

Promoting Hmong Refugees' Well-Being Through Mutual Learning: Valuing Knowledge, Culture, and Experience

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Refugees who resettle in a new country face numerous struggles, including overcoming past traumas and coping with post-migration stressors, such as lack of meaningful social roles, poverty, discrimination, lack of environmental mastery, and social isolation. Thus, in addition to needing to learn concrete language skills and gain access to resources and employment, it is important for refugees to become a part of settings where their experiences, knowledge, and identity are valued and validated. The Refugee Well-Being Project (RWBP) was developed to promote the well-being of Hmong refugees by creating settings for mutual learning to occur between Hmong adults and undergraduate students. The RWBP had two major components: (1) Learning Circles, which involved cultural exchange and one-on-one learning opportunities, and (2) an advocacy component, which involved undergraduates advocating for and transferring advocacy skills to Hmong families to increase their access to resources in their communities. The project was evaluated using a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach. This article discusses data from qualitative interviews with participants, during which the importance of reciprocal helping relationships and mutual learning emerged as significant themes.

KEY WORDS: Hmong; mutual learning; refugee well-being; refugee women.

INTRODUCTION

There were an estimated 19.2 million refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced people, returned refugees, and stateless people at the start of 2005, which is approximately one of every 335 people in the world (United Nations High Commission for Refugees, 2005). A significant majority of refugees remain in their country of first asylum (usually in the “developing” world) or are repatriated to the country from which they fled. Less than 1% of refugees are resettled into a third country in the “developed” world. The United States accepts the

majority of refugees from this group, and thus fulfills an important role in resettling refugees who are unable to return home or remain in their country of asylum.³ Although many refugees feel fortunate to resettle in the United States, they face numerous challenges. As they struggle to adjust to a new country with different languages and cultures and to create new homes and lives for themselves, the

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³ Since September 11, 2001, when the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were attacked, the United States has severely decreased the number of refugees it accepts, leaving thousands of refugees who had been approved for resettlement before September 11 in dangerous situations (Springer, 2002). The U.S. typically accepted approximately 70,000 refugees for resettlement per year, and although this quota was maintained, the actual number of refugees accepted plunged to 26,300 in 2002. However, the U.S. remains by far the largest acceptor of refugees, with the second largest acceptor, Canada, resettling 10,400 in 2002 (United Nations High Commission for Refugees, 2003).

economic⁴ and political⁵ contexts in the United States in the last decade have compounded their difficulties. To counteract these recent trends, it is important to consider structures and relationships that can be developed to promote the well-being of refugees and to ensure that communities in the United States benefit from the important contributions refugees can make.

Refugee Mental Health and Well-Being

The adverse mental health consequences related to becoming a refugee (e.g., the trauma of war, persecution, violence, escape, refugee camp internment, and resettlement) have been extensively documented (e.g., Carlson & Rosser-Hogan, 1991; Rumbaut, 1989b, 1991a, 1991b; Westermeyer, Neider, & Callies, 1989). Many studies have found that refugees experience higher rates of psychological distress than the general population or other immigrants in the United States and Canada (e.g., Berry, 1986; Williams & Westermeyer, 1986). This is especially true for Southeast Asian refugees (Hirayama, Hirayama, & Cetingok, 1993; Rumbaut, 1991b), and in particular, highland people such as the Hmong from Laos (e.g., Kinzie et al., 1990; Ying & Akutsu, 1997). Although some distress is related to past traumas, recent research has documented

that the high levels of distress among refugees are also caused by the daily stressors they face in exile situations, such as lack of meaningful social roles, loss of community and social support, poverty and daily economic concerns about survival in a new country, marginal position/relative powerlessness in a new place, discrimination, lack of environmental mastery, undesired changes to their way of life, and social isolation (Gorst-Unsworth & Goldenberg, 1998; Lavik, Hauff, Skrondal, & Solberg, 1996; Pernice & Brook, 1996; Rumbaut, 1991a; Silove, Sinnerbrink, Field, Manicavasagar, & Steel, 1997; Sinnerbrink, Silove, Field, Steel, & Manicavasagar, 1997). These post-migration stressors are particularly burdensome for refugees such as the Hmong, whose culture, skills, and experiences are vastly different from the predominant culture, language, and work opportunities in the United States (Scott, 1982).

Many trauma-focused individual interventions designed to promote the mental health and well-being of refugees not only ignore the distress caused by exile-related stressors, but also fail to address several other important issues. First, distressed refugees often do not use mental health clinics—both because clinics are not necessarily responsive to the needs of refugees and ethnic minorities and because of the common stigma of seeking “psychological” help (Miller, 1999; Sue & Morishima, 1982). In addition, research has shown that therapy and/or medication are not effective without addressing the social and economic needs of refugees (e.g., Kinzie & Fleck, 1987; Pejovic, Jovanovic, & Djurdic, 1997). Furthermore, individual interventions can be culturally inappropriate, particularly for collectively oriented cultures, and may even contribute to refugees’ disempowerment (e.g., Strawn, 1994). Finally, individual interventions often pathologize individuals (Ryan, 1976) and fail to utilize resources and strengths in their communities (Rappaport, 1981). For refugees in particular, individual trauma-focused interventions may lose sight of the fact that refugees are people with strengths and resources who were caught in horrible situations, and, furthermore, that their communities can also be important sources of strength.

Therefore, it is important to consider refugee mental health and its promotion from a holistic perspective that recognizes the traumatic circumstances most refugees have had to endure prior to their resettlement in the United States, while also focusing on the difficulties refugees face in their daily lives in the United States. In addition, efforts to promote refugee well-being must be culturally relevant to refugees

⁴ The U.S. government has increasingly shrunk its responsibility for providing social services, benefits, economic regulation, and a safety net to its citizens and residents. At the same time, the number of jobs that provide livable wages and benefits has decreased (Danziger & Haveman, 2001).

⁵ In 1996, three federal laws (the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act) were enacted. Among their many provisions, these laws excluded non-citizens (including legal permanent residents) from most public benefits, mandated the deportation of non-citizens for relatively minor offenses, expanded the number of deportable offenses, and removed opportunities for the appeal of Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) decisions to legal courts (Nash, Kamel, Anderson, & Shaddock-Hernandez, 2003). In addition, since September 11, 2001, the rights of refugees and immigrants in the U.S. have been further jeopardized by intensified law enforcement and public scapegoating in the name of national security. Basic civil and human rights protections have been denied to non-citizens in the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT ACT) Act of 2001, and immigrants and refugees have been criminalized by the placing of immigration enforcement and services in the Department of Homeland Security (Nimr, 2003).

and should build upon their strengths and the resources in their communities.

