

CULTURE LEARNING IN COMMUNITY: BURMESE REFUGEES  
AND THE MEANING OF HOME

by

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## **DEDICATION**

To our Lord, Jesus Christ

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### **In Memory of:**

John and Minnie Lopez

John and Alice Mader

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*¡Que Dios los bendiga y los cuide hoy y cada día de sus vidas!*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
LIST OF FIGURES .....	x
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS .....	xii
ABSTRACT.....	xiii
CHAPTER	
I. REFUGEES, ACCULTURATION, AND LEARNING .....	1
Refugees Resettling in the United States .....	2
Purpose of Study .....	9
Research Questions .....	9
Theoretical Perspective .....	10
Overview of Methodology .....	11
Significance of the Study .....	12
Perspective and Positionality of the Researcher .....	13
Conclusion .....	15
2. A REVIEW OF LITERATURE .....	16
Refugee Acculturation and Beyond .....	17
Refugee Acculturation and Social Adjustment .....	21
Refugees and Learning .....	23
The Meaning of Home .....	28
Habitat for Humanity .....	33
Gaps in Literature .....	36
Conclusion .....	37
3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .....	38
Overview of Research Design .....	39
Site and Participant Selection .....	41
Data Collection Procedures .....	44
Data Management and Analysis .....	49

Trustworthiness of Study.....	51
Conclusion .....	55
4. PARTICIPANTS .....	56
Mi Meh .....	57
Hsaw Reh & Pray Meh.....	60
David Say & Sa Rah Meh .....	62
Mu Ria.....	64
Pray Reh & Nga Meh .....	66
Bu Htoo .....	68
Pa Noe .....	70
Nay Reh and Tu Meh .....	72
Saw Moo.....	74
Albert Aung and Heh Htoo Mu .....	76
Group Interview 1 .....	78
Group Interview 2 .....	81
Conclusion.....	84
5. RESEARCH FINDINGS .....	85
Seeking a Place to Call Home .....	86
Memories of Past Homes .....	89
Memories of Refugee Resettlement .....	95
Adjusting to a New Home.....	96
Burmese Refugees and a Place to Call Home .....	114
Settling into a Place Called Home.....	124
Where do You Consider Home? .....	136
Conclusion .....	143
6. LEARNING, ACCULTURATION, AND CULTURAL FUSION .....	145
Learning through Acculturation .....	146
Learning through Homebuilding .....	149
The Meaning of Home .....	151
The Fusion of Cultures .....	153
Conclusion .....	157
7. CONCLUSION .....	159
Dissertation Recap.....	160



Implications for Theory, Practice, and Policy .....	162
Limitations and Delimitations .....	166
Recommendations for Future Study .....	167
Final Thoughts .....	168
APPENDIX SECTION .....	170
REFERENCES .....	177

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1.1 What Resettled Refugees Learn through Acculturation and Cultural Fusion.....	13
4.1 Karenni Car at Sunset .....	57
4.2 Backyard Garden .....	58
4.3 Lemongrass .....	60
4.4 Meal-to-go.....	61
4.5 Back Porch of Home.....	62
4.6 Lemon Tree .....	63
4.7 Kayan Woman .....	64
4.8 Vining Plants.....	65
4.9 Planted Tree .....	66
4.10 New Garden .....	67
4.11 Front Porch.....	68
4.12 Yellow Home .....	69
4.13 Karen Man and his Red House .....	70
4.14 Pool Garden .....	71
4.15 Green Garden .....	72
4.16 Shoes at the Door .....	73
4.17 Vines over Fence.....	74
4.18 Hand Sanitizer on Porch .....	75
4.19 Banana Tree .....	76
4.20 Honeydew Melon.....	77
4.21 Sunset in Habitat Neighborhood.....	78
4.22 Ethnic Food.....	79
4.23 Backyard Pool.....	80

4.24 Front Garden .....	81
4.25 Flower Garden .....	82
5.1 Refugee Camp on Thailand Border .....	91
5.2 Building in Community .....	92
5.3 Kitchen in Camp .....	93
5.4 Habitat Volunteers .....	115
5.5 Painting a House .....	116
5.6 Burmese Living Room and Place to Pray .....	125
5.7 Burmese Home Interior and Fish Friends .....	126
5.8 Living Area in Burmese Home and Tending the Garden .....	127
5.9 Kitchen and Hallway in Burmese Home .....	128
5.10 Burmese Bedroom .....	129
5.11 Outdoor Kitchen and Garden of Burmese Home .....	129
5.12 Interior of Burmese Home and Tree in Backyard .....	130
5.13 Vegetable Garden and Family Worship Area of Burmese Home .....	131
5.14 Images of Burmese Home Interior .....	132
5.15 Images of Garden in Backyard of Burmese Home .....	133
5.16 Burmese Home Exterior .....	134
5.17 Burmese Home Interior and Garden .....	134
5.18 Spices, Food Preparation, and Garden Area of Burmese Home .....	135
6.1 Family Altar .....	156

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Description</b>
HUD	U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
IOM	International Organization for Migration
JCHS	Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University
MPI	Migration Policy Institute
NGOs	Nonprofit organizations that assist in U.S. refugee resettlement
OHCHR	United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner
USRPC	United States Refugee Processing Center
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USCIS	U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
VOLAGS	Voluntary agencies that assist in U.S. refugee resettlement

## **ABSTRACT**

According to the U.S. Refugee Processing Center (RPC), over three million refugees have resettled in the United States since 1975 (U.S. Dept. of State, 2018). The purpose of this research was to obtain a deeper understanding of what refugees learn through their cultural experiences as they adjust to their new surroundings. Viewed through the theoretical lenses of acculturation and cultural fusion, this ethnographic study focused on the culture learning of 24 Burmese refugees who resettled in the United States and are current homeowners residing in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods.

Research findings showed that Burmese refugees in this study adapted and learned best within a community setting. This research documented how they transitioned from lives in their home country and refugee camps to new kinds of shelter, food, language, employment, and transportation in order to satisfy their basic needs. Included are stories and pictures depicting their understanding of the meaning of home, the radical difference in the world they came from to the one they encountered in the U.S. through the physical buildings that shelter them, the gardens that surround them, the family and neighbors they interact with, and the nostalgic tug of their native homeland. Further, study findings showed that the theory of culture learning can expand outside the realm of international college students by identifying the context through which refugees learn through acculturation and cultural fusion.

