rely on their own ethnic group when they are faced with barriers or other issues. As a result of the strong ethnic social ties that lead to extensive networks in the area, the need to rely on individuals outside of their communities appears to diminish. An additional aspect that may create less interaction with the larger community is lack of English fluency. Both ethnic groups had limitations arise related to English fluency, and as a result they may be less likely to develop relations among the non-refugee community due to the language barrier. All participants considered the language barrier as a major difficulty during their early resettlement. Consequently, this obstacle may push participants and each ethnic group to rely on each other, instead of the native-born community.

The lack of interaction with native-born individuals for the Burmese and Congolese directly ties into where they live and the demographics of their neighborhoods. For the individuals living in suburban residential housing areas, their neighbors were primarily native-born Americans. With few to no other refugees in the area, this created a barrier for both groups

in the sense that there were language limitations as well as cultural differences that left many struggling to establish ties with the native-born community. The Burmese live in predominantly white neighborhoods and often mentioned the lack of English fluency, which made it difficult to establish close social relations with neighbors. With the majority of the Burmese participants facing fluency barriers, this created a major obstacle in creating social relations. Likewise, the Congolese faced difficulty in forming relations with the native-born community in their neighborhoods.

Additionally, both Burmese and Congolese noted that they felt some dislike of other racial groups. Several Burmese reported not liking their African American neighbors. The Congolese also mentioned disliking neighbors who were hostile or unkind to them; the racial groups named were primarily white or African American neighbors. An additional aspect hindering close social relations was the element of time as most participants were employed full-time with many working overtime. The lack of time meant that there were fewer chances for the participants to interact with neighbors. When they did have time, they usually spent it with their ethnic or church community. In Table 7.3, I summarize the similarities and differences of social relations between the two groups in their neighborhood communities.

Table 7.3—Comparison of Burmese and Congolese Neighborhood Communities

	Burmese	Congolese
Living Arrangements	-Nuclear families -Majority live in Kentwood	-Nuclear families -Half live in Kentwood
Apartment Complexes	Close social ties with other refugees (all ethnicities)	Close social ties with other refugees (all ethnicities)
Suburb Residential Homes	-Exclusion from native-born neighbors -Language barriers are the primary factor for distant relations	-Exclusion from native-born neighbors -Higher rates of hostility among native-born neighbors
The Road to Homeownership	-Few barriers: Burmese realtor available to homebuyers	-Significant barriers: no Congolese realtor available to homebuyers
Distant Social Relations with Larger Community	-Extremely distant; minimal to no interaction -Minimal to zero reliance on native-born Americans for support	-Distant; more interaction with larger community but still limited -Some reliance on native-born Americans for support

Workplace

The workplace is a domain in which strained relations exist for both Burmese and Congolese individuals with the native-born individuals. These strained relations tend to be experienced among co-workers and supervisors for both groups. Both groups also tend to work in factories, with the exception of two Congolese participants who were self-employed in in-home daycare services. For both the Burmese and Congolese, there is little incentive to establish close social ties with native-born Americans due to mistreatment, discrimination or prejudice, or hostile interactions. While both groups do experience mistreatment and hostility, the Congolese named more experiences of overt forms of hostility and discrimination in the workplace than the Burmese. The Burmese tend to name language as the reason for poor treatment, while the Congolese named African heritage as the primary reason for poor treatment.

Social Relations at Work

Social relations with native-born Americans at work tend to be very uncomfortable for all the participants—both among the Burmese and Congolese. These social interactions take place primarily in factories with interactions being described as strained to hostile. A factor contributing to the hostile interactions may also be due to the types of workplaces the refugees are working for. Of the participants who are employed, all but one Burmese and all but two Congolese also work in factories. All of those who currently do not work in factories (retired, stay at home mom, or self-employed) have work histories in which they were employed in factories at some point. The uncomfortable interactions at the workplace occurred with several racial groups and ethnicities including white, Latino, and African American, though the Burmese reported more uncomfortable interactions with whites than any other group. The Congolese noted that primarily relationships with white and African American individuals produced discomfort with a few cases of among Latinos in the workplace.

The Congolese and Burmese both reported that they felt animosity to varying degrees arising out of strained social interactions with native-born individuals at work. These reports were discussed as unpleasant interactions with their supervisors and coworkers that led to a lack of close social ties and in some cases hostile interactions that created stress. Burmese participants told of various forms of tension in their interactions at work such as getting “points” for missing work, “sabotage” at work resulting in being fired, not being believed, and getting placed in worse positions. These experiences are very similar to the Congolese participants who also noted getting picked on, paid less, a lack of promotions, and being removed from certain positions without consent. As a result of these strained interactions, all the participants tend to avoid seeking close social ties at work as they are encumbered with discomfort at best and hostility at

worst. In these experiences, the participants were acutely aware of the power that affords privilege to the native-born group, which left little incentive for to develop close relations at work.

Discrimination, Prejudice and Mistreatment at Work

Both Burmese and Congolese experienced various forms of mistreatment in their workplaces from co-workers and supervisors. These practices of mistreatment may have also created tension in the relationships that severely hinders interactions among the participants in their places of employment, which can lead to lower frequencies of developing close social ties with native-born individuals for both ethnic groups. The Burmese reported various instances of unfair treatment, such as being sabotaged at work, being “looked down” on, and being bullied due to their ethnic categories. Others linked lower levels of education with discrimination, in that those who did not finish high school reported more instances of being discriminated against. The Congolese in this study noted significant and often very overt forms of hostility. They were more forthcoming than the Burmese about the nature of their relations at work. These varied from supervisors exhibiting preferential treatment of whites over blacks, to being blocked from promotions (or seeing others less qualified promoted), to having verbal insults directed towards them. While the Burmese participants also experienced mistreatment, it appeared to be less blatant forms of mistreatment such as bullying or silence. These differing experiences may be due to the Burmese participants belonging to a different ethno-racial group than the Congolese in which the Burmese may experience less prejudice or discrimination than African refugees. According to categorical inequality, Massey et al. (2018) argue that all immigrants are placed into an out-group, yet there are differences among immigrant groups rooted in which category of

outgroup they are situated in (Massey et al. 2018). It is possible that native-born individuals may place Asian immigrants in the “pitied out-group” and given sympathy by others when facing hardship through causes outside of their control and is partially influenced by Asian stereotypes as a “model minority.” In contrast, Africans could be considered a “despised out-group” in this typology in which they are viewed with contempt, exploited, and given harsher punishment, partially as a result of African American’s slavery history in the United States. This creates for the participants in this study a perpetual “othering” and non-belonging. African refugees may be viewed with less compassion than Asian refugees, which creates vastly different experiences for the two refugee groups.