Based on these realities, the Refugee Well-Being Project (RWBP) was developed to promote the mental health and well-being of Hmong refugees from Laos by involving undergraduates and Hmong participants in mutual learning and advocacy. Rather than emphasizing *only* what newcomers to the United States needed to learn to survive here, this project focused on mutual learning, through which refugees and undergraduates both learned and shared. Through this process, Hmong participants' experience and knowledge was valued and their identities were validated. Undergraduates came to understand the Hmong participants and their experiences in new ways and saw their culture, knowledge, strength, and resiliency, rather than just seeing their needs.

The Hmong

The Hmong in the United States are an ethnic minority from the highlands of Laos.⁶ As a result of their recruitment by the CIA to fight against the North Vietnamese and their communist allies in Laos, many Hmong were forced to flee from Laos to Thailand between 1975 and 1990, where they spent up to 20 years in refugee camps. Between 1975 and 1996, the United States accepted approximately 130,000 Hmong refugees for resettlement. As of 2001 approximately 300,000 Hmong lived in the United States (Hmong population in the world—year 2000, *n.d.*), with the largest concentrations of Hmong people in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin (2000 U.S. Census—Hmong population growth, *n.d.*).

Hmong culture is a collectivist, clan-based culture (Scott, 1982), which, as opposed to American and other Western cultures that emphasize autonomy, privacy, and individual initiative, is based upon a “we” orientation and the importance of group solidarity, duties and obligations, and a collective identity. This emphasis on clan and community is an important strength of the Hmong community, which commonly results in an incredibly extensive and strong support system (Dunnigan, 1982; Hutchison, 1991). Despite these strengths, the

Hmong have been particularly challenged in their adjustment to life in the United States. Numerous factors have contributed to their difficulties: Significant language and cultural differences, limited previous education, limited transferable occupational skills, and the particular context into which they were relocated (e.g., most Hmong arrived here in the 1980s in the midst of a severe economic recession). As a result of these factors, the Hmong have experienced a large gap between the abilities they possess and the needs they must fulfill here (Scott, 1982).

Refugee Women⁷

While the adjustment and well-being of refugee women who resettle in a new country is important for the women themselves and for their families, refugee women often face the greatest challenges. For instance, Rumbaut (1989a) found that women play a pivotal role in Southeast Asian refugee families. Their socioeconomic and psychological well-being was significantly related to their children's academic success, while their husbands' were not. Furthermore, refugee women's psychological well-being predicted their husband's depression at a later time but not vice versa. At the same time, Rumbaut found that Southeast Asian refugee women arrive in the United States with the fewest human capital resources, face more job discrimination, bear the main burden for child-rearing, and have significantly poorer health and psychological well-being than their male counterparts. These factors often “widen the ‘adaptive gap’ between the genders in the competitive American context” (Rumbaut, 1989a, p. 172), which places refugee women at significant disadvantage.

In a narrative analysis of three Hmong women's life stories, Monzel (1993) emphasized the lack of control and marginality they felt over their lives and attributed it to several conditions: (1) Limited control over their personal lives as women in a patriarchal society, (2) experiences as refugees (e.g., living through war, being forced to flee their homes), and (3) marginality as an ethnic minority without a homeland. This marginality is often exacerbated by the common practice of assuming that a “refugee community” is a homogenous group in which a particular representative or representatives can speak for

⁶The Hmong are not originally from Laos. Their origins are a subject of great debate, but an estimated 10 million Hmong people live in China, and there are hundreds of thousands of Hmong in Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Burma (Hmong population in the world—year 2000, *n.d.*).

⁷Originally, the RWBP was open to the participation of all Hmong adults in the community. However, much greater interest was expressed by Hmong women, and, therefore, the project was predominantly an intervention with refugee women (see Goodkind, 2002 for full discussion of this phenomenon).

the entire community. Cha and Small (1994) point out that in Hmong culture, the formal leaders are always men and they most likely do not represent the views and interests of Hmong women. Thus, it is important to recognize these issues of power within refugee communities and within our larger communities and work to create settings that recognize the diverse individuals with different interests and needs in these communities. Cha and Small also emphasize the importance of allowing multiple voices and perspectives to be heard. Given that cultures themselves are dynamic rather than static and that the refugee experience in particular is a time of cultural and social change for many refugees (e.g., Light, 1992; Rumbaut, 1989a), it is important that Hmong women have opportunities to be heard and to make their own decisions.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE RWBP: ECOLOGICAL AND EMPOWERMENT PERSPECTIVES

The Refugee Well-Being Project was designed from an ecological and empowerment perspective. In order to be ecologically valid, the intervention was developed in close collaboration with Hmong community members, based upon their needs and interests, and attributes of their culture such as their collective orientation. In addition, attention to their experiences as refugees, such as loss of control over their lives and the cultural differences they face in their daily lives in the U.S., was incorporated into the project. Given such experiences, there is the potential for further disempowerment and marginalization of refugee communities if power differentials between refugees and people who offer assistance to refugees are reinforced (Ager, 1999). Thus, it was important that the intervention was explicitly designed to be focused on mutual learning, to have no experts, and to foster equal relationships among all participants. Although power and privilege differences clearly existed among participants, attempts were made to minimize power differentials and emphasize the diverse strengths that people had.

Another aspect of empowerment and ecological perspectives is building upon the strengths of individuals and communities to involve them in solving their own problems. Rappaport (1981) suggests that we need to move beyond a needs model (prevention) or a rights model (advocacy), both of which suggest professional experts as leaders who know the an-

swers and provide them to their “clients,” to empowerment where we are collaborators. Empowerment implies that many competencies are already present among individuals and communities, and that structures and connections need to be built to fully utilize these. Ager (1999) points out that a focus on the past traumas of refugees may reinforce a discourse of refugee vulnerability and dependency. He suggests that we need to balance this with emphasis on the resiliency of refugees and the resources within their communities. This is particularly significant because refugees have endured numerous situations in which they were powerless (e.g., being forced to leave their homes, living in refugee camps where they had almost no rights and very limited choice about where they could go). Thus, opportunities to regain their self-efficacy, have their experiences collectively validated, and develop new knowledge and skills are important. Finally, an ecological perspective emphasizes the importance of creating collaborative, culturally appropriate interventions (Trickett, 1996).