## CHAPTER 1

### REFUGEES, ACCULTURATION, AND LEARNING

*I walk through the apartment complex housing surrounded by the delicious smells of international cooking permeating from the apartments. It is almost dusk, and the sounds of refugee children chatting in different languages float up to me from the courtyard below. I knock and am let into the sparsely furnished apartment of a large refugee family from Burma. Upon entering the dim apartment, I instinctively reach for the closest light switch and flip it on. Nothing happens. The lightbulb must be out, I think to myself, as I cross the kitchen to turn on another light switch. After determining that light is out as well, I walk through the house, flipping switches as I go. Much to my dismay, every lightbulb in the house is burned out except for one in a closet. Through the interpreter that arrives a few minutes after me, I discover that this family sat around the lone closet every night for the past three weeks, afraid to venture far from the only light that illuminated the darkened apartment once the sun went down. Why? Because I, their teacher, had never taught them how to change a lightbulb.*

This story is about my encounter with one refugee family, living in one apartment housed in one city in the U.S. But this same experience can be shared by refugees throughout the world and by those that serve them. Upon resettlement, the Burmese refugees' world was turned upside down. Everything they knew was different. They had to learn a new language, adapt to technological advances, establish new social connections, and so much more. In essence, they had to learn to survive within the confines of a world vastly different from which they came, not only geographical but also centurial. In order for me and other people to assist them, we needed a deeper

understanding of the challenges they faced and the lessons they learned as they balanced aspects of their own culture with other cultures to survive in their adopted country.

### **Refugees Resettling in the United States**

According to the U.S. Refugee Processing Center (USRPC), over three million refugees have resettled in the United States since 1975 (U.S. Dept. of State, 2018). This staggering number shows the compassion and commitment of past U.S. administrations to extend a welcoming hand to those in need. Classified as a subset of documented immigrants, many refugees who arrive in the U.S. quickly adapt to life in America and are well on their way towards self-sufficiency within months. For others, the adjustment is more complex (Mitschke et al., 2011; Morrice, 2012).

Refugees that migrate to the U.S. hail from a myriad of countries. Of these, over 1.48 million refugees and former refugees are Asian (U.S. Dept. of State, 2018), with the most recent refugees originating from the country of Burma (also known as Myanmar). In fact, since 2008, approximately 109,000 Burmese refugees, representing 15 distinct ethnic groups, have resettled in America (Gihooly & Lee, 2016; U.S. Dept. of State, 2018). Many of their life journeys led them away from civil war in Burma to refugee camps in Thailand and then on to the U.S., where they finally realized their dreams of a place to call home. The study explores what 24 Burmese refugees learned through their experiences of acculturation and cultural fusion from their arrival in the United States to their present lives as homeowners residing in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods.

Often, immigrants migrate voluntarily. In the case of refugees, migration occurs involuntarily. According to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), therein lies the distinction between immigrants and refugees

([www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)). Whereas immigrants move away from their homelands voluntarily, many refugees are forced to flee armed conflict or persecution in their homeland, seeking safety in neighboring countries, then sometimes moving again into a third country for resettlement (UNHCR, 1951). It is through this process that involuntary cross-cultural acculturation occurs. Such is the case for refugees resettling in the U.S.

### **Refugees and U.S. Refugee Resettlement Policies**

In the early 1950s, the United Nations General Assembly created the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office to assist the millions of displaced persons affected by World War 2. At that time, the newly created UNHCR was given three years to complete its mission. Almost 70 years later, this organization continues assisting in the protection and resettlement of refugees worldwide ([www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)). According to historical documents by the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner ([www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org)), Chapter 1, Article 1 (2) of the 1951 *United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* defines a refugee as someone:

... owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (p. 2).

Assisting displaced persons that have fled their homes due to fear of persecution is a complex issue. Refugees leaving their native countries are often admitted into



neighboring countries either as residents of refugee camps or permanent citizens of the host country (Mon, 2010). In the majority of cases, the native country stabilizes, and refugees eventually return. In other cases, host countries allow refugees to become permanent citizens. According to UNHCR 2019 estimates, over 1.4 million displaced persons will be classified as needing resettlement, representing a 17% increase from the prior year. Yet less than one percent of refugees eligible were resettled in 2018 ([www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)).

For many years, the U.S. has led the charge in welcoming displaced persons approved for resettlement ([www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)). According to a 2018 report by the Migration Policy Institute, current U.S. administration policies have significantly challenged refugee resettlement programs across the nation (Greenberg et al., 2018). While current U.S. resettlement numbers are still elevated compared to other countries, the number of refugees admitted into the U.S has significantly dwindled during the last two years. In the previous 10 years, the U.S. welcomed on average 76,000 refugees per year, yet only 22,491 newly arriving refugees were admitted into the U.S. during the fiscal year 2018 (Greenberg et al., 2018).

Once approved for U.S. resettlement, refugees are assigned to one of nine non-governmental organizations (NGOs) tasked with the goal of assisting refugees in achieving self-sufficiency in their adopted homeland. Also referred to as VOLAGS (voluntary agencies), these resettlement agencies provide refugees with financial, medical, job placement services, and more. But their efforts have been challenged as of late as they struggle with steep decreases in refugee arrivals and less funding for services. These agencies must explore other options for achieving their missions of promoting the

self-sufficiency of refugees (Fix et al., 2017).

According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, refugees living in the U.S. must apply for permanent residency after one year and apply for citizenship after five years of legal entry ([www.uscis.gov](http://www.uscis.gov)). Self-sufficiency, the goal of successful resettlement, is achieved when refugee families no longer need assistance in providing food and shelter for themselves and their loved ones ([www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)).

### **Burmese Refugees Resettling in the U.S.**

Burma, a Southeast Asian country bordered by India on the west, Thailand on the east, and China on the north, has a long history of political unrest. Since the 11<sup>th</sup> century and especially since 1948 when Burma gained independence from Britain, the Burman military regime has been in conflict with non-Burman ethnic minorities fighting for their autonomy and fundamental civil rights (Mon, 2010). Burma is a multi-ethnic country with over 135 distinct ethnic groups. The Bamar people, comprising 68% of the population, control both the government and the military. Despite pressure from international communities, thousands of ethnic minorities across Burma have been killed or have fled the country, seeking shelter as displaced persons in refugee camps in neighboring counties (Mon, 2010).

In the U.S., over 15 different ethnic groups from Burma have been resettled across many states in the last 10 years (Gilhooly & Lee, 2016). Some of these ethnic groups include Burmese Chin (pronounced Chin), Mon (pronounced Mun), Rohingya (pronounced RO-hin-gya), Karen (pronounced Kuh-REN), and Karenni (pronounced Kuh-REH-ni). The Karen people are one of the largest Burmese ethnic groups, whereas the Karenni people represent one of the smallest Burmese ethnic groups (Mon, 2010).

Within Karenni, there are several ethnicities, including Kayah and Kayan (often referred to as the Karenni long neck people) (Dudley, 2010).

Confusion exists among many as to whether this country is called Myanmar or Burma. In 1989, the military regime changed the country's name from Burma to Myanmar. However, other countries, including the U.S. government, and many of the Burmese people themselves, do not acknowledge the name change and refer to the country by its original name of Burma (Mon, 2010). Out of respect for the Burmese refugees I encounter, this study will follow their lead and refer to their home country by its original name of Burma.