In her explanation of the constructs of race and racialization in the United States, Kim (1999) suggests that two dimensions—civic ostracism and relative valorization—create a *racial triangulation* for positioning whites, Blacks, and Asian Americans. On the dimension of civic ostracism, Asian Americans are perceived as foreigners or outsiders, while both whites and Blacks are insiders by default. On the dimension of relative valorization, whites are considered more superior than Asian Americans, whereas Blacks are positioned below Asians as the most inferior in terms of their social status in United States society (Kim 1999). Kim’s theory helps to understand the different race relations that Burmese and Congolese experience in this study as racial groups that are interconnected with differences in treatment. Yet, whites remain superordinate and non-whites subordinate. The Congolese and Burmese participants are both situated as foreigners using the civic ostracism frame, yet the Burmese can be positioned above African Congolese based on relative valorization. In this way, the various dimensions of race, ethnicity, and nationality produce differing experiences for the Burmese and Congolese.

The other primary difference in the workplace is that the Burmese were more likely to name language fluency as the primary factor causing mistreatment, whereas the Congolese usually named racism, ethnic heritage, or nationality as the underlying causes. Although language fluency was sometimes linked with discrimination, most Burmese named language alone as the leading issue that created tension among native-born American coworkers and supervisors. Many felt “looked down on” because of their lack of language fluency, thereby lacking the motivation to form social ties with their mostly white supervisors and coworkers. However, a few Congolese participants also attributed the lack of English fluency as an exclusionary element that led to few close ties. For example, some reported that coworkers conversed in English (knowing they were not being understood) intentionally to make them feel uncomfortable, creating isolation and limiting social interaction. Others stated that they felt disrespected because they were not fluent or because they were only minimally fluent. With both groups naming language as an element in inhibiting the development of social ties, it too (in addition to discrimination and prejudice) acts as a barrier in being able to form close relations through a shared language.

Several individuals among the Congolese and Burmese participants also reported forms of exploitation they experienced at work. One Burmese participant reported being exploited by non-Burmese refugees. The Laotian owners of the restaurant he worked at forced him to work 12 hours a day, seven days a week. They also underpaid him and withheld part of his wages that they claimed were for taxes. Some Congolese experienced exploitation. They were given worse positions than non-Congolese workers and were paid less than others for the same type of work. These experiences led to a lack of close social relations with others outside of their ethnic group. Similar to discrimination and prejudice, exploitation can lead to greater stress and lower

frequency of interactions with coworkers and superiors in the workplace leading to little incentive to form relations with others in this domain.

Among these two groups, social relations are extremely strained with the native-born population as a result of mistreatment, which makes any attempt at forming close relations unlikely. Whether overt or covert, the experiences with native-born coworkers and supervisors are at best strained and at worst hold discriminatory actions and hostility that create stress among both groups. The Congolese appear to have experienced more cases of overt mistreatment than the Burmese or, at least, were reported more often among the Congolese than the Burmese. Among both groups, however, mistreatment creates conditions where participants may seek close social relations in other domains. The workplace is an arena in which social relations are strained, which creates an environment where individuals avoid making close ties at work and turn to other domains to establish close relations. Although Congolese and Burmese refugees are placed closely with native-born individuals in the workplace for long hours, the physical proximity does not automatically create more opportunities for them to form social ties or to facilitate mutual understanding. Quite the contrary, race, ethnicity, and non-native speaking status continue to build relational walls that sustain inequalities and segregation. In Table 7.4, I summarize the two groups' social relations in the workplace.

Table 7.4—Comparison of Burmese and Congolese Workplace Social Relations

	Burmese	Congolese
Discrimination, Prejudice and Mistreatment at Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -High frequency by native-born white Americans; one case by Laotian refugees -Present, but less overt forms -Language barriers named as primary reason for mistreatment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -High frequency of discrimination and prejudice by native-born white workers -Overt forms -African heritage named as primary reason for mistreatment
Social Relations with Native-born Individuals at Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Strained to hostile -Strained interactions with white individuals primarily 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Strained to hostile -Strained interactions with white, Latino, and African Americans

Discussion and Conclusion

The social relations developed in each domain hold similarities and differences among each group in this study. The Burmese and Congolese tend to have very close relations with one another in their ethnic community and in the church community and these two domains serve as the primary source for close social ties to emerge. Both groups also have similarities in that there are strained or absent relations in their neighborhood community and workplaces. Yet, there are notable differences in the neighborhood community for the Congolese in which interactions with the native-born neighbors tend to be more hostile than the Burmese experiences with native-born neighbors. Put simply, there are very few close relations formed in the neighborhood community and in the workplace for both the Burmese and Congolese, but the Congolese face more hostility than the Burmese.

In looking closely at the church community and ethnic community, both groups rely heavily on these communities to form, develop, and sustain close social relations. The close ethnic networks provide significant support that is crucial to help overcome various obstacles

during their resettlement. The Burmese and Congolese groups also have extensive ties and close relations within their church community. They both maintain extremely close relations in their congregations and participate in social gatherings outside of Sunday services that strengthen their relationships. Both the ethnic and church communities are the primary sources of social interaction that help maintain the close social ties in each group.

Expanding on the work and neighborhood domains, the Burmese and Congolese participants share similarities in their experience within these spheres in the sense that there are either very few or very strained social relations with native-born Americans. In particular, suburban residential neighborhoods offer little space for fostering social relations with others. Both groups reported this issue, but the Burmese noted it was primarily because of language barriers and a lack of time available for social activities due to their heavy work schedules. The Congolese, on the other hand, revealed a few instances of language barriers, but noted there was mostly hostility because of their African heritage. While the Congolese and Burmese both experience isolation and exclusion in their neighborhoods, the Burmese do not experience the same frequency of hostility as the Congolese in the residential neighborhoods. Both groups indicated that when living in apartment complexes, they did not experience hostility or strained social relations due to other refugees living in close proximity. The Burmese were able to purchase homes at a higher rate than the Congolese as indicated in the discussion above—likely due to having Burmese realtors available in their community who helped them in the process. Drawing on Weber's concept of status in which groups tend to form on the basis of status which can be formed from many characteristics, property ownership is important to a status group (Weber 1946). For example, property ownership, according to Weber, helps the status group develop a level of wealth which allows for a particular lifestyle. In this way, social honor is

given to the social group based on the ownership of property. For the Burmese, owning their own homes may allow for the status group to enjoy a particular lifestyle while also bestowing social honor in the process.

The workplace, on the other hand, is the domain in which both groups felt a lack of social closeness with the native-born individuals in similar ways. The relations varied from strained to hostile for both the Burmese and the Congolese that left little incentive to put effort into establishing relationships at work. They both experienced various degrees of mistreatment, hostility, discrimination, and prejudice. While both groups noted similar treatment from native-born individuals at work, there were a few differences in the level and type of discriminatory and prejudiced behavior with the Congolese refugees revealing more overt instances of hostility. The examples provided by the participants may be an outgrowth of the ethnic categories of Asian and African stereotypes rooted in the racial hierarchy in the United States as categorical inequality illustrates—Asian and African immigrants are not treated the same by the host society. What appears an outgrowth of mistreatment at work is that instead of connecting with native-born workers and developing social relations, the Congolese and Burmese both rely heavily on their church and ethnic communities for support through extensive networks that are an outgrowth of the extremely close relations formed.