THE REFUGEE WELL-BEING PROJECT

Since 1996, I have been conducting research that has focused on Hmong refugee women and the challenges they face in adjusting to life in the United States and being able to live the kind of lives they choose. I came to this work after spending 2 years working with Hmong refugees in a refugee camp in Thailand, helping them prepare to resettle in the United States. Upon returning to the U.S. and spending 4 years working with a small group of Hmong women in Michigan, I developed the idea for the Refugee Well-Being Project in collaboration with them. It was based in part on a well-researched and effective advocacy model in which trained undergraduate advocates work with disenfranchised individuals or families to mobilize community resources and transfer advocacy skills (e.g., Davidson, Redner, Blakely, Mitchell, & Emshoff, 1987; Sullivan & Bybee, 1999). It is unlikely, however, that applying this individual-level model would have been successful in the Hmong community. Instead, taking into account the collective orientation of Hmong culture (which values the well-being of the group above that of the individual) and their particular needs as refugees (i.e., English proficiency, improved understanding of the system and their environment, increased social support, development of more valued social roles), we created an advocacy and

learning project that was structured around a group learning component. Thus, the RWBP had two major components: (1) Learning Circles, which involved cultural exchange and one-on-one learning opportunities for Hmong adults, and (2) an advocacy component, which involved undergraduates advocating for and transferring advocacy skills to Hmong families to increase their access to resources in their communities. Twenty-seven undergraduates⁸ and 28 Hmong participants⁹ worked together for 6–8 hr per week for 6 months during 2000 and 2001. In order to recruit participants who would most benefit from the project, Hmong families living in the three public housing developments in a mid-sized Midwestern city were contacted by myself and/or the two Hmong co-facilitators of the project. During visits to their homes, the project was described and adults in the household were invited to participate. There were a total of 25 Hmong families in the housing developments and 13 (52%) chose to participate. When it was determined that extra space was available, the project was opened up to other Hmong families in the community (based on the network of the author and Hmong co-facilitators and by spreading the word throughout the Hmong community). The project was fully based in the communities of the Hmong participants. The Learning Circles occurred at the community centers of two public housing developments where many participants lived. The advocacy component emphasized the planning of activities and development of resources within the Hmong families' natural environments.

Learning Circles

The Learning Circles were based on a model created by the Jane Addams School for Democracy

⁸The undergraduate participants included 21 women and six men. There were 19 European Americans, three Latino/as, two Asian/Asian Americans, two Arab Americans, and one biracial African American/Native American. All but one were juniors and seniors. They made a two-semester commitment to the project and earned eight course credits.

⁹The Hmong participants included 26 women and two men. They were an average of 41 years old (range 22–77), most (79%) were married, and they had an average of six children (range 0–11). Fifty-four percent were employed, 82% had no previous education, none of the participants had a high school degree from the United States, and 33% were not literate in any language. They had been in the United States an average of 12 years (range 6 months to 22 years) and resettled here at the average age of 29 (range 16–66).

in Minneapolis. Participants met in Learning Circles twice weekly at one of the housing development community centers for 6 months. Each meeting was of 2 hr duration and was composed of equal numbers of Hmong participants and undergraduate students. The Learning Circles involved two components: Cultural exchange and one-on-one learning. Cultural exchange occurred for the first 30–45 min of each meeting and was facilitated together by an undergraduate and a Hmong participant. In order to enable all participants to share in the discussion, regardless of English or Hmong language ability, the two Hmong co-facilitators translated Hmong to English and English to Hmong throughout the cultural exchange discussions. The purpose of the cultural exchange was to provide a forum for Hmong participants and undergraduate students to learn from each other, share ideas, develop plans for collective action, and realize the important contributions they were capable of making. One-on-one learning occurred in the remaining 1¹/₄–1¹/₂ hr of the Learning Circles. During this time, undergraduates and Hmong participants worked in pairs and focused on whatever each Hmong adult wanted to learn (e.g., speaking, reading, and/or writing English, studying for the U.S. citizenship exam, learning to complete employment applications and practice interviews, writing checks, or any area of learning each chose). This aspect of the one-on-one learning was very important and different from most other learning situations. Vella (1994) calls this “participation of the learners in naming what is to be learned” (p. 3), and states that it is essential for effective adult learning. Hmong participants were actively engaged in their own learning processes and received individual attention, which provided them with control over their own learning and more concentrated learning time. It is also important to note that the undergraduates were also engaged in learning, as they learned about the culture, experiences, and knowledge of Hmong residents. Materials, such as citizenship study guides and English as a Second Language (ESL) materials were available to facilitate learning.

Advocacy

The advocacy component of the intervention was based on the Community Advocacy model, which has been successfully applied to women and children who have experienced domestic violence (Sullivan & Bybee, 1999) and to juvenile offenders (Davidson et al., 1987). Once relationships began

to form between individual Hmong participants and undergraduate students, each undergraduate was matched with a Hmong adult, with whom they had been working during the Learning Circles, to serve as an advocate for that person and her family. Rather than deciding who would work together, relationships between Hmong participants and undergraduates were allowed to develop naturally, and people tended to gravitate towards someone who matched their personality and style of learning. It is important to note that relationships between Hmong participants and undergraduates formed during the Learning Circles, before sending the students into the homes of Hmong families to do advocacy.

Each advocate spent an additional 4–6 hr each week (outside of the Learning Circles) with the Hmong adult and her family to provide advocacy on any issues the family wanted to address. Advocacy continued for 5 months, with some undergraduates mainly working with the adult participant and some undergraduates working closely with both the Hmong adult and her children. The undergraduates first worked with the families to identify the specific issues each family wanted to focus on during the advocacy. Often these discussions occurred during Learning Circles, so that translators could assist with communication. Once an unmet need was identified, the advocate and the family proceeded through four phases of advocacy: Assessment, implementation, monitoring, and secondary implementation (Sullivan, 2000; Sullivan & Bybee, 1999). Because most families had multiple unmet needs, the advocate and family were most often engaged simultaneously in several phases of the advocacy process, in order to address the various needs the family had identified. In addition, undergraduates continually worked to transfer advocacy skills to the Hmong participants and their families.

It is important to note that the learning and advocacy components of the intervention were two inextricable parts of one holistic intervention. The intervention was centered around the group Learning Circles: Undergraduates and Hmong participants met in the Learning Circles for almost 1 month before beginning advocacy together, and often they would discuss their advocacy efforts during the Learning Circles to share ideas and resources with other group members, to address an unfair institution or system collectively, and/or to get the input or translation assistance of the group facilitators. The integration of the two components was also essential in making the intervention culturally appro-

priate and in enabling Hmong refugees to build upon the skills and strengths they already had in order to develop new skills and knowledge. Centering the project on the Learning Circles avoided imposing individual constructs of well-being or empowerment on a community with a collective ideology, by incorporating the cultural factors and strengths within the Hmong community (e.g., their strong social-support networks). Furthermore, rather than emphasizing only what newcomers to the United States needed to learn to survive here (which is, of course, important), the project focused on mutual learning, through which refugees and undergraduates learned from each other.