### **Refugees and Habitat for Humanity**

Refugees that are resettled in the U.S. often quickly take a giant leap toward self-sufficiency by finding employment soon after arrival (Fix et al., 2017). Yet once resettlement services are complete, many refugees struggle to find affordable housing, an ongoing problem that affects many American families (Greenberg et al., 2018). A 2018 report by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) concludes that there is a critical need for affordable housing in this country ([www.hud.gov](http://www.hud.gov)). In addition, research shows that families benefit from living in their own homes (Eriks et al., 2015; Phillips et al., 2009).

For several refugee families living in one Texas city, Habitat for Humanity, a non-profit global organization established in 1976 ([www.habitat.org](http://www.habitat.org)), has become part of that solution to a critical need for affordable, sustainable housing. This organization attempts to address barriers to homeownership by helping low-income families attain affordable housing. The first Habitat for Humanity large-scale homebuilding began in

central Texas in 1976, where over 1000 homes have been built to date (www.habitatsa.org). To qualify for a Habitat house, potential homeowners must physically participate in building other Habitat homes within their new community, putting in a minimum of 300 hours of sweat equity before their own housebuilding can begin. Future homeowners, called “partner families” by the Habitat organization, learn basic housebuilding skills by working side-by-side with professional housebuilding staff and a steady stream of volunteers from throughout the city.

Additionally, clients must attend up to 30 hours of home education workshops on topics such as budgeting, home maintenance, and safety. Refugees with limited English language skills attend these courses with an interpreter. Once the home is complete, homeowners are offered no-interest, affordable mortgages (www.habitatsa.org).

The concepts of building shelter and neighbors helping neighbors are familiar attributes that Burmese families have historically embraced, well before their U.S. resettlement. Several Burmese refugees that resettled in one mid-Texas city were offered, and ultimately accepted, the opportunity to build and then own a house through Habitat for Humanity. To date, over 40 Burmese families reside in three Habitat neighborhoods within that city.

### **Past Research on Refugee Learning**

The lived experiences of refugees fleeing their homes for safety is not a new area of interest for adult education researchers to explore. Many that examine this field of study tend to focus on refugee/immigrant acculturation and integration. In the process, they turn first to the writings of Dr. John Berry, a professor emeritus of psychology at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario, Canada (Croucher & Kramer, 2017; Hauck et

al., 2014), who has done extensive research throughout his career on immigration and acculturation. While acculturation of refugees and immigrants is widely studied, only a few explore acculturation and the resettlement of Burmese refugees in the U.S. (Gilhooly & Lee, 2016; Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011; Mitschke et al., 2011).

How refugees learn is another prominent area of refugee research. Literature suggests that successful refugee acculturation peaks when learning is maximized during the resettlement process (Croucher & Kramer, 2017; Myers & Nelson, 2018). Many studies on refugee learning fall within the scope of educating children (Arvanitis, 2020; Gilhooly & Lee, 2016; Lloyd & Wilkinson, 2016). Others focus on ways to teach refugee parents how to be more engaged in the education of their children (Cureton, 2020; Cun, 2019). More specific to adult education, a multitude of researchers turn a lens to refugee learning that occurs formally (Larrotta, 2017; Sheikh & Anderson, 2018). Still others explore how refugees gain knowledge informally through community gardens, art classes, and more (Gerber et al., 2017; Hauck et al., 2014; Morrice, 2012).

Further, some researchers aim to acquire a greater understanding of refugee learning by viewing learning through culture learning theory, a theory of adaptation. While looking at how technology impacts sojourners, Pacheco (2020) writes, “Culture learning is a theory of cross-cultural adaptation that seeks to conceptualize the challenges sojourners often experience when learning to navigate their daily functioning in novel and unfamiliar cultural environments (Masgoret & Ward, 2006; Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2017)” (p. 4).

While studies on the topics of refugee acculturation and refugee learning are commonplace, there is a need for practical research that can offer resettlement staff

members and volunteers a broader picture of what refugees learn through their acculturation experiences. Refugees that resettle in the U.S. bring with them a range of experiences. In the case of the Burmese refugees, their life experiences come from a world markedly different from the post-industrial world they entered. People like me that interact with refugees upon their arrival often make assumptions about what refugees know and what they need to know. The lightbulb story above is a classic example of an assumption I made. Even though I knew that Burmese refugees came from a place where there was no electricity, it never occurred to me to teach them about the purpose of a lightbulb. The lightbulb was something that I took for granted that all people know but for refugees coming from ecologies so different from the post-industrial U.S., changing a lightbulb was an unfamiliar concept.

### **Purpose of Study**

The problem this research addresses is a need for communities with an influx of refugees to fully understand the challenges resettled refugees face so that they may be better prepared to guide them towards self-sufficiency. Thus, the purpose of this study is to create a deeper understanding of what resettled Burmese refugees learned through their experiences of acculturation and cultural fusion, from their initial resettlement in the U.S. to their current residences in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods.

### **Research Questions**

Research questions guiding this study are:

1. What have resettled Burmese refugees learned through their experiences of acculturation?

2. What does home mean to Burmese refugees living in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods?
3. How have Burmese refugees living in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods fused cultures as they learned to live in the U.S.?

### **Theoretical Perspective**

From a theoretical perspective, many researchers that study refugees tend to follow in the shadow of Dr. John Berry, a professor emeritus of psychology at Queen's University in Canada who has done extensive research throughout his career on immigration and acculturation. Through his work, Berry has identified four acculturation strategies applicable to the experiences of immigrants – integration, assimilation, separation/segregation, and marginalization (Berry, 1997).

Going one step further, other researchers seek to explore the issue of how one culture affects another from the theoretical perspective of cultural fusion, an intercultural communication process first developed by Eric Mark Kramer in 1992. Croucher and Kramer (2017) describe cultural fusion theory as a process that occurs when newcomers assimilate behaviors from their adopted culture while maintaining elements of their native identity, and in the process, their adopted culture is also transformed (p. 98).

Finally, from a philosophical standpoint, this research will follow a social constructivist viewpoint. Social constructivism is embraced by “individuals seeking understanding of the world in which they live and work” (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). This philosophy aligns with my research project in two ways. First, one of this project's goals is to explore how one group of people construct meaning based on how they view the

world. Secondly, this is consistent with Croucher and Kramer's (2017) writings on cultural fusion theory.

### **Overview of Methodology**

In order to understand how resettled refugees learn through their experiences of acculturation and cultural fusion, I chose to fully immerse myself in this research by creating an empirical study that followed an ethnographical approach. Ethnography allows for a cultural study of a specific population of people and how individuals within that group view their world (Agar, 1980; Creswell, 2013; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Wolcott, 1999). It also encourages flexibility and allows for the study to flow based on the needs of the participants (Gibbs, 2007; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Wolcott, 1999). Finally, ethnography enabled me to interview participants in their home environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gibbs, 2007; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Wolcott, 1999).