The literature addressing social “othering,” in which immigrants are cast as the outsiders (Grove & Zwi 2006), leaves many refugees experiencing social isolation. Furthermore, marginalization is often a result of the othering of immigrants and refugees that can affect access to resources (Powel & Menendian 2016). The participants in this study experienced both othering and marginalization with the native-born community through hostile social interactions, mistreatment, prejudice, and discrimination. Much of the literature suggests that immigrant well-

being is enhanced for those who are connected with the host society (Di Saint Pierre et al. 2015; Hynie 2018; Kabuya 2008). Yet, the participants in this study appear to be worse off the more contact they have with the native-born community due to unfriendly or unreceptive relations with the native-born community. The scholarly literature on integration also reveals conflicting ideas about social relations with the native-born community with some arguing relations with the host community are necessary to enhance well-being and others arguing the opposite. For example, Kabuya (2008) argues that refugees are better off when they are able to socially integrate with the native-born population. On the other hand, studies by Crow and Allen (1994) and Wirth (1988) suggest that interactions with the native-born community can result in higher rejection and, in turn, social isolation and segregation. However, the participants in this study who were perhaps “rejected” through hostility or mistreatment were not isolated by any means. In fact, they appear to have formed stronger bonds within their ethnic group.

Based on the participants’ experiences, their sense of well-being may be hindered when there is interaction with the native-born community. This aligns with Crow and Allen (1994) and Wirth’s (1988) studies suggesting that relations with the native-born community can be damaging, yet it does not align in the sense that the participants are not isolated since they rely heavily on their social networks within their respective ethnic and church communities. What is more, when close social relations are not formed with the host society, this may actually help improve the participants’ sense of well-being. Much scholarly literature on integration frames it as a process between the immigrant and the host society. Yet, the process of social integration also exists within the same ethnic group in a host society as we see with the participants in this study, who form extremely close relations within their co-ethnic groups. This suggests that the

native-born community may be less important and can, in fact, be damaging to refugees' sense of well-being in certain domains.

The development of close social relations is a crucial part of forming support systems and networks that help refugees through difficult times. Since both refugee groups in this study experience strained or absent relations in the workplace and neighborhood domain, this may fuel the formation of even closer relations within their ethnic and church spheres. With both groups experiencing othering and marginalization in the neighborhood and workplace sphere, this creates little space for developing close social interaction and may promote the rejection of forming social ties with native-born Americans in these domains. In particular, it is the Congolese participants who experienced more hostility when compared to the Burmese in their neighborhoods with many instances of prejudice and discrimination from the native-born neighbors. At work, both groups experienced othering that made it difficult to connect with the host society as well. For the participants, social relations are formed primarily in their ethnic and church communities as an outgrowth of the close social bonds. Due to factors such as lack of English fluency, hostility, mistreatment, prejudice and discrimination, the participants seemingly turn away from “integrating” with the host society and, in turn, rely on others within their co-ethnic group.

Using the *triangulation* approach as set forth by Kim (1999), this frame helps illustrate the social relations that exist among whites, African Americans, and the participants. Native-born white individuals may elevate the Burmese participants above the Congolese participants while at the same time situating Burmese as subordinate to them—helping to explain the strained social relations that exist among the groups. Furthermore, African Americans may perceive themselves as elevated above refugees in general due to being non-foreign which may turn into

hostility towards both Burmese and Congolese, but not in the exact same ways. For example, the Burmese participants did not note any poor interactions with African Americans, but only white native-born individuals, whereas the Congolese noted poor interactions with multiple groups including whites, Latinos, and African Americans in the workplace and neighborhoods. This suggests that the Congolese experience subordination in relation to other racial and ethnic groups, as Kim (1999) suggests in her racial triangulation framework. The Burmese only reported strained relations with whites, which also suggests their relative subordination to whites, but not to other racial or ethnic groups.

In Table 7.5, I summarize the two groups' similarities and differences of social relations in varied social domains.

Table 7.5—Comparison of Burmese and Congolese social relations in all social domains

Domain	Theme	Burmese	Congolese
<i>Ethnic Community</i>	Ethnic Group Cohesion	-High social interactions & close social ties	
	Impact of the Pandemic	- Minimal impact on social relations	- Negative impact on social relations
<i>Church Community</i>	Social Relations in the Church	-Very close	
	Support via the Church	-Extensive among co-ethnics	
	Pastors' Role	-Extensive connections with co-ethnics and native-born individuals	
	The Pandemic and Church	-Social gatherings less impacted -Social interaction <i>not</i> impacted	-Social gathers highly impacted -Social interaction <i>reduced</i>
<i>Neighborhood Community</i>	Living Arrangements	-Nuclear families	
		- <i>Majority</i> live in Kentwood	-About <i>half</i> live in Kentwood
	Apartment Complexes	-Close social tie with other refugees (all ethnicities)	
	Suburb Residential Homes	-Exclusion from native born neighbors	
		- <i>Little to no hostility</i> -Language barrier named primary factor for distant relations	- <i>Higher rates of hostility</i> -Hostility from native-born neighbors: white & African American
	The Road to Homeownership	- <i>Few</i> barriers: Burmese relators available to homebuyers	- <i>Significant</i> barriers: No Congolese realtor available to homebuyers

Table 7.5 – continued

	Distant Social Relations with Larger Community	-Extremely distant; minimal to no interaction -Minimal to zero reliance on native-born Americans for support	- <i>Distant</i> ; more interaction with larger community but still limited -Some reliance on native-born Americans for support
<i>Workplace</i>	Discrimination, Prejudice, and Mistreatment at Work	-High frequency of <i>prejudice</i> by native-born white workers, one case by Laotian refugees -Present, but less overt forms - <i>Language barriers</i> named as primary reason for mistreatment	-High frequency of <i>discrimination and prejudice</i> by native-born white workers - Extremely overt forms - <i>African heritage</i> named as primary reason for mistreatment
	Social Relations with Native-born Individuals at Work	Vary from <i>strained to hostile</i>	
		-Strained Interactions with white individuals	-Strained interactions with white, Mexican, and African American individuals

Table 7.5 illuminates the similarities in each groups’ experiences within their ethnic community and highlight the differences between the two groups. For example, the pandemic impacted the Congolese in negative ways, whereas the Burmese experienced no impact on social gatherings. The Burmese experienced much less hostility in their suburb neighborhoods than the Congolese, and significantly fewer obstacles in purchasing their homes when compared to the Congolese who did not have a Congolese realtor available. The Burmese also experienced more distant relations with others in their neighborhoods than the Congolese, though slight. Lastly, the workplace was unpleasant for both groups, but the Congolese experienced more overt forms of prejudice, discrimination, and mistreatment. The Congolese also named their ethnic heritage as

the primary factor for these experiences whereas the Burmese noted it was due to lack of English fluency. The social relations in each domain are segmented as the two groups do not have identical experiences, instead, they vary greatly from domain to domain. In this way, they can be framed as *segmented social relations* which draws from Zhou's (1997) segmented assimilation theory.