EVALUATION OF THE RWBP

To assess the fidelity of the intervention and measure its impact on participants, a comprehensive, multi-method strategy was implemented, which included both quantitative and qualitative components. The quantitative evaluation revealed that the RWBP had numerous positive impacts on the Hmong participants, including improved quality of life, decreased psychological distress, increased English proficiency, and increased satisfaction with resources (see Goodkind, 2002; Goodkind, in press; Goodkind, Hang, & Yang, 2004 for a full discussion of these results). I chose to use a research design that included a large qualitative component with many considerations in mind, both theoretical and methodological. Some of the most important ones involved making sure that the evaluation of the intervention was consistent with the principles upon which it was based—that it be participant-focused and reciprocal. In other words, I wanted the interviews to not only be useful for me but also to be valuable to participants by providing them with opportunities to share their experiences with each other and with me.¹⁰ Related to this idea, I wanted to ensure that refugees had the opportunity to speak in their own words, because often others speak for them. Methodologically, the combined methods allowed me to better understand participants' experiences in the intervention and look

¹⁰ An illustration of this was when I went to interview a Hmong participant and his undergraduate partner. I explained to them that if they agreed, I was going to tape-record the interview so I could transcribe it later. The Hmong man decided then that he also wanted to record the interview and thus went to get his tape-recorder as well. It seemed that he felt that the discussion was something that would be meaningful and useful to him too.

at both processes and outcomes, as well as to examine changes in participants over time. In addition, some concepts would have been difficult or impossible to measure quantitatively.

This article focuses on several themes related to mutual learning that emerged from the semi-structured qualitative interviews with pairs of Hmong and undergraduate participants after their completion of the project. I conducted the interviews of each Hmong and undergraduate pair with one of the Hmong co-facilitators of the project. Each question was asked to both the Hmong participant and undergraduate student, each of whom answered in their own native language. The Hmong co-facilitator translated all of the questions and answers, so that everyone could understand what was being said and could communicate freely with each other. The interviews were conducted in Hmong participants' homes or in one of the community centers where the Learning Circles were held. They ranged in length from 50 min to 2 hr and were semi-structured with 10 open-ended questions, which explored participants' experiences in the project (e.g., the most important things each undergraduate and Hmong participant had learned from each other and taught each other, the best and most difficult things about working together, what their expectations of the project were and whether the project had met them, suggestions for future projects, opportunities to add other thoughts or ideas). The qualitative interviews were not intended to test specific hypotheses about the effectiveness of the intervention, but instead were used to explore participants' experiences in the project. Thus, unlike the quantitative outcome interviews, which were conducted by trained interviewers who were not a part of the project, the qualitative interviews intentionally involved Hmong and undergraduate participants as well as myself and a co-facilitator/translator. These interviews served a different purpose from the quantitative interviews; their purpose was to create an opportunity for participants to engage in mutual dialogue about their experiences.¹¹

The interviews were tape-recorded and the English was transcribed by a paid transcriber. I verified the accuracy of all transcriptions by checking

them against the tapes, which was particularly important given the multiple speakers and languages within each interview. Next, I conducted a content analysis of the transcripts. First, I created a comprehensive list of themes by reviewing all of the data several times. Some themes were predetermined by the quantitative outcomes or by the questions posed, while others emerged from the data during the analyses. Next, these themes were grouped into meta-themes, as part of a process of moving from description to meaning-making and analysis. I revised, combined, and separated themes as necessary, until I developed a final coding framework that provided an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences in the project and the impact of these experiences on their lives. To confirm the authenticity of both the coding framework and the coding, a third party not involved in the project reviewed the content analysis and coding framework. We discussed any differences or disagreements until consensus was reached. Data verification also occurred through the triangulation of the interview data and the field notes I took throughout the duration of the project.¹² In addition, I discussed the coding framework, themes, and content analysis with the Hmong co-facilitators and incorporated their feedback.

PROCESSES OF MUTUAL LEARNING

One of the important ways that the project impacted participants was by bringing people of many different cultures into close interaction with each other. In fact, the contact went beyond interaction among participants to become genuine engagement, in which participants shared ideas, learned from each other, and addressed issues together. This occurred both in the Learning Circle group discussions (cultural exchange) and in the time pairs of Hmong participants and undergraduates spent working together during one-on-one learning time and outside the Learning Circles doing advocacy together. During the group discussions, translators made it possible for Hmong participants and undergraduates to express themselves and to ask questions to each other to a degree they probably never would have had on their own because of language differences. On the

¹¹ It is important to note, however, that data from the qualitative interviews provided support and validation for the findings from the quantitative component of the evaluation that participants' quality of life, access to resources, and English proficiency increased and their psychological distress decreased.

¹² I recorded field notes throughout the 6 months of the project, after each Learning Circle, during weekly supervisions with the undergraduate students in small groups of seven, and following the qualitative interviews.

other hand, spending time together without a translator provided very different opportunities for learning and interaction.

Several specific themes that illustrate these processes of mutual learning and the important role it played in promoting participants' well-being emerged from the qualitative interviews with Hmong and undergraduate participants. In addition to participants' discussion of the experience of mutual learning, other themes included: Valuing of Hmong women's knowledge and experience, validation of Hmong women's identity, appreciation of the strength and resiliency of Hmong women, recognition of society's responsibility in the process of refugee resettlement and the need for system-level change, and increases in participants' environmental mastery and self-confidence. Although Hmong and undergraduate participants' responses provide evidence that mutual learning was occurring and was beneficial in numerous ways, some Hmong and undergraduate participants also talked about inequalities they experienced in their relationships with each other.

Genuine Reciprocal Nature of Learning/ No "Expert"

Both Hmong and undergraduate participants recognized the reciprocal and bi-directional nature of their learning, illustrating that the goal of mutual learning was achieved. Chae,¹³ a 38-year-old Hmong woman said:

I feel the same way as you [undergraduate] do, because you learn a lot from Hmong culture, and I also learned a lot about American culture. So, you haven't learned everything yet, and the same goes here, I haven't learned everything yet about the American culture, so we're kind of in the same boat. You're trying to learn my stuff, I'm trying to learn yours.

Many students understood that refugees and other newcomers have knowledge and skills that can make important contributions to the United States and that the undergraduates learned as much if not more than the Hmong participants in the project. Michael, a 21-year-old undergraduate, said:

The initial interaction between Lee and myself, just sharing ourselves with each other and learning from

each other, she was definitely not the only one learning the whole time.

Melinda, a 22-year-old undergraduate, commented:

I think in a lot of ways it's [the project] exceeded my expectations, because when it started, I was like, "well, I don't know if this is going to work," because we all sat in this big room looking at each other, like I don't know if this is ever going to happen. And I feel like I've established quite a good relationship back and forth, and I think I've gained a lot from it. It's been a big time commitment, which has been hard, but it's been really nice. I've enjoyed the whole thing, and I think I've learned just as much as she [Hmong participant] has if not more.