This research was conducted in the midst of a worldwide pandemic. While it was my original intent to interview participants inside their homes, this was not possible due to social distancing restrictions. After a delay of several months, I was allowed to proceed under the condition that all interviews were conducted outside their homes using social distancing and mask guidelines.

Participants for this study were Burmese Karen and Karenni refugees residing in three Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods across one mid-central Texas city. For this study, 24 respondents participated in 12 interviews, including five individual interviews, five couples interviews, and two focus group interviews. Each interview lasted between 35 and 60 minutes, and all interviews were held outside the homes of the participants.



Before each interview, participants were asked to give verbal consent, and all interviews were audio-recorded. Following recruitment and selection of the participants, data were collected utilizing several data sources, including semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, participatory observations, field notes, and journal writing.

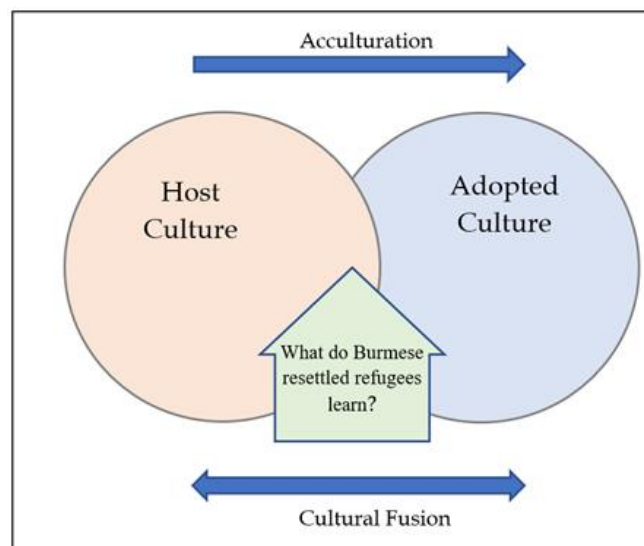
Once data collection was complete, this research followed a combination of Creswell's (2013) and Wolcott's (1999) approaches to analyzing the data. First, I organized and transcribed all files, then uploaded them into Dedoose ([www.dedoose.com](http://www.dedoose.com)), a web-based application used for qualitative research analysis. Next, I identified patterns within the data and create a codebook to list, update and analyze the data as needed (Saldaña, 2009). Third, I compared themes that emerged from data collection to themes identified during the literature review. Finally, I drew conclusions from the previous steps and prepared a comprehensive narrative. All data is confidential and in a secure location. A more thorough explanation of the methodology used for this research project can be found in Chapter 3.

### **Significance of the Study**

The literature on the migration of immigrant and refugee adults suggests that they face significant social, cultural, and economic challenges which can affect their experiences of resettlement, employment, well-being, civic engagement, and identity (re)constructions (Bajaj & Suresh, 2018; Shields & Lujan, 2019). This is certainly true for the approximately 109,000 Burmese refugees, representing 15 distinct ethnic groups resettled in America in the past 10 years (Gihooly & Lee, 2016; U.S. Dept of State, 2018).

The significance of this study is two-fold, touching upon theory and practice.

First, this study contributes to literature by documenting what refugees learn through their experiences of acculturation. Second, this study offers examples illustrating the impact of cultural fusion on the lived experiences of Burmese homeowners and their understanding of the meaning of home. Viewing refugee resettlement through the conceptual lenses of acculturation and cultural fusion offers essential insights into the study of a subset of refugees who are rarely studied and offers host communities insight into their adjustments so that they might be better able to assist their resettlement (see Fig. 1.1).



**Figure 1.1** What Resettled Refugees Learn through Acculturation and Cultural Fusion  
*Source.* Author

### **Perspective and Positionality of the Researcher**

My interest in assisting refugee families began when I noticed that refugee children were being placed at my daughter's school. Wanting to help these families adapt to their new lives in the U.S., especially the women, I started volunteering with a local resettlement agency and my local parish. Eventually, I was hired by the resettlement agency to teach ESL and job readiness skills to newly arriving refugees. I taught refugees

from many countries through my work, including Burmese refugees from at least six different ethnicities – Chin, Karen, Karenni, Kachin, Mon, and Rohingya. In essence, my job was to help refugee adults gain the skills they needed to obtain self-sufficiency in their adopted country. Among other things, I was tasked with teaching students how to write their name and their address, how to read and write basic English, how to ride the city bus, how to use American currency, how to respond to basic interview questions, and how to best promote their current job skills to obtain marketable employment.

To provide my students with real life-work experience, I introduced many of them to homebuilding through Habitat for Humanity, a non-profit global organization established in 1976 that helps low-income families attain affordable housing ([www.habitat.org](http://www.habitat.org)). As volunteer homebuilders, they learned to hammer shingles onto a rooftop, safely use a circular saw, install siding, caulk all areas of the house, and so much more. Additionally, this training allowed them to learn about following safety procedures, wearing proper work attire, taking directions from a supervisor, and the meaning of breaktimes. During the designated lunch break, they even learned about American foods such as sandwiches and spaghetti.

Three years later, I hosted a meeting for several refugee families at our local parish and introduced them to the idea of applying for homeownership through Habitat for Humanity. After much discussion and many questions, one young couple cautiously made the decision to apply. Then, after observing their finished home, another couple decided to apply. Then another. And another. Eventually, we reached a point where my assistance was no longer needed. The leaders of the community had completely taken over assisting other refugee families with the application process. As a result, while many

Burmese families in our area have also chosen to purchase traditional homes, over 40 Burmese families currently reside in Habitat neighborhoods.

As a researcher, I recognize that I am in a unique situation and want my positionality to be clearly acknowledged. This study is a heartfelt account of my desire to know and understand this special group of people on a deeper level. I am honored to count many refugees and former refugees as dear friends. My friendship with several Burmese families residing in Habitat homes makes me an outsider with insider positionality that has allowed me to become engaged within this community. In many respects, they are my family—people I admire, respect, and adore. This research allowed me a unique opportunity to study this fantastic group of people more deeply. Through this research, it is my pleasure to share a part of my world with you.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, there is a clear need for a study on the resettlement journey and acculturation process of Burmese ethnic minorities to help communities with an influx of refugees fully understand the challenges resettled refugees face so that they may be better prepared to guide them towards self-sufficiency. While refugee acculturation has been studied extensively over the years, little has been written that documents the learning that occurs through refugee acculturation. The complex issue of acculturation provides a stepping-stone to understanding how refugees navigate the resettlement journey. The methods for this study were carefully planned and structured, as noted above. Through the theoretical lenses of acculturation and cultural fusion, this ethnography research explored Burmese homeowners gaining knowledge, neighbors helping neighbors, the blending of cultures, and the deep satisfaction of a job well done.