Zhou's (1997) framework helps to understand the non-linear process of second-generation immigrant incorporation which produces different outcomes. This framework proposes three patterns of acculturation into white middle class: permanent poverty, assimilation into an underclass, and profound economic progress with the "preservation of the immigrant community's values and tight solidarity" (p.975). Zhou (1997) focuses on the second pattern of downward mobility in her study. Pushing against the assimilation model, Zhou challenges the assumptions that all immigrants will be able to "gain equal access to the opportunity structure of society" (p.976). Like segmented assimilation theory, I argue that refugees' *segmented social relations* help to frame these groups' experiences not in terms of uniformity, but as having diverse outcomes within each of the domains. In this way, social integration is not an "either-or" outcome or a linear process. Rather, it takes place in segmented ways that lead to differing outcomes of refugee incorporation.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to understand how refugees form social relations and how the domains in which interaction takes place impacts the closeness of social ties among Burmese and Congolese refugees in West Michigan. In the discussion below, I summarize the empirical findings of how Burmese develop social relations, how Congolese develop social relations and the similarities and differences between the two ethnic groups. Following this summary, I discuss the theoretical implications of this research as well as the social implications for refugee adaptation and integration. I also discuss the contributions of this research to enhancing the scholarly understanding of social integration. Finally, I discuss the limitations of this study and suggest directions for future research.

Summary of Findings

The findings from the empirical research reveal both similarities and differences in the development of social relations among Burmese and Congolese refugees. By examining four domains--the ethnic community, church community, neighborhood community and the workplace--this study brings light to the variations in how social relations are formed through varied mechanisms and result in different outcomes. Among both Burmese and Congolese participants, there are extremely close social ties formed within their ethnic community through various social activities and gatherings that create a robust network of social support. Both groups rely on their co-ethnics for emotional and material support that help them overcome hardships. Many members of the two groups relocated to West Michigan to be around a larger

ethnic community. Similarly, the church community for the Congolese and Burmese is key in creating a physical space for developing close social ties. Both groups attend a weekly service that provides a platform for engaging in social interaction and developing close social ties. These social ties are reinforced through activities within the church that can often extend outside of the church, such as home visits, attending celebrations such as weddings and births, and funerals of members in their communities. Both the ethnic and church communities facilitate the development of strong social ties for the Congolese and Burmese. These close co-ethnic relations not only provide a web of networks that aid in the navigation of daily lives, but they also provide social support needed to help overcome hardships.

In contrast, neighborhoods and workplaces do not provide such close social relations for the Congolese and Burmese. Rather, social relations in these two domains are nonexistent at best and hostile at worst. In their neighborhoods, the Burmese participants experienced a lack of social interaction, which they interpreted as the result of their limited English fluency. For many, there were no interactions with neighbors. Those who owned their own homes reported brief engagement with neighbors. However, the experiences were different when living among other refugees in apartment complexes where relations were closer. The Congolese reported much higher rates of hostility, which they interpreted as a result of their African heritage. Their interactions with native-born Americans were mostly hostile with a few exceptions. Such hostility was primarily from both white and African American neighbors that came in the form of verbal assaults and damage to property. Both groups experienced social exclusion isolation from native-born individuals in their neighborhoods, but it was more pronounced among the Congolese.

The workplace is similar in that there are limited or strained social relations with the native-born workers and supervisors. Both groups experienced varying degrees of discrimination, prejudice, and mistreatment, but the Congolese reported more instances of overt forms of discrimination and prejudice. The other interesting aspect was how mistreatment was interpreted. The Burmese reported language barriers as the primary reason while the Congolese noted it was their African heritage. These explanations are similar in the Burmese and Congolese reports of strained relations among neighborhood interactions. The Burmese attributed their lack of interaction with native-born neighbors to their language barrier.

This study reveals that both the Burmese and Congolese participants form extremely close social bonds within their ethnic and church communities—places where social interactions take place primarily among other co-ethnics. These ties are formed out of more frequent interaction in these domains as well as their shared language, cultural heritage, and religion. While the workplace and neighborhood could be a place for close ties to form with native-born Americans, this does not occur. Rather, participants commonly experienced hostility and mistreatment. Although they worked and lived alongside native-born individuals, participants rarely developed social relations outside of their own ethnic group. Quite the contrary, their interactions with native-born individuals in the workplace and neighborhood were often unpleasant.

With a smaller number of Burmese refugees in the area when compared to the Congolese, my early speculation in this study was that the Congolese would face fewer obstacles due to a more robust community and extended networks from which to draw. Additionally, with fewer Burmese in West Michigan, I also hypothesized that the Burmese participants might face more barriers in accessing resources, forming social relations, and more prejudice and discrimination

(see Chapter 3, page 62). However, the findings from this study suggest the opposite—the Burmese appear to face much less prejudice and discrimination than the Congolese participants. While the Burmese do experience prejudice when interacting with the native-born community, it is less overt than the Congolese in both the neighborhood community and workplace. In fact, the ethnic base of the Congolese and Burmese appear to provide similar levels of support and networks for the participants. Thus, the actual size of the ethnic community base appears to matter less than do other factors, such as ethnicity and perceptions about the racial categories they belong to from the native-born community.

The findings of this study contradict Valenta's (2007) argument that refugees will naturally integrate as they have more contact with the native-born community. Quite the contrary, because of their language barriers and experiences of prejudice, refugees often avoid pursuing relations with native-born Americans although they have plenty of opportunities to engage in close contact with the native-born population. However, this does not mean that refugees are not "socially integrated" into the host society. This study illustrates that the participants do not need interactions with the host community to enhance their sense of well-being. In fact, they appear to be flourishing within their co-ethnic communities as they rely on each other for support through extensive networks. Both groups show extensive network connections via their ethnic groups and religious communities upon which they draw on in times of need. The frequency of their interaction is extremely high in these spheres. Such close social ties with co-ethnics have provided support in various life events including relocation from out of state, social gatherings such as weddings, births, deaths, and illness in each community. Deep connections have been formed within their church communities that produce friendships and extremely close ties.

Theoretical and Social Implications

Immigrants, including refugees, are often framed as outsiders or what categorical inequality scholars (see Massey et al. 2018) name as the “outgroup.” As a result, when this outgroup status is also conjoined with an undeserving frame it may reinforce refugees’ outsider status. Thus, being viewed as less deserving of state or social assistance can create the conditions for native-born individuals to perceive refugees as undeserving, which lends them to be “othered.” This framework reveals that there are consequences for how social relations are formed with the native-born community. When refugees are both othered and perceived as undeserving, the social relations may become strained with the native-born community. In turn, refugees may form stronger social bonds within their ethnic communities or other refugee groups as a result of being othered by the host society.