Some undergraduates had new realizations about their limitations in only being able to speak English. Monica, a 20-year-old undergraduate woman explained how learning each other's languages should be a mutual endeavor:

I think a lot of people look at people that can't speak English that are in America, as if they have the deficit, that they're the ones that can't speak English, so they must be worse off, but it's just as much the people that can speak English and can't speak their language that have the deficit.

Hmong Participants' Knowledge and Experience Valued

A very difficult aspect of the refugee experience is that the knowledge and experience refugees bring from their former homeland often seems useless to them in their new country or seems unrecognized and invisible to others. Refugees often cannot use their existing skills and are forced to take jobs that are not challenging or interesting to them. Thus, the valued social roles they once held may no longer be available to them. This often makes people feel that they do not know anything or that they do not have things to contribute to their new country, community, or neighbors. Through this project, many participants regained the feeling that they had things to teach to others in the group and that their experience and knowledge was important. Kiaw, a 44-year-old Hmong woman, said:

One thing that I taught to the students here is my experience during when I was fleeing from Laos. I was trying to get away from the war and so we got to the border, and then the Viet Cong caught us, so they took us to their place in Vietnam, they took us there, and we stay there for about two years.

¹³Names and identifying information have been changed to protect the participants' privacy.

And I mean, we were all scared and afraid that they were going to kill us, but after the two years, we just took off on our feet, and we just walked, and get away from the Viet Cong. We just went over to Thailand. And so we were really lucky. So I have taught them [undergraduate participants] that, my experience during that time of the war.

A 36-year-old Hmong woman, Kia, commented:

The best thing about this project is that Jessica's always asking everybody to see if they have other ideas to talk about. And I really like that because what if I have something and then she keeps on giving all her ideas? What if I had wanted to talk about something, and then she'll say, "Anybody who has any other ideas, just tell me and then we'll talk about it." And I'm really glad that you did that because when I have something to say, we're there to say it, we're there to talk about it. So, I really like that about this project.

Validating and Valuing Hmong Identity, Culture, and Experience

It is also very valuable for newcomers to have their identity recognized and validated in their new country. Living somewhere where no one knows who you are or that your language and culture even exists can be difficult, particularly for a group such as the Hmong who are relatively unknown and have never had a homeland. Many participants talked about how pleased they were that now more people knew about the Hmong people. Phia, a 64-year-old Hmong man, stated:

I think that this project is good for everybody. And I think that it teaches other students to know what Hmong people look like, and where they're from and what they are, that we are different from Vietnamese and other people—Chinese, and other people. Because we look alike and I think that we don't have a country of our own and then people don't know the Hmong people that much so we're sort of like under everybody, you know? But it's good that we have this program where they know who we are and then just so that they don't think that only Vietnamese people are out there or only Chinese people are out there—everybody's Vietnamese or Chinese. Just so that they know that there are many different kinds of people—Oriental or Asian people—and that we are the Hmong people, and it's good that we have this program.

Chae said:

Without this class I wouldn't know any other people, and you wouldn't know that we're Hmong people. So now that you know Hmong people, you know

how we are, you know how we live, and, you know where the community is, so whenever you see us, just come and talk to us. We're always friends to everybody, it's just that people don't really seem to think we're Hmong. They think we're just all Chinese or whatever, Asian. We're Asian, we're from there, but we're actually Hmong people, so it's good that you have come here and learned about us too, and good thing you come here because we learn about the American culture as well, and so it is really good for us both.

In addition to Hmong participants' perceptions that their experience and knowledge were valued and that their cultural identity as Hmong was recognized, undergraduates talked about their role in these processes. Michael commented:

I think a lot of it just had to do with learning about the Hmong culture, which has to do with being survivors, and overcoming adversity, and just coming to America—their struggle and then trying to survive and live. And I think what I've learned throughout the Learning Circles, through other people, stuff like that, is that everyone helps each other out. And that's awesome. If everyone could just do that, it'd be great. But the Hmong people just help each other out—no matter if they know who they are or not—they're always just helping each other out. And that's how they survive. And that's awesome, you know, that's something I've learned.

Lori, a 30-year-old undergraduate, said:

If anything, I now know who Hmong people are. I never knew anything about Hmong people. It's amazing that there are so many Hmong in America, and most Americans don't know, or there's no way to educate Americans about it, different people that come and go through the U.S. really. In that case, it's been really educational.

At the same time most undergraduates were learning about Hmong people for the first time, they were also discovering the important lesson that there was diversity within the Hmong culture—that not all people can be understood by knowing something about their culture. Monica said:

Recognizing, not that I was consciously thinking these are all people from the same ethnicity, they're all refugees, therefore they all have the same problems, but really realizing the difference in the problems that everybody was having and how completely different—like I expected our relationships to be a lot more similar than they actually were.

In addition, working closely with people of another culture gave some undergraduates insight into the ways in which individuals' cultures shape their

worldview and the assumptions that we often make when embedded within our own cultural contexts. Jeremy, a 23-year-old undergraduate, said:

Getting to know Mai Lor just kind of makes me realize how much of a different perspective, what I mean is the way I see the world is, I mean is just one way, but the way Mai Lor sees the world or the way she goes about her day is just, it kind of reminds me that in a way, that there's, I don't know if this makes sense, but there's just thousands of ways to go about life and do things in general that, I don't know, maybe not be as quick to make assumptions. I think I'm pretty good about not doing that with people in general, but without a program like this, a lot of us would never get an opportunity to meet anybody here.

Recognition of Strength and Resiliency

Through their recognition of the frustrations and difficulties refugees experience in the United States and their own privilege and advantages, undergraduates also began to appreciate the strength and resiliency of Hmong participants—how they had survived in spite of great hardships. Many students saw their own lives differently because of this awareness and expressed admiration for the Hmong participants. In addition, they revealed a complex understanding of the many different struggles of refugees and the strength and perseverance it requires to start a new life in the United States. Wendy, a 20-year-old undergraduate, said:

I think I've learned a lot. I've learned, I think about strength, because, after hearing Bao's stories about Laos and Thailand and everything, and how she came here and then, she's a mother of six children, and all the stuff that she, just like her everyday life, is just amazing that she does so much stuff and she's able to raise six children and take care of her in-laws and be a wonderful mother, and so I think I've learned a lot of stuff, about how a person can be strong, and accomplish a lot of stuff.

Patrick, a 20-year-old undergraduate, commented:

One of the things I learned is, I kind of got a newfound respect for people that just got here because I see it, I mean, they work, jeez, she [Hmong participant] works all night, she works all day. I mean, I kind of understood how it feels like to be in a new environment when I did my year abroad and I went to other countries where I had no idea how to speak and write the language. But that was to a lesser extent because most people still spoke English. But when they come here, and no one really

speaks Hmong, and it's so hard, all the stuff that they do. It really reinforced just how hard that they had to work. And, just, I don't know if I could handle that.