## CHAPTER 2

### A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

For many refugees immigrating to a host country, integration into the culture can be riddled with challenge and strife, particularly for those struggling with language barriers; yet, ultimately, refugee resettlement potentially allows documented refugees the opportunity for a better life (Harkins, 2012; Hauck et al., 2014; Mitschke et al., 2011). According to the U.S. Refugee Processing Center (USRPC), over three million refugees have resettled in the United States since 1975 (U.S. Dept. of State, 2018). Many refugees that arrive in the U.S. quickly adapt to life in America and, within months, are well on their way towards self-sufficiency. For others, the adjustment is more complex (Mitschke et al., 2011; Morrice, 2012).

Refugees from Burma are a population of particular interest to me as a researcher. Notable for their diversity, they represent 15 distinct ethnic groups that have not been widely studied (Ertorer, 2016). Additionally, the vast majority are recent immigrants, with many arriving within the past 10 years (U.S. Dept. of State, 2018). Moreover, several hundred Burmese refugee families currently reside in cities throughout the state of Texas (U.S. Dept. of State, 2018).

The purpose of this review is to pinpoint what literature reveals about what resettled refugees learn through their experiences of acculturation. More specifically, and in order to build a foundation for this study, it is crucial to understand how current literature looks at the issues of refugee acculturation, refugee adult learning, and refugees and the meaning of home. This chapter is broken down into two main parts. The first part, *Refugees and Acculturation*, looks to literature to understand the complexities of

how resettled refugees interact with people from other cultures in their adopted country. This includes reviewing how literature views the social adjustment and adult learning that occurs during refugee resettlement and explores the barriers and changes refugees face as they transition to life in the U.S. The second half of this chapter, *Refugees and the Meaning of Home*, looks at what literature reveals about the meaning of home, the importance of homeownership, and the shared experiences of refugees as homeowners.

The original search strategy for this literature review began with a hunt for peer-reviewed articles on the Texas State University, Alkek Library website based on the search terms ‘Burmese refugees’ AND ‘acculturation.’ Because this search revealed gaps in literature exploring the link between refugees and culture learning, queries were expanded to include several combinations of the following terms: refugees, refugee resettlement, Burmese, Karen, Karenni, acculturation, cultural fusion, culture learning, the meaning of home, homeownership, homeowner, and Habitat for Humanity. Searches for timely articles using similar search terminologies were also conducted in Google Scholar and ProQuest. Most of the items selected for this review were published within the last 10 years, with the exception of a few seminal articles.

### **Refugee Acculturation and Beyond**

In exploring the acculturation of refugees resettling in the United States, this literature review begins with looking at the changes that occur when one culture interacts with another as immigrants learn to navigate in their adopted countries. Often, migration occurs voluntarily. According to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), therein lies the distinction between immigrants and refugees ([www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)). Whereas immigrants move away from their homelands voluntarily,

many refugees are forced to flee armed conflict or persecution in their homeland, seeking safety in neighboring countries, then sometimes moving again into a third country for resettlement (UNHCR, 2015). It is through this process that involuntary cross-cultural acculturation occurs.

Refugee acculturation has been studied extensively over the years. Many writers that explore acculturation and immigration turn first to the writings of Dr. John Berry, a professor emeritus of psychology at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, Canada (Croucher & Kramer, 2017; Hauck et al., 2014) who has done extensive research throughout his career on immigration and acculturation. In his highly referenced article, "Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation," Berry (1997) discusses the acculturation process of adults growing up in one culture but ultimately residing in another. Through his theoretical framework, Berry attempts to explain the sophisticated acculturation process refugees experience as they blend with other cultures. Finally, Berry concludes that while several complex factors predicate this process, the ability of a person to adapt to their surroundings appears to be the most critical factor in successful acculturation.

Expanding on Berry's (1997) early research on acculturation, Sam and Berry (2010) contend that nearly every adult living in a society where people of different cultures reside has ostensibly experienced some acculturation. Within a *culturally plural society*, they explain that "to fully comprehend acculturation, one must understand and take into consideration key features of the two original cultural groups" (p. 473). In other words, researchers studying refugee acculturation must understand the cultural characteristics of newly arriving refugees both before and after their interactions with people from their host country.

Next, the issue of refugee acculturation emerges in literature through the use of the term transnationalism (Alfred, 2010; Myers & Nelson, 2018). For example, in their writings, Myers and Nelson (2018) describe the concept of transnationalism as “simultaneous participation within and across two or more cultures” (p. 2) that can be measured through economic, political, social, or cultural factors. Alfred (2010) describes a similar view of transnationalism, contending that immigrants and refugees hold on to elements of their home culture while they acquire values in their new culture. In describing these effects, Alfred writes, “In their attempts to learn the life ways and mores of the new society, they form new networks and relationships with members of the host country. ... (and) continue to maintain relationships and ties with the homeland” (p. 223).

Finally, other researchers take acculturation theories one step further by exploring how one culture affects another at a deeper level by turning their research focus on cultural fusion theory, a theoretical framework first introduced in 1992 by Eric Mark Kramer. In their research, Croucher and Kramer (2017) describe the theory of cultural fusion as “a more realistic description of the immigrant experience” (p. 109) because it factors in the interactions that occur between the new immigrants and people they encounter in their adopted countries. In describing the difference between fusion and assimilation, Kramer (2018) writes:

Fusion is integration. Integration means both mixing and addition. Assimilation is not integration despite how the words have been misused. Assimilation is the elimination of differences and, therefore identities and meanings. Assimilation can end. Assimilation is complete when there is nothing left to mix. Assimilation means the termination of integration (p. 68).



This description aligns with the writings of Sandel and Liang (2010), who describe cultural fusion theory as a concept that best reflects “the unpredictable mixing of cultures and the potential for creating something new” (p.4). Their study tests cultural fusion theory by analyzing the impact increased global migration has on transnational marriages, focusing on the cultural adaptation of 28 women from mainland China and other Southeast Asian nations that married into close-knit Taiwanese families. Ultimately, these authors conclude that fusion between the immigrants and people within their host countries is best achieved when the differences between the two cultures are negotiated and celebrated.

More recently, one researcher utilized the principles of cultural fusion theory to look at how the portrayal of Syrian refugees in Turkish newspapers can potentially impact the fusion of two similar cultural groups—the Syrian refugees and the Turkish people residing in the host country (Bilge, 2019). The author concluded that mainstream Turkish media portrays a one-sided view of acculturation because they tend to focus on aiding Syrian refugees in the adaptation process yet fail to address the importance of the host country’s adaptation. Because effective cultural fusion necessitates that both sides must adapt, Bilge wrote that “effective cultural exchange ... can only be achieved through facilitating communication to promote mutual understanding and reduce stereotyping and othering between the two communities” (p. 124).