This social integration framework emphasizes the importance of social ties in creating solidarity among individuals. Durkheim ([1987]1966) argues that social ties are critical for the well-being of individuals in a society. As such, the social ties that refugees form create social cohesion to help mitigate difficulties that arise during resettlement. Since the Burmese and Congolese participants in this study did not create close social ties in their neighborhood or workplace domains, the ethnic community and church community are critical sources for developing close social relations through interactions among their co-ethnic groups. The neighborhood domain in which individuals lived in houses (instead of apartments) were especially isolated due to native-born individuals comprising the majority of neighbors. Likewise, in the workplace, it was native-born individuals who created difficulties for the participants in this study. Due to the struggles faced by refugees at work and in their neighborhoods, refugees may rely on their ethnic and church community solely in forming social

relations since they are unable to form close relations in their neighborhoods and workplaces. In this way, native-born Americans are not a source of support in the way that those within their co-ethnic group are. As a result, the close social ties formed in the ethnic and church communities create solidarity among each refugee group and create foundational networks of support that become critical when faced with resettlement obstacles or stressors.

Kim's (1999) concept of racial triangulation helps to understand the social positions of the Burmese and Congolese in relations to whites and Blacks in United States society. In this study, both groups experience subordination from white Americans. At the same time, the Burmese tend to experience less hostility and overt instances of mistreatment, which aligns with Kim's (1999) argument that Asian Americans are elevated relative to African Americans, yet still subordinated to whites in terms of their position in the racial hierarchy. What is more, Congolese participants experience overt racial prejudice, discrimination, and mistreatment at the hands of both whites and African Americans (with Latinos also named). Thus, the formation of social relations looks different for Burmese and Congolese refugees. Neither of the two groups are able to mesh with the native-born population.

Zhou's (1997) segmented assimilation theory is helpful for understanding the ways in which participants' social relations are fragmented in United States society. Zhou (1997) posits that second-generation immigrants' incorporation into the host society creates various outcomes, which are largely shaped by social positions such as class and race. I use the term *segmented social integration* to describe the non-linear and non-uniform processes of refugee integration. I argue that refugees are socially integrated into the host society through the development of social relations in varied social domains. Their social integration is achieved unevenly across social sectors and with different outcomes, shaped by multiple factors including race, ethnicity,

nationality, language, and social sphere. Moreover, refugees' close social ties with others that facilitate their integration are mostly established through co-ethnic connections, rather than interracial contacts as many other scholars suggest (see Di Saint Pierre et al. 2015; Hynie 2018; Kabuya 2008).

This study helps to reveal that the host society interacts with Burmese and Congolese refugees in different ways. Not only does the system of racial classifications affect the two ethnic groups differently, but it does so in ways that disallow incorporation with the native-born community. The Burmese have not experienced the overt forms of mistreatment from the host society as the Congolese have, but they have still experienced subordination by native-born Americans. These experiences also help to show that when native-born Americans interact with Burmese and Congolese, their social attitudes vary by race and social domain. Social inclusion was uncommon in participants' experiences when they interacted with non-refugees. As a result, integration did not happen through interracial interactions. While some studies suggest that integration with the host society is critical for refugees' incorporation, this study suggests the contrary. Refugees do not belong to the in-group category and remain excluded from the mainstream society. While refugee groups may appear to be economically integrated through their employment, social integration with the native-born community does not exist. The system of racial formation in the United States prevents these refugees of color from gaining social acceptance. As a result, the refugee participants in this study are blocked from becoming true members of the host society.

Contributions of the Research

This study fills a gap in the literature addressing Congolese and Burmese refugee resettlement. Moreover, this research addresses the lack of attention given to the integration processes of Burmese and Congolese refugees in the United States. Due to the absence of research addressing these two groups and of the adaptation processes specifically, this study helps to clarify the literature that examines social integration. Social integration studies on immigrants and refugees often lack clarity in definitions and empirical applications. More pointedly, previous studies often use integration in broad strokes with unclear factors of what the integration process entails in the host society. Drawing from Durkheim's perspective that social ties with others indicate varying degrees of social integration, in this study, I show how refugees engage in the development of social relations in various social domains that could facilitate or hinder their social integration into the host society.

Contrary to what the immigration literature suggests, the participants in this study do not experience a sense of enhanced well-being when social relations are formed with the native-born community in their workplace or neighborhoods. Instead, they find solidarity within their co-ethnic community and in their church. They develop incredibly close social ties in these two domains, which may also be an outgrowth of relying on these two spheres alone for social support. Likewise, the social integration literature tends to frame social integration as a direct social connection between the immigrant or refugee and the host society. This body of literature also tends to ignore examining the social ties that are created within the same ethnic group that facilitate their social integration. This study demonstrates that social relations do not necessarily need to be formed with the native-born population to develop helpful social ties that aid in refugees' adaptation and incorporation in the host society. Through close social relations in their

ethnic and religious communities, refugees gain a sense of inclusiveness and a web of social networks that help facilitate their social integration into the larger society. Furthermore, there is an overall lack of research examining social relations among refugees, with only one study examining the formation of social relations (see Eraydin et al. 2010) and little to no research examining the development of social ties among Burmese and Congolese refugees. Other research examining the formation of social networks is pertinent to understanding integration, yet these tend to examine only the relations that are close knit and ignore other aspects of social interaction such as hostile or strained relations with others (see Amisi 2006; Faas et al. 2015; Morken & Skop 2017). This study contributes to the literature by illuminating that social relations with non-refugees may develop but they are rarely close ties. Many subjects' social relations with the native-born community exist in the workplace and neighborhoods, but they were not close ties and in many cases were quite hostile. Therefore, interracial relations are unhelpful for refugees' integration.

Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this study exist in several areas. First, there is a small Congolese sample size compared to the Burmese. Thus, when comparing the Burmese experiences with the Congolese, I may not have produced an accurate picture of their experiences due to relying on such a small number of Congolese participants. While the small sample size was not a result of inadequate recruitment, it may relate to having higher rapport with the Congolese community resulting from my past research. My key informant and other participants may have felt less pressure to recruit others due to the friendship that is already in place between us. Since the friendship base is already in place, the informant had little incentive to spend more time helping

me recruit others for the study. This leads to limitations in the attempt to compare and contrast the two groups with such a limited sample size of Congolese participants. The Burmese sample is also relatively small. While significantly higher than the Congolese, the small number of Burmese participants that were recruited could have been a result of collecting data during the Covid pandemic. In fact, a focus on one group may have provided more focused and fruitful research outcomes.

Other limiting factors in the data collection process include a lack of participant observation data because many or, in some cases, all social gatherings and events were cancelled due to the pandemic. With many resettlement agencies closed (including the agency that granted me permission to work with them), this severely limited my ability to participate in social events held in connection with the agency. Likewise, I was not able to attend refugee events as many individuals were not holding events or were unlikely to invite an outsider. In other words, there were considerable roadblocks during data collection due to the pandemic that hindered what I was able to accomplish in this study. In fact, the pandemic may have also played a role in my small sample sizes among the two groups since individuals in the community may have felt less inclined to socially interact with someone they did not know.