Society's Responsibility

Undergraduates recognized the strength of Hmong participants, but they also realized that individual perseverance and tenacity can only be successful if refugees' host country assists newcomers by providing support and assistance. They began to think not only about how refugees adjust as individuals, but also about how the United States could facilitate their transition. Many saw that our country is not necessarily fulfilling this role very well. Wendy said:

I learned that, like I knew a little about what it was like coming to America, just from hearing my relatives tell stories about my grandparents coming and their parents coming. So I knew a little bit, but I guess not really first-hand, as much as I have in this program. And I just, I think it's crazy. I mean, you come here and especially if you're a refugee because if you're just immigrating here that's one thing, but if you can't even go home, you don't have a place to live, and so you come here, and it just seems like the American government should help out more and the American society should help out more and be more accepting of refugees and immigrants both. And it's just, I don't know, it amazes me how difficult it is to come to America, even though we're like the land of the free and everyone's welcome and we have the Statue of Liberty welcoming you when you come. It's like, kind of a joke, because we say we want you but not really, because we treat you like crap once you come.

Matt, a 21-year-old undergraduate, said:

I guess I learned a lot, just about some of the odd peculiarities of this country, and how I'm really kind of able to avoid them, as a citizen. But people who come to America are kind of forced to deal with just very odd things. Like aid institutions that are set up to help people, that really end up just kind of causing harm by being very confusing and I guess you could say non-centralized . . . And, we've been dealing with hospitals and Medicare and Medicaid. And that's just, I think, a small facet of the kind of things you have to deal with when you come to America. And I guess you could say I have a greater appreciation for the absurdity of a lot of things they have to deal with. How they're just really not necessary. Like forms and processes and steps and rules and sub-rules, and they all just seem to get in the way of accomplishing things with humans.

The Role of Context and the Importance of System Change

As participants became aware of the different experiences they had, they began to see the ways that our lives and the well-being of individuals and communities are affected by our social realities and the contexts in which we live. With this awareness often comes the realization that peoples' lives cannot improve without transforming the systems that affect them. Michael said:

I think there's a system that's there that tries to help people, but there definitely needs things done to the system to change it because it's not 100%, not even 50% right.

Lori commented:

I think that it made me see that our government makes decisions, and then they make the decisions for the American people, but then they don't have the money to do what they're trying to do. So there should be more money to help Hmong people to learn the culture better, to learn more about American way of life, learn about English, to help them feel at home here. And there should be more resources and I guess that's what I've learned, because if this program is the only program, then it seems like there's not enough contact between the resources and the people that need the resources.

Matt mentioned a specific Learning Circle discussion about people's work experiences:

I was going to say the same discussion, the union one, that was very interesting to hear everyone's different stories about workplace experiences. It really kind of gave me an idea of how people are exploited in this country, especially if they're coming from a place where they're already at a disadvantage. Employers just seem to feed on that, and encourage their subservience, to keep them there. That's what I saw. I kind of already had that idea, but that discussion really gave me a lot more evidence on it.

Increased Environmental Mastery and Self-Confidence

In addition to concrete skills and knowledge,¹⁴ many Hmong participants talked about a more

¹⁴Hmong participants' significant increases in English proficiency and knowledge required for the U.S. Citizenship exam were documented in the quantitative findings (see Goodkind, 2002). In the qualitative interviews, Hmong participants also talked about other concrete skills and knowledge they acquired, including math skills, ability to fill out job applications, and ability to write checks.

general sense of environmental mastery and self-sufficiency—being able to do the things that they wanted to do in the “outside world” and being able to accomplish these things without being entirely dependent on others. Kiaw said:

I came here, I didn't know anything. People ask me a question and you know that you're going to say yes or no, but you don't even know, when you look at that person you don't know if you're going to say yes or you're going to say no, which word means what. So it was kind of confusing. But then as time went by through this class, I got the chance to understand and learn more. So when I went home I was able to look at the letters that came in the mail and understand, like what this bill is for, how much I have to pay, or where do I go and pay for this, and etcetera. Like, all the other letters that come in, I was able to understand where it was from, and what the letter is for, so thanks to you [undergraduate and project], I was able to know, understand that and just do it for myself.

Related to their increased self-sufficiency and environmental mastery many participants felt better about themselves and more confident in their abilities, both in terms of what they were able to learn and accomplish and from the affirmation and support of their undergraduate partner. Kia commented:

So then now I have the confidence to start learning the citizenship. And then I thought well maybe if I could get a little bit down I could get more. So then now I'm more of helping myself, where I could understand that I could get more and more.

Lee, a 29-year-old Hmong woman, said:

Like before, I used to depend on people to take me to the doctors, to go and translate for me, and when it gets so hard, I just figure that, why don't I just try to go by myself and then see what happens. And then I try at first and then next time, I have more confidence in going by myself. And then, if they say things that I understand, then I understand. If not, then I just tell them that I don't understand and then, as time goes on, the more you go by yourself, you learn more, you understand more.

Inequality in Relationships

Although the results demonstrate that Hmong and undergraduate participants engaged in processes of mutual learning, some Hmong participants experienced the relationship between themselves and their undergraduate as unequal, which in some ways it was. It is important to be aware of the power differences inherent within the structure of the

intervention: The undergraduate's role was to engage in advocacy and learning with the Hmong participant. The intervention was directed by each Hmong participant and her goals and interests, but the undergraduate possessed the skills, knowledge, and training that the Hmong participant often needed, and furthermore, the undergraduates were native English speakers and Americans (except for one international student from Japan). Thus, despite the fact that undergraduates did learn a great deal from the Hmong participants, some Hmong participants did not feel as though this were the case. For instance, Song, a 22-year-old Hmong woman, said:

I feel that maybe you learned about the Hmong ways of culture, especially how they live their life and how everything goes around, just what we do, everyday life. And especially with me, my experience, you see that when I'm pregnant and I have the baby, we have to stay home for a month, and so you probably learned that. But I don't think I taught you anything else because I learned more from you, because you know English, and you know how to read and write, and so I think I learned more from you than you learned from me.

Xia, a 28-year-old Hmong woman, said:

I don't think that I ever taught Lucy anything, except I only learned from Lucy.

Another Hmong woman, Nhia, aged 39, commented:

Well the most important things that I taught Patrick, I don't know because it's always Patrick teaching me all this stuff, so I'm not really sure.