Researchers have also turned their lenses to the quantitative study of acculturation (Barry, 2001; Berry & Hou, 2017; Khawaja et al., 2014). Berry and Hou (2017) utilize a four-quadrant acculturation scale (assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization) to examine the acculturation, experiences of discrimination, and the

well-being of over 3000 second-generation immigrants living in Canada by assessing their sense of belonging in their host society and in their heritage cultures. Another group of researchers used two acculturation scales to examine the acculturation and resiliency of migrants, refugees, and international students living in Australia (Khawaja et al., 2014). Still another researcher created the East Asian Acculturation Measure (EAAM) scale to measure the acculturation of immigrants from East Asia (Barry, 2001).

While the articles reviewed in this section are not all explicit to refugee identity, studies on the complex issue of acculturation can be instrumental in understanding how refugees navigate the resettlement journey, especially regarding their social adjustment. The following section narrows the focus of this literature review by looking at what literature reveals about acculturation and social adjustment, with a particular focus on refugees from Burma.

### **Refugee Acculturation and Social Adjustment**

Hoare (2011) describes learning as “a cogitative process in which patterns of thinking are changed” (p. 21). This definition aligns with the writings of Croucher and Kramer (2017), who surmise that newcomers entering a culture “encounter new ways of acting that may challenge their traditional ways of acting/behaving” (p. 103). Thus, the second area of interest that emerges from literature regarding refugee acculturation involves the impact refugee resettlement has on the cultural adaptation of those immigrating to their new adopted countries (Colvin, 2018; Hauck et al., 2014; Joyce & Liamputtong, 2017; Morrice, 2012). While social adjustment and adult learning can occur in several areas of the refugee resettlement journey, this section will focus on the

adjustments many Burmese refugees make in the areas of social interactions and adult learning while adapting to life in the U.S.

### **Refugees and Social Connections**

One theme in the literature views the adaptation of refugees through their social adjustment in their adopted country. Several researchers agree that, while initially, refugees encounter barriers to acculturation, these issues are often minimized by the social support they receive from their friends, family, ethnic community, and the local support networks set in place to assist them (Hauck et al., 2014; Joyce & Liamputtong, 2017; Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011). While some articles can be found that focus on the Burmese Karen community, only a couple of authors have explored the resettlement journey of other ethnic minorities from Burma, such as the Burmese Karenni.

El-Bialy and Mulay (2015) define genuine social connections as the key factor in successful acculturation and that these connections can occur within or outside of the ethnic community. Several researchers agreed that Burmese refugees strongly connect to their local ethnic communities (Hauck et al., 2014; Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011). In one qualitative study, Hauck et al. (2014) describe the results of data collected by medical students looking at acculturation stress on refugees residing in central Virginia. Their work is based on the acculturation theories developed by Berry (1997) described above. In their study, they conclude that Burmese refugees have a close-knit community with strong ties to their ethnic roots, pointing out that many families resided proximally and often celebrated birthdays, holidays, and other special events with others in their community. In another study, Mitschke et al. (2011) share similar results. Their findings conclude that Burmese Karen refugees appreciate living near other refugee families who

share common languages and similar experiences of living in the same Thai refugee camps.

Following a similar path, several studies examine the social connections established between Burmese refugees and members of the local communities in which they resided. Regarding local support networks, Croucher and Kramer (2017) describe the difficulties some immigrants face in adapting to their new homeland yet note that adaptation can be positively impacted by the interactions that occur between the newcomers and members of the host culture. Similarly, Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny (2011) describe the many ways dedicated volunteers helped one group of Karen refugees overcome barriers, stating that the group is more adjusted in terms of employment, finances, emotional support, and friendship networks with Americans. While not all volunteer interactions are positive, they write, positive relationships between members of the new and the host cultures can and often do arise.

Lastly, in a recent qualitative study, Myers and Nelson (2018) explore the resettlement experiences of a group of Burmese Karen and Karenni refugees living in a mountain-west town in America. The results of this study reveal that while many respondents initially felt disconnected from the U.S, within one year, most felt socially adapted to life in their adopted country (Myers & Nelson, 2018).

### **Refugees and Learning**

A review of the literature also suggests that successful acculturation can be impacted by the amount of adult learning that occurs during refugee resettlement (Croucher & Kramer, 2017; Myers & Nelson, 2018). Whereas some authors chose to study refugee learning within formal settings (Larrotta, 2017; Sheikh & Anderson, 2018),

others seek to understand refugee learning gained informally (Hauck et al., 2014; Morrice, 2012; Myers & Nelson, 2018). Still, others focus on shared learning that occurs when people of different cultures experience their educational journeys collectively (Gerber et al., 2017).

First, many researchers studying the refugee resettlement journey seek to understand the formal learning journey that refugees follow as they adapt to life in their adopted country (Larrotta, 2017; Sheikh & Anderson, 2018). For example, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement is tasked with providing support for newly arriving refugees with the goal of helping them integrate and quickly become self-sufficient (Larrotta, 2017). Yet, according to Larrotta, funding for ESL classes, job readiness programs, and employment services have “expiration dates,” and some courses inadequately cover the educational needs “related to why and how they entered the country” (p. 63).

Whereas many researchers focused their studies on the formal education programs offered to refugees upon arrival, others explore the role adult educators play in the educational journeys of refugees (Alfred, 2010). Noting how adult educators can impact refugee learning, Alfred recommends that prior lifelong learning influences should be considered when planning educational programs specific to refugees in order to better “assist them in affirming their ethnic identity as well as fulfilling their need to learn, to survive and to cope within the new environment” (p. 227).

Interestingly, one study determined that language can be both a positive and negative cultural trigger point for many Burmese Karen and Karenni refugees (Myers & Nelson, 2018). On the one hand, one respondent surveyed felt that speaking the native

language helped them stay connected to their culture. However, on the other hand, the respondent felt that speaking English enabled them to feel culturally in tune with Americans. Moreover, many of the Burmese refugees interviewed by Hauck et al. (2014) expressed concerns that limited English language skills hindered their ability to find suitable employment, communicate with health providers, and make American friends.

Secondly, many authors conclude that the most valuable learning comes informally through the lived experiences refugees encounter in their daily lives (Hauck et al., 2014; Morrice, 2012). Hauck et al. (2014) describe the refugee experience of learning as partaking in a full and active learning journey as opposed to the adventures of a tourist who passively observes the lives of people they encounter in their travels. In describing the effect migration has on adult learners navigating resettlement, Morrice (2012) echoes this sentiment, writing that migration “disrupts the inherited frames of reference and the accumulated biographical repertoire of knowledge and understanding, and they are forced to learn new behaviors, under new rules, and to adapt to new values and another type of social organization” (p. 252).

A growing blend of researchers suggest that a unique set of knowledge can be constructed by blending what people know with what they learn. For example, Selvi (2007) theorizes that individuals can construct knowledge through life experiences. Making a case for a link between learning and creativity, Selvi writes, “There is a dynamic relationship between learning and creativity. Creating and constituting something new is related to new learning” (p. 354).