Another limitation existed in my inability to conduct follow-up interviews with the Burmese. This research study was my first time working with the Burmese refugee group and I had little rapport established with anyone inside the group or with my key informant. As a result, my informant may have felt little motivation to provide follow-up interviews since we did not have close ties established. The other limiting factor in conducting follow-up interviews may also be due to the time constraint that most Burmese refugees experience. Since the key

informant hosted and scheduled all the interviewees in her home, this may have added to her already overloaded schedule.

Using translators during the interviews can also be problematic and create some limitations during data collection. Because my key informant recruited and selected the translators, I did not have a choice in who was selected to translate, nor did I know the interpreter's ability to translate the interviews into English. This can affect the data collected if the translator misses dialogue or does not translate everything. For example, in several cases, the translators engaged in a long conversation with the interviewee but translated very short excerpts into English. Another limitation that can arise with the use of translators is that there is usually some level of meaning that is lost in the process, which can sometimes flatten the data that is collected. Due to the lack of focus on Burmese and Congolese refugee adaptation, future research is needed to examine these two groups more closely.

While the data collected for this study provides insight into the experience of the participants, it may not necessarily be applicable to other Congolese and Burmese groups in the United States. This area needs further examination since there are almost no studies that compare and contrast these two groups specifically. Similarly, due to the lack of understanding of the differences and similarities of the development of social relations among the Burmese and Congolese in the United States, further research is needed in this area, perhaps with larger sample sizes of both groups. What is more, this study's sample is limited to refugee laborers, which overlooks refugees who have higher levels of education, professional jobs, and who may be better integrated into the host society because of these factors. Further research is also needed to examine the social relations with the agency itself as a domain. This area was absent in this study due to Covid restrictions and issues with access to local resettlement agencies.

Lastly, the factor of trauma was also not examined in this study. Past trauma that refugees have experienced may play a role in the way in which refugees are able to adapt to the host society, but I did not have enough data to discuss this point. Due to refugees' past trauma and an inability to treat the trauma, this may influence the process of incorporation into the host culture. For example, if individuals have had severe physical or psychological trauma (or both) in their home country, this may severely hinder their ability to incorporate themselves into the host society. This is an area that needs to be explored in future research of refugee adaptation.

Conclusion

This study seeks to understand how Burmese and Congolese refugees form social relations in different social domains. The Burmese and Congolese have similarities and differences in how social relations are formed. The ethnic community and church community are spheres in which social relations are close among each co-ethnic group. These social relations also help to form robust networks that serve as foundations of support when faced with hardships in life. The only difference between the two ethnic groups in these domains was in the limitations that Covid placed on social interactions. The Congolese noted that Covid largely restricted social interaction and created more isolation within their social sphere. Their social isolation arose in part from hesitancy in holding social gatherings due to fear of reprimand from authorities if they were caught holding a gathering.

On the other hand, neighborhood and workplace do not lend themselves to foster close relations. Both the Congolese and Burmese found few close social ties within these domains, yet there are notable differences in their interactions with native-born individuals. The Burmese tend to experience less hostility than the Congolese in their residential suburban neighborhoods. The

Congolese overwhelmingly reported instances of discrimination and prejudice from their neighbors. For the homeowners in this study, the Burmese fared better in that they had several Burmese realtors to assist during homebuying setting them up for fewer obstacles and a speedier process. Compared with their Congolese counterparts, the Burmese interacted with native-born individuals less frequently, which they interpreted as a result of their lack of English fluency. With the Congolese having higher English fluency rates, this helped them interact with the native-born community more than the Burmese. The workplace was also a domain in which close relations were rare with native-born individuals for both groups. Instances of prejudice, discrimination, and mistreatment were commonly reported. The key difference in this domain is that the Burmese noted that language fluency was the primary reason for mistreatment, whereas the Congolese noted it was their African heritage. The Burmese also reported fewer instances of overt mistreatment than the Congolese. The individuals that both groups interacted with differed. The Burmese noted that their strained relations were primarily with white individuals at work while the Congolese reported it was with white as well as Latino and African Americans at work.

Furthermore, as the use of integration is problematic, a focus on the development of social relations and social ties is needed to help illuminate the processes of adaptation in the host society. The examination of social relations and social ties is not only an area that is underdeveloped in the scholarly literature on immigrant integration but is largely in terms of the process that immigrants and refugees go through while adjusting to a new society. In other words, more research is needed in this area that focuses on how refugees adapt to uncover the processes during resettlement.

This study shows that Congolese and Burmese refugees do not have identical experiences. Instead, their experiences vary in many ways depending on the domain in which

social interaction takes place. The Burmese and Congolese in this study are incorporated in different ways with various outcomes in their experiences in West Michigan. Burmese and Congolese refugees form close social relations in some sectors of the society (e.g., ethnic and religious communities) but not others (e.g., neighborhoods and workplaces). Their close social ties are mostly with their co-ethnics, but not with the native-born population. However, this does not mean that these refugees are not “integrated” into the host society. Rather, refugees’ co-ethnic social ties serve as the primary mechanism that facilitates their social integration by offering a web of social networks and social support needed for navigating the new environment and thriving in the host society. Drawing from Zhou’s (1997) segmented assimilation theory, which shows the processes of second-generation immigrant incorporation into the host society create various outcomes, I use the term *segmented social integration* to describe the non-linear, non-uniform processes and outcomes of refugee integration through social relations. It is through segmented social relations across social domains in the host society that refugees experience varying degrees of integration.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A—HSIRB Approval

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY



Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

Date: April 29, 2020

To: Chien-Juh Gu, Principal Investigator
Diane Roushangar, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: IRB Project Number 20-04-23

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “Resettlement Agencies and the Self-Sufficiency Narrative: A Focus on Agency Approaches to Arab and Congolese Refugee Integration in West Michigan” has been approved under the **expedited** category of review by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may **only** be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes to this project (e.g., ***add an investigator, increase number of subjects beyond the number stated in your application, etc.***). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation.

In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the IRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

A status report is required on or prior to (no more than 30 days) April 28, 2021 and each year thereafter until closing of the study.

When this study closes, submit the required Final Report found at <https://wmich.edu/research/forms>

Note: All research data must be kept in a secure location on the WMU campus for at least three (3) years after the study closes.