Mai Xiong, a 32-year-old Hmong woman, described specifically the inequality inherent in the structure of the program:

I know that Jennifer's been with me for a while, and she understands how I feel and how my life's been like, but it's that separation—that she is here to help me out and I'm here with my family, so I know she knows what's going on in my family, but the thing was, I know she knows, but she doesn't want to say it. And then me, I don't want to say it to her and tell her all my problems, but I know that we both know that we know each other's problems, but she knows more about mine.

These comments suggest that although both Hmong and undergraduate participants felt they benefited from each other and engaged in processes of mutual learning, inequalities in their relationships and what they believed they could contribute to

their partners' learning persisted. The inequality that many Hmong participants perceived was also illustrated by the fact that most Hmong participants referred to the undergraduates as their teachers (using the word for teacher both in English and Hmong). I talked with many Hmong participants and the Hmong co-facilitators about the use of this word and most suggested that it was used as a term of respect. Furthermore, because the role of the undergraduates in Hmong participants' lives was one that they had not experienced before, most Hmong participants did not know what other word to use. The use of the word teacher also seemed to express many Hmong participants' beliefs that they were learning more from the undergraduates than they were teaching to them. It is understandable that Hmong participants felt that they learned more than they taught because they tended to learn more concrete skills such as English language proficiency or methods for mobilizing resources. However, all students felt that they learned a great deal from Hmong participants and the dialogue created in the interviews allowed students to respond to Hmong participants who felt that the students did not learn from them by sharing what they did learn. For instance, in response to Xia's comment that she did not think she taught her undergraduate partner anything, Lucy replied, "I don't think that's true. I think I did learn a lot." Lucy continued on to explain what she learned from Xia about Hmong culture and the difficulties of beginning life in a new place.

Summary

Taken together, the voices and experiences of the Hmong and undergraduate participants suggest that a genuine process of mutual learning occurred. What participants learned from each other varied, for instance Hmong participants tended to engage in more instrumental learning (e.g., concrete skills and knowledge) while undergraduate participants tended to describe more transformative or critical consciousness-raising learning experiences. However, despite these differences and the inequality some Hmong and undergraduate participants described in their relationships with each other, there was overlap of the different types and domains of learning, and, most importantly, everyone was learning, respecting the knowledge and experience of others, and realizing that they had something to contribute to the group.

DISCUSSION

The Refugee Well-Being Project emphasized that newcomers and other Americans have much to learn from each other. Rather than a discourse of vulnerability, it focused on refugees as strong, resilient people whose experiences and cultures can contribute greatly to their communities. This was important because refugees' experiences, knowledge, and identities were validated, and because refugees contributed to undergraduates' education through the sharing of their enthusiasm, strength, resiliency, and cultures.

Validation of Refugees' Experiences, Knowledge, and Identities

As the comments of Hmong and undergraduate participants illustrate, through their involvement in the Refugee Well-Being Project, their Hmong identity was recognized by the undergraduates and their skills, knowledge, and experiences were valued. This occurred in the Learning Circles and in the time Hmong and undergraduate participants spent with each other outside of the Learning Circles. In addition, the paired qualitative interviews themselves were validating because Hmong participants heard directly from the undergraduates what the undergraduates had learned from them and how deeply the experience had affected them. Thus, these interviews were an important and powerful part of the process of the intervention because they provided participants with a more formal opportunity to talk to each other about the relationships they had formed, to tell each other what they learned, and to communicate to each other how much the experience meant to them.

Newcomers spend the majority of their time in the United States realizing how much they do not know and trying to "catch up." They are constantly reminded that their language, their skills, and their cultural knowledge are not relevant in their new lives. Rarely are they asked by other Americans to talk about their lives before they arrived here. However, refugees need to be able to build upon what they know and maintain a sense of coherence and meaning in their lives, while learning the new things they need to know. In her book about the learning experiences of Laotian refugee youth in an American school, Danling Fu (1995), an immigrant from China, explained how her own experiences of cultural exchange with Americans helped her learn about the

United States and strengthen her own voice at the same time:

Through constant sharing and discussion about reading, writing, and many issues of education and literacy with my peers and mentors, I understood more and more about American society, culture, and people. In turn, this understanding helped me look at my native culture and world with a different perspective. My learning about the two worlds enlightened me and made me a reader, a writer, and a thinker with a much broader viewpoint. I was eager to express myself. My timid, uncertain, soft voice became strong and passionate (pp. 12–13).

Refugees' Contribution to Undergraduates' Education

Hmong participants felt validated because undergraduate participants were genuinely learning from them and valuing their culture and knowledge. Undergraduates also benefited greatly from their experiences, and talked about many ways in which they were impacted personally (e.g., increased self-confidence, more connections with others, changed life goals). Most relevant for understanding the contributions to undergraduates' education was what they learned about the challenges of being a refugee in the United States, their re-examination of their own culture and values through learning about a new culture, and the formation of critical consciousness and awareness about the need for social change. Undergraduates' perspectives were transformed by engaging in advocacy with Hmong participants and seeing how difficult it can be for people to access the resources they need and get government assistance if they are poor, people of color, non-citizens, and non-native English speakers. Thus, through discussions and direct experience, many undergraduates began to realize all that they took for granted and were motivated to make changes in the world.

Undergraduates' education through the process of mutual learning also included addressing stereotypes and developing genuine relationships within and across groups. Fu (1995) argues that "humans are too complicated to be grouped as stereotypes" (p. 212). In order to avoid this, people need opportunities to really get to know each other and to understand the social conditions within which they and others are situated. Lesch and O'Donoghue (1999) ask: "How can one write about the experiences of people from an excluded and often unheard group and make their voices heard without them becoming

representative of the entire group? Instead of reinforcing stereotypes, how can we discover the universality of human experience that enables us to form meaningful connections within and across groups?" (p. 11). Hmong and undergraduate participants began to form these connections and discover "the universality of human experience," as illustrated by their comments about seeing how they and other participants in the group actually had many similarities, shared much in common, and were able to learn from each other and work well together. Lesch and O'Donoghue (1999) continue to explain how forming relationships among members of different races and cultures reduces stereotypes:

In viewing multiculturalism as the product of our unique voices and perspectives, we begin to move outside of the cultural boxes that have been constructed by traditional views of diversity. When 'culture' is taught using 'facts' rather than authentic voices and lived experiences, people become members of a group and not individuals. They become what Danling Fu (1995) describes as 'ethnic species' rather than unique selves. Being labeled in this way denies the interplay of the many and varied forces that shape one's unique life experience (p. 12).

Thus, to challenge stereotypes and the un-supportive contexts in the U.S. involves redefining who belongs in the United States and what it means to be a refugee or newcomer.