Further, many researchers explore several theoretical elements of learning through culture learning theory, an adaptation theory that seeks to make sense of the challenges

sojourners have navigating daily life in unfamiliar cultural environments. In their seminal work on culture learning, Masgoret and Ward (2006) explore the theoretical dimensions associated with people experiencing cultural transitions through the cultural skills and behaviors they bring to their new environments, with a focus on language barriers and communication proficiency.

A recent study by Pacheco (2020) is noteworthy for its exploration of culture learning because of its look at how technology impacts sojourns. In her publication, Pacheco notes while past research on international students has focused on their culture shock, technological advancements have positively contributed to changes in their cultural immersion. Thus, she argues for a shift in research to study culture learning's role in shaping the transcultural experiences of sojourners, including refugees.

Specific to how young refugees learn, one study looks at culture learning in reference to refugee elementary school students learning science (Harper, 2017). In her study, Harper determines that “science learning embedded within a cross-cultural learning community can empower refugee students to construct their own hybrid cultural knowledge and leverage that knowledge to engage in a meaningful way with the epistemology of science” (p. 358).

Several authors also highlight the significance of learning to speak a common language with members of the host country, which can be done both formally and informally (Berry, 1997; Croucher & Kramer, 2017; Myers & Nelson, 2018). For instance, in explaining cultural fusion, Croucher and Kramer (2017) describe the importance of communication between people of different cultures as key to refugee

acculturation. This aligns with the acculturation theories of Berry (1997), whose findings conclude that, ultimately, communication and education lead to positive adaptations.

Lastly, according to Watkins and Marsick (2010), group learning through communities of practice becomes an essential tool for people with similar cultures to “learn from and with one another as they pursue interests, opportunities, and challenges” (p. 66). In one mixed methods study, Gerber et al. (2017) look at the impact of shared learning through a refugee community garden. Their findings suggest shared learning with people of similar backgrounds can help optimize successful refugee acculturation by increasing social support, promoting networking opportunities, and reduce stress (p. 28). This type of learning segues into a need to review literature for an understanding of how refugees view the meaning of home and how sharing their neighborhood spaces with people from other cultures can affect the resettlement journey of refugees seeking to improve their lives.

In summary, refugee acculturation has been studied extensively over the years. While some researchers turn towards the findings of Berry (1997), others focus their studies on transnationalism (Alfred, 2010; Myers & Nelson, 2018) or cultural fusion (Croucher & Kramer, 2017, Sandel & Liang, 2010; Bilge, 2019). Still others study refugee acculturation through quantitative research. Another area of interest that emerges from literature involves the impact refugee resettlement has on the cultural adaptation of those immigrating to their new adopted countries (Hauck et al., 2014; Joyce & Liamputtong, 2017; Morrice, 2012). Several researchers agree that initial barriers to acculturation can be overcome by the social support they receive from their friends,



family, ethnic community, and the local support networks set in place to assist them (Hauck et al., 2014; Joyce & Liamputtong, 2017; Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011).

Finally, literature reveals that formal and informal learning during refugee resettlement can positively impact refugee acculturation (Croucher & Kramer, 2017; Myers & Nelson, 2018). Whereas many researchers focused their studies on the formal education programs offered to refugees upon arrival, others focus on the valuable informal learning refugees encounter in their daily experiences (Hauck et al., 2014; Morrice, 2012). Still others look at the constructs by which refugees can build knowledge (Harper, 2017; Pacheco, 2020; Selvi, 2007). Lastly, literature shows that group learning can be a powerful tool for people with similar cultures (Watkins & Marsick, 2010).

### **The Meaning of Home**

One of the goals of this research was to explore what the concept of home means to refugees living in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods. Refugees that have resettled in these communities have migrated from their native countries to refugee camps and then to the U.S. for resettlement. They have traveled far in their quest for a place to call home. To better understand their plight, the second half of this chapter reviews how current research depicts the meaning of home and homeownership, particularly in regard to refugee acculturation.

The meaning of home is not a new field of study. Researchers seeking to document the lived experiences of people from all walks of life have extensively explored this topic. For example, some scholars focus their research on the meaning of home through the lens of homelessness (Coward, 2018; Kidd & Evans, 2011). Still others look at home through the lens of low-income women who have experienced violence in

their homes at the hands of their intimate partners (Woodhall-Melnik et al., 2016). In exploring the Jewish diaspora, Hoffman (1999) argues that the Jews often refer to the concept of home as more spiritual than as a physical geographical space. Finally, Paulsen (2013) looks at home from a purely structural perspective of builders and their experiences on building show homes.

Furthermore, the meaning of home as it pertains to immigrants and refugees has undoubtedly produced several influential books and articles that offer a wealth of knowledge on this subject. For example, one recent study focuses on the lived experiences of Muslim refugee women resettled in Iceland (Kristjánsdóttir & Skaptadóttir, 2018). In this study, the authors argue that while many acculturation theories revolve around the assumption that refugees construct their identities where they currently reside, advances in technology now allow people to live their lives across borders by using social media to better communicate with friends and relatives that reside elsewhere. This aligns with the theory of transnationalism described above.

Within this wealth of academic knowledge lies the meaning of home as documented from an assortment of immigrant stories. In one unique example, Kusenbach (2017) explores the meaning of home through the lens of immigrant families residing in a mobile home park, arguing that ownership of a mobile home should be viewed as a sign of successful social mobility rather than a subpar dwelling to be avoided. Another study looks at how elderly Chinese immigrants who follow their adult children to a foreign country view the concept of home (Zhan et al., 2017).

Viewing the concept of home through a critical lens, Coward (2018) notes that researchers often depict home as a dwelling place usually associated with positive

emotions and safe refuge. Yet, for adults whose circumstances have led them to homelessness, this is certainly not the case. Ultimately, Coward's research shows that positive relationships are intrinsically linked to feelings of home, even for those with limited abilities or opportunities to develop close relationships. In conclusion, Coward writes that for the homeless population he studied, "experiences of a dwelling place were more likely to be negative rather than positive ... (yet) 'home' could be found in the most challenging of circumstances, and often in the most unlikely of places" (p. i).

Parra (2012) writes that the notion of home for many immigrants is "an imagined space of nostalgia embedded in their memory with the hope of someday returning to find and continue where they left off" (p. 17). This feeling, he writes, leaves them with a sense of displacement in their new homeland as well as feelings of isolation as they adapt to life in America. Such is not necessarily the case with immigrants classified as refugees, who do not have the option of returning to their countries of origin. While they may experience feelings of isolation and may have nostalgic images of home in their native land, they must navigate a new space called *home* for themselves and their families within their adopted country.