251 W. Walwood Hall, Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5456
PHONE: (269) 387-8293, FAX: (269) 387-8276

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY



Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

Date: July 31, 2020

To: Chien-Juh Gu, Principal Investigator
Diane Roushangar, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: IRB Project Number 20-04-23

This letter will serve as confirmation that the changes to your research project titled “Resettlement Agencies and the Self-Sufficiency Narrative: A Focus on Agency Approaches to Burmese and Congolese Refugee Integration in West Michigan” requested in your memo received July 27, 2020 (to change the title of the study from “Resettlement Agencies and the Self-Sufficiency Narrative: A Focus on Agency Approaches to Arab and Congolese Refugee Integration in West Michigan” to “Resettlement Agencies and the Self-Sufficiency Narrative: A Focus on Agency Approaches to Burmese and Congolese Refugee Integration in West Michigan;” recruitment flyer, instrument, and consent revised to reflect these changes) have been approved by the WMU Institutional Review Board.

The conditions and the duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the IRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination:

April 28, 2021

251 W. Walwood Hall, Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5456
PHONE: (269) 387-8293, FAX: (269) 387-8276

Appendix B—Refugee Agency Approval Letter



Western Michigan University
Internal Review Board
1903 Western Michigan Ave
Kalamazoo, MI 49008

June 30, 2020

To Whom It May Concern,

I am writing on behalf of West Michigan University doctoral candidate Diane Roushangar. Thrive: A Refugee Support Program is pleased to support Ms. Roushangar's research into the lives of refugees who have resettled in the greater Grand Rapids area. We give Ms. Roushangar permission to work with Thrive's staff, volunteers, and refugee clients.

Sincerely,

Ms. Marcia Elders
Founding Board Member/Thrive Office Manager

3334 Breton Road SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49512
616-421-2500

Appendix C—Informed Consent Document

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

IRB Approved

APR 29 2020

Western Michigan University
Department of Sociology



WMU IRB Office

Principal Investigator: Chien-Juh Gu
Student Investigator: Diane Roushangar
Title of Study: Resettlement Agencies and the Self-Sufficiency Narrative: A Focus on Agency Approaches to Burmese and Congolese Refugee Integration in West Michigan

You are invited to participate in this research project titled "Resettlement Agencies and the Self-Sufficiency Narrative: A Focus on Agency Approaches to Burmese and Congolese Refugee Integration in West Michigan"

STUDY SUMMARY: This consent form is part of an informed consent process for a research study and it will provide information that will help you decide whether you want to take part in this study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. The purpose of the research is to: to understand how resettlement agencies engage their clients in social, civic and political participation, how they interact with the local community and how refugees experience integration and will serve as Diane Roushangar's dissertation for the requirements of the Doctorate of Philosophy. If you take part in the research, you will be asked to complete a short survey and one or two interviews. Your time in the study will take 10 minutes to complete a survey and one or two interviews that will take 45-60 minutes each. Possible risk to you for taking part in the study may be discomfort from answering sensitive questions and the time to complete the interviews. There are no costs to you and there are no direct benefits other than offering you the opportunity to share your perspectives. This research may benefit the resettlement organization and the series to refugees. Your alternative to taking part in the research study is not to take part in it.

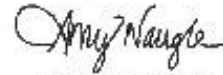
The following information in this consent form will provide more detail about the research study. Please ask any questions if you need more clarification and to assist you in deciding if you wish to participate in the research study. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by agreeing to take part in this research or by signing this consent form. After all of your questions have been answered and the consent document reviewed, if you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign this consent form.

What are we trying to find out in this study?

This study hopes to discover the ways in which resettlement agencies engage their clients in social, civic, and political participation as well as the local community in the current political climate, which may help promote better communication and assistance to the Burmese and Congolese refugee population

Who can participate in this study?

Refugee Education Center staff and volunteers and Burmese and Congolese refugees who are clients of the [agency] over the age of 18 willing to discuss his or her experiences, while being recorded are eligible to participate in this study.



WMU IRB Office

Where will this study take place?

Each interview will take place at a mutually convenient time and location, and will take place on the premises, at a public location, or through WebEx video conferencing services. WebEx will be used as a video chat platform because it is compliant with federal regulations regarding confidentiality. The video chats will be scheduled ("schedule a meeting option" as opposed to using the "start a meeting option") as a precaution against unauthorized breaches of our conversations. If video chats using WebEx are recorded, they will not be shared. There will be 1-2 interviews total with one or both potentially taking place over the phone or through video chat.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?

Each interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes. There will be 1-2 interviews; one or both potentially taking place over the phone or via video chat. There will also be a demographic survey that will take less than 20 minutes to complete. The total time commitment will not exceed 3 hours.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?

During the interview, you will be asked a series of questions about refugee resettlement, refugee integration, working in the agency and/or working with the local community, while being digitally recorded. If at any time you do not want to answer a question you are not required. You may answer them to the best of your ability.

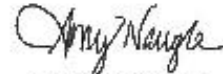
What information is being measured during the study?

This section will describe the measurements that we are going to take during your participation in the study. The information being measured are the experiences and perceptions of individuals through interviews; the behaviors of individuals through participant observation; and how the agency approaches integration through an analysis of written documents.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?

Risks are minimal for you as a refugee. For refugees, you will be asked questions regarding your experiences in the United States rather than the ones that brought you to the United States. However, there may be some sensitive topics and associated discomfort due to discussions such as loss of identity through the process of resettlement. I will pay close attention to the verbal and non-verbal cues that indicate discomfort and I will change the topic or switch to a different interview question. If these strategies don't diminish your discomfort, I will discontinue the interview and offer the counseling support services document.

Risks are minimal for you as a staff member. I will pay close attention to verbal and non-verbal cues that indicate discomfort and I will change the topic or switch to different interview questions if I find you are experiencing discomfort. In the event you become uncomfortable due to witnessing trauma or through the telling of your stories, and the above strategies don't diminish your discomfort, I will discontinue the interview and offer the counseling support services document.



WMU IRB Office

What are the benefits of participating in this study?

There are no direct benefits to you for participating, other than offering you an opportunity to share your perspectives. This research may benefit the resettlement organization and services to refugees.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?

There will be no costs associated with participation in the interviews. The research will accommodate your schedule and location of the interview to remove any associated costs.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?

There is no specific compensation for participation in the interviews.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?

During this study, Diane Roushangar and Chien-Juh Gu will have direct access to information collected. All information will be kept confidential and will be secured through pseudonyms in the field notes in addition to any potential presentations or publications.

What will happen to my information or biospecimens collected for this research project after the study is over?

The information collected about you for this research will not be used by or distribute to investigators for other research

What if you want to stop participating in this study?

There will be absolutely no consequence in your decision to decline in participation. No one will know you have decided to decline in participation.

You can choose to stop participating in the study at any time for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. You will experience NO consequences either academically or personally if you choose to withdraw from this study.

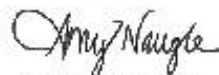
The investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact Chien-Juh Gu at (269) 387-5243 or chien-juh.gu@wmich.edu or Diane Roushangar at (616) 915-1533 or diane.m.rousangar@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

IRB Approved

APR 29 2020



WMU IRB Office

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Western Michigan University Institutional Review Board (WMU IRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

Please Print Your Name

Participant's signature

Date

Opt-Out of Digital Recording

I have read and understand this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me and I agree to the confidentiality agreement and to participate in the study. *I do not give permission to be digitally recorded during the interview.*

Please Print Your Name

Participant's Signature

Date

Appendix D—Interview Questions—Agency Staff

Agency & Work experiences with NGOs

Why did you choose to work with refugees? What was your occupation before working here and why did you change jobs?