Limitations and Challenges

Although this study offers some insight into processes that may promote refugee well-being, as with any research, this particular study has limitations that deserve mention. First, the qualitative findings may be somewhat tenuous because participants might have been reluctant to say anything negative about the project to their undergraduate partner, the co-facilitator, or me. The close relationships developed among participants, co-facilitators, and me and the fact that participants did offer suggestions and comments about aspects of the intervention they did not like suggest that people felt comfortable expressing their true feelings, but it is impossible to know this for sure. It is important to note that participants also had opportunities to express their opinions about the project during quantitative post-interviews with interviewers who were not a part of the project, and their opinions remained consistent. In sum, although conclusions must be drawn with caution, the

patterns observed in the quantitative data, the qualitative findings, the extremely minimal attrition, and my immersion in the community suggest that this intervention demonstrated promising results.

One of the most salient project challenges involved language differences. Despite the excellent translation provided by the co-facilitators, many participants often felt frustrated with their inability to communicate with each other. This frustration subsided in some regards, as everyone learned that relationships could develop across language barriers and as participants learned more English (or Hmong in some cases). At the same time, however, as relationships grew stronger, participants' inability to fully express themselves to each other was also highlighted.

The short length of time of the project was also difficult for many participants. As the ending date approached, many of the Hmong participants began mentioning it during Learning Circle discussions and expressed their concern and disappointment. Participants' comments during the interviews and the quantitative results indicate that the intervention period was too short of a time in which to achieve fully sustainable changes. Furthermore, despite the explicit attention devoted to avoiding dependency, there was a constant tension evident because many Hmong participants' limited English proficiency made it difficult for them to access resources in the community without the assistance of their undergraduate or a translator. This is linked to the issue of the length of the intervention. In order to avoid dependency, Hmong participants needed more time to develop English proficiency and other skills and knowledge required to mobilize resources. In addition, a longer or on-going project would have provided opportunities to develop more sustainable changes, infrastructures, social networks, and relationships.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study have several implications for policy and practice. First, it is important to consider mechanisms for shifting the focus of work with refugees from "helping" to mutual learning. It is rare that assistance to refugees is structured in ways that attempt to minimize power differentials between newcomers and those offering their help. The hierarchical nature of typical helping relationships is in fact often more salient because there is frequently a great deal that refugees do not know about life in the United States. However, it is particularly important

when working with refugees to deconstruct the traditional helper/helped roles because their experience as refugees has frequently left them relatively powerless. Thus, it is important for practitioners and policymakers to recognize refugees' strengths, knowledge, and experiences and to rely on refugees' expertise on their own lives to shape services and policies. In addition, we also need more structural ways to incorporate refugees' knowledge and skills into their communities, such as opportunities for refugees to share their cultures and experiences with school children, their children's teachers, and other adult community members. The RWBP did not completely eliminate the inequalities of a traditional "helping" relationship, but it was an important step towards creating mutually beneficial relationships.

Second, the success of this project lends support to the idea that attention to the psychological needs of refugees is important but inadequate if other needs are ignored. Rather than an exclusive focus on therapy to deal with the past traumas that refugees have experienced, holistic interventions that address material, social, and educational needs and the challenges of living in a new country, as well as psychological needs, are important. This requires creative approaches and broader definitions of the appropriate roles for psychologists and other people who seek to promote the mental health and well-being of refugees.

Third, it is evident from the participants in the Refugee Well-Being Project that the challenges of adjusting to a new place persist for many years for some people, particularly those who have limited education and English proficiency. However, most refugee organizations, policies, and programs focus on the first 6 months after refugees arrive in the United States. Although this is a crucial time period, we need to think about ways to develop ongoing support for and connections with newcomers for many years, so that they can truly become a part of their communities and not remain isolated.

A fourth implication involves the connection made between Michigan State University and its community. Universities have numerous resources, including human resources (e.g., faculty, students, and staff), intellectual resources (e.g., knowledge and research), and material resources. At the same time, university faculty and students have much to gain and learn from community members. Thus, it is important to focus on developing genuine partnerships, projects, and interventions that connect universities to the communities in which they are sit-

uated. In the Refugee Well-Being Project, bringing undergraduates and Hmong refugees together provided several advantages for promoting refugees' mental health, including lower cost to the community and less stigma for participants. In addition, the undergraduate students had important opportunities to learn from and with the Hmong families, to develop advocacy and teaching skills, to engage in service learning that allowed them to apply what they learned in the classroom, to develop critical awareness, to earn course credit for work in the community, and to acquire beneficial experience for graduate school or a career in human services. Therefore, it is important to continue to consider ways that university resources can be effectively applied to promote the well-being of their communities.

Implications for Future Research

There are several potential directions for future research. First, it is important to consider how this type of project could be sustained and institutionalized within refugees' communities. An on-going partnership between universities and refugee communities and organizations, in which undergraduates make a two-semester commitment and refugee community members participate as long as they want is one idea. As such a project grew and social and material resources within the community developed, coordination and ownership could be increasingly shifted to the refugee community. However, many refugee communities have so few resources that it takes time to reach this ultimate goal.

Second, it is clear from both the literature on refugee adjustment and well-being and the comments and experiences of participants that intergenerational issues are particularly salient for many refugees. One of the powerful aspects of the Learning Circles at the Jane Addams School for Democracy in Minnesota is that they involve all generations—including young children, teenagers, parents, and elders. This provides opportunities for cultural exchange not only between refugee and undergraduate participants, but also across generations of refugees, so that parents and their children can learn from each other and appreciate the knowledge, experiences, and challenges that they possess. This structure also helps preserve certain aspects of newcomers' cultures across generations, while allowing for the transformation of other aspects. The Refugee Well-Being Project's combination of Learning

Circles and advocacy has not been implemented with multiple generations of refugee families, but the issues raised by participants in the Learning Circles and interviews suggest that this is an important direction to pursue.

Finally, the Refugee Well-Being Project also has potential applicability to other refugee populations. Although the project was developed with particular attention to certain attributes of Hmong culture and the specific needs and interests of Hmong community members, the flexibility and individualized approaches inherent in both the Learning Circle and advocacy components of the project suggest that it could be easily adapted to other refugee groups. In particular, the structure of this project would be effective with other refugees who face great challenges in adjusting to life in the United States because of limited previous education and large cultural and language gaps.

CONCLUSION

Newcomers to the United States bring with them unique perspectives, skills, and traditions, which have the potential to make great contributions to our country. At the same time, the United States has become increasingly less receptive to refugees and immigrants, as evidenced by recent political, economic, and social trends. Therefore, the impetus to understand the processes through which refugees can thrive in the United States and become integrated and accepted into their resettlement communities, while maintaining their own cultural identities, is strong. The Refugee Well-Being Project sought to address these issues by bringing people together to learn from each other, share their experiences, and value the cultures and knowledge of each other. Through these processes, we transcend traditional notions of diversity and can appreciate people for who they are—not just as members of a particular group or as people in need, but as valuable members of our communities.

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