How many staff and volunteers work in the agency? How are volunteers recruited?

What are the programs like that the agency offers? What do they do well? In what ways could they be improved?

How well do the paid staff and volunteers work together, in your opinion?

How are volunteers trained and what activities do they participate in with refugees? Do they select what programs they want to participate in or are they placed based on other criteria?

What is the organizational culture like here? Do they promote teamwork with others? How does the organization promote cooperation with volunteers?

In your opinion, what do you find most difficult in working/volunteering with [organization]?

In your opinion, what do you find most rewarding in working/volunteering with [organization]?

What are the programs like that the [organization] offers? What is your role in these programs? What are your tasks?

Can you name some difficulties you face in achieving your work goals in the agency? Can you name activities and procedures that either work well or don't work well in achieving your work tasks and assignments?

If you could recommend the [organization] change one aspect in their programs, what would it be? Why?

Experiences with assisting refugee groups

What refugee groups have you assisted in the past? Which group(s) do you have most experience with? Have you found any significant differences when working with different groups? Is there any group that is easier or more difficult to work with? In what ways?

What are your general expectations of refugees while they are clients at this agency? What about after they leave? How long do you think you should provide help to refugees? Why? What kinds of help should be offered?

In what ways do you help refugees find and maintain employment? Do you offer material assistance? What kind?

In what ways do you help refugees with their educational goals? How effective are the programs? Do you see any barriers with the services offered for education assistance?

In what ways do you find Burmese and Congolese experience integration differently? Are there a different set of obstacles they face in becoming self-sufficient? What are they?

What types of activities do you offer that help refugees learn the language? What about gaining access to education or vocational training? How effective are they? What are some major barriers? What works well and what does not? Why?

How do you help refugees get involved in the United States' social activities? For example, how do you help refugees get involved in community events and gatherings with other ethnic groups?

How do you help refugees get involved in the United States' political activities? For example, how do you help them get involved in voting or local politics?

Do you find certain refugees or ethnic groups have an easier time integrating? How do they view themselves in the resettlement process—as optimistic learners or in a pessimistic passive role?

The role of the NGO in refugees' resettlement

What is [organization's] role in helping promote refugee involvement in the community? What do you do? What activities or events do you promote?

Do you advocate for the involvement of refugees with other refugees in the community? How effective was it? What are some barriers? In your opinion, what is the most effective approach and why?

Do you advocate for involvement of the local community with refugees? How effective was it? What are some barriers? In your opinion, what is the most effective approach and why?

Since the Trump administration took office in 2016, do you think the local community has shifted in terms of how welcoming they are towards refugees? In what ways has there been a shift?

Do you think members of the local community see refugees as deserving of material assistance? Or financial assistance such as welfare? Why or why not?

What types of events do you hold to help garner support from the local community? How effective are these events in achieving your goals? What events were the most effective? Why? Why did some events work better than others?

Does the local community appear to be more welcoming towards Congolese or Burmese, both or neither? Why?

How does living in a politically conservative area influence how you engage the local community to help support refugees during their resettlement?

How do you [worker] help your clients become self-sufficient? How do you define self-sufficient? Do you help them find employment or learn about the culture? Something else?

What are your general expectations of refugees while they are clients at this agency? What about after they leave? How long do you think you should provide help to refugees? Why? What kinds of help should be offered?

In what ways do you help refugees find and maintain employment? Do you offer material assistance? What kind?

In what ways do you help refugees with their educational goals? How effective are the programs? Do you see any barriers with the services offered for education assistance?

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Do you find certain refugees or ethnic groups have an easier time integrating? How do they view themselves in the resettlement process—as optimistic learners or in a pessimistic passive role?

Appendix E—Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire

_____ Age

_____ Gender

_____ Ethnicity

_____ Country of Origin

_____ Marital Status

_____ Years Since Becoming a Refugee

_____ Years at Previous Refugee Camp (if applicable)

_____ Length of time in Resettlement Program

_____ Length of time receiving assistance from [RAC]

_____ Help from any other agencies? Which one(s)?

_____ Currently Employed? Where?

_____ If Yes, how many hours per week?

_____ Do You Have Children? If yes, How many?

_____ How Many Family Members are with you in
U.S.?

_____ What is your level of education?

_____ Any certifications or vocational training?

_____ What is your preferred language?

_____ How many languages do you speak?

Appendix F—Interview Questions—Refugees

Agency Interactions

Tell me about how the [organization] assists you in your daily activities? Who do you interact with most—volunteers or other staff?

Who has helped you the most while here and what programs have been most beneficial? Why?

How has the agency helped you find employment? How do you like your job? Is there anything you don't like about your job? Why?

How has the [organization] helped you find employment? How have they helped you in learning the language? What about other educational opportunities such as vocational training or certifications?

What are some suggestions you have for [organization] to improve upon how they offer services to its refugees? What about the actual services—any room for improvement? Where?

Have your experiences been positive with the volunteers you encounter? What about the staff at [organization]—have they been able to help you in meeting your needs?

How does the [organization] help you feel like you belong as a member of this country?

How does [organization] help you in making friends? Who do they help you get connected with? How does the [organization] help with getting you involved with others in the community?

How well do you get along well with the staff and caseworkers?

What is your favorite program(s) that the [organization] offers? Why is it your favorite?

If you could give one recommendation to the [organization] to make your experience better, what would it be?

Living in the United States & Social Interactions

How did you find housing? Who helped you find housing?

Do you like where you live? How do you like your location (geographic)? How do you like your house/apartment itself? What do you like/dislike about it?

What were the steps you went through to get into your current residence? How long have you lived here? Where did you live before?

Who lives with you in your household? Has this changed since you've been living in the United States?

How often do you interact with your neighbors? Do you like your neighbors?

Do you feel the local community has been welcoming and helpful during your resettlement in the area? How well do you feel you are connected to the west Michigan community? Do you feel you belong?

Have you experienced discrimination based on your nationality, religion, ethnicity, race or other categories? If yes, what were they?

If yes to the above question, how has the [organization] helped you overcome these difficulties? Do they offer support and what kind?

How large/small is your ethnic group in the area? How well are you connected with them? Why or why aren't you connected with them?

What motivates you during resettlement? Where do you see yourself in 2 years? 5 years? Where do you think you'll be living and working?

What do you miss most about your country of origin? What do you like most about living in the United States?

What prevents you from getting involved with people in the local community?

Do you prefer to socialize with refugees in your own ethnic group? With any refugees? Or with the local people from the community? Or doesn't it matter?

How often do you socialize with other refugees from your ethnic group? What activities do you do?

How often do you socialize with refugees not from your own ethnic group? What activities do you do?