In her book *Refugees and the Meaning of Home*, Taylor (2015) explores the meaning of home through the lived experiences of Greek Cypriot refugees living in extended exile in London. In her work, she discovers that refugees forced to flee their native homes often reflect on past homes with mixed emotions. On the one hand, lost homes hold pleasant memories of joyful lived experiences with family and friends; yet, on the other hand, these same homes can hold unpleasant memories of unrest and persecution. Similarly, she writes, subsequent homes where refugees reside are "capable

of being a place of refuge and safe haven, and at the same time as being a place of alienation and discrimination” (p.4).

What becomes clear from a review of existing literature is that the meaning of home is much more than just a place of shelter. Several researchers describe home as having a distinction between a state of mind versus a physical dwelling (Boccagni, 2017; Coward, 2018; Kidd & Evans, 2011; Kinefuchi, 2010; Wiles et al., 2009). In his recent book, *Migration and the Search for Home*, Boccagni (2017) describes home as a relationship that must be actively pursued, writing that “significant others to which home implicitly points – partners, family members, kin, friends, neighbours – may be as or more significant than its material location” (p. 4).

Along a similar vein, Kinefuchi (2010) argues that home is a place where cultural meanings can continue to develop, writing that “it is at home, whether family, community, or otherwise, where cultural identity is maintained through the daily performance of traditions, customs, and rituals” (p. 231). Researchers such as Wiles et al. (2009) agree, concluding that people often express a solid attachment to place when describing their homes and often point to their gardens and favorite chairs as proof of their high level of comfort and attachment to their places of residency.

These multidimensional notions of home offer researchers a unique opportunity to glimpse how refugees ultimately define the meaning of homes given the unique challenges they face (Parra, 2012; Taylor, 2015). With this in mind, it is unsurprising that many researchers conclude that exploring the full lived experiences of people’s lives is crucial to defining a more realistic meaning of home for each individual (Anton & Lawrence, 2014; Blunt, 2005; Coward, 2018; Wiles et al., 2009).

## **Refugees and Homeownership**

The final area of interest that emerges from literature regarding refugees and the meaning of home involves the impact housing has on their cultural adaptation as they settle in their adopted countries. A review of literature shows that, while limited, there is indeed some research that links housing to the acculturation of refugees. A prime example is Poppe's (2013) study of refugee homeowners, in which he argues that for many refugees, the meaning of homeownership is closely linked to "identity, security, stability, achievement, family life, and status" (p. 219).

Generally, research trends regarding homeownership show that families benefit from living in their own homes (Eriks et al., 2015; Phillips et al., 2009), yet there is a critical need for affordable housing in this country, according to HUD (2018). One HUD report on housing challenges states, "A family with one full-time worker earning the minimum wage cannot afford the local fair-market rent for a two-bedroom apartment anywhere in the United States" (Albert, 2018, p. 5).

One avenue of research explores the benefits of families living in their own homes (Bate, 2017; Eriks et al., 2015; Phillips et al., 2009). Some researchers argue that stable housing helps acculturation by helping provide better access to social services such as education, healthcare, and employment opportunities (Carter & Polevychok, 2004). Bate (2017) discusses the influence homeownership has on the meaning of home with regard to financial stability. In his study, Bate argues that homeownership can help people achieve greater economic stability because their funds are invested in property. However, he points out that for people struggling to pay their housing costs, homeownership can have a negative effect on their perceptions of home.

More specific to refugee resettlement, other researchers turn their lenses toward the barriers immigrants face when considering homeownership (Hauck et al., 2014; Poppe, 2013; Shobe & Narine, 2005). In their work, Shobe and Narine (2005) outline four factors that hinder immigrants from homeownership, including lack of English fluency, no link to financial institutions, no established credit history, and inability to qualify for loans.

In a similar article specific to former refugees, Poppe (2013) identifies two pivotal factors former Burmese refugees consider when pondering homeownership—affordability and social networks. Another study takes the construct of social networking one step further by explaining that refugees often live in large family groups while in the respective refugee camps, and to decrease acculturation stress, resettlement agencies often place large family units within close proximity of each other (Hauck et al., 2014). In exploring refugees and homeownership, how then does literature view homeownership experiences of Habitat for Humanity homeowners?

### **Habitat for Humanity**

Habitat for Humanity, a non-profit global organization, is one entity that attempts to address several barriers to homeownership by helping low-income families attain affordable housing ([www.habitat.org](http://www.habitat.org)). Families that qualify for Habitat homes are offered no-interest, affordable mortgages once the house has been built ([www.habitatsa.org](http://www.habitatsa.org)). Additionally, Habitat for Humanity provides a platform for adult learning as all potential homeowners must attend 30 hours of required education workshops on topics such as budgeting, home maintenance, and safety. Furthermore, by working side-by-side with professional staff, volunteers, and other future homeowners,

partner families learn not only basic housebuilding skills but also develop lifelong connections with their soon-to-be neighbors as they build their neighborhood collectively.

Thus, for homeowners that partake in the Habitat for Humanity process of homebuilding, both factors identified by Poppe (2013)—affordability and social networks—can be satisfied. Also, the financial barriers that hinder immigrant homeownership identified by Shobe and Narine (2005) are minimized due to Habitat’s commitment to ease the financial burden of those in need of affordable housing.

Some studies specifically address the Habitat organization's positive impact on families seeking a permanent place of residence. For example, research conducted by Phillips et al. (2009) queried over 100 families living in Habitat homes and found that a significant number experienced economic, social, and psychological benefits of homeownership. Several homeowners interviewed admitted that before living in Habitat homes, they resided in “small, over-crowded, substandard apartments in high-crime areas” (p. 59). After becoming homeowners, most felt they were in a better place financially.

Phillips et al. (2009) also found that partner families residing in Habitat homes felt more confident, accomplished, and satisfied with their quality of life. Many also felt they were able to apply the problem-solving skills they learned during the homebuilding process to other life experiences. Because many of the volunteers that helped build their homes were fellow Habitat homeowners, many respondents Phillips et al. interviewed felt safe in their Habitat communities and felt secure connections with their neighbors.

In another mixed methods study, Eriks et al. (2015) look at the impact Habitat homeownership had on a large number of partner families, pointing out that most families felt their lifestyles had improved significantly since moving into their new neighborhoods. Several respondents in their article stated they felt safer in their new homes than their prior living arrangements and were more likely to know neighbors within their Habitat community. Many expressed pride in their ability to pay their bills and to save money for the future. Thirty percent of adults surveyed indicated they had returned to school (p. 17).

Finally, Mullins (2006) links learning with housebuilding from the perspective of the college students participating in an experimental learning activity. Thirty-two students spent a day at a Habitat housebuilding site volunteering alongside staff, partner families, and other community volunteers. Recognizing that learning occurred in several personal development areas such as self-esteem, leadership, problem-solving, and decision-making, the students concluded that participating in a Habitat build “served to connect people to one another” (Mullins, p. 227). Arguably, the same can be said of Habitat homeowners.

In summary, the meaning of home is also a well-documented subject in academia. In fact, researchers seeking to document the lived experiences of people such as refugees and immigrants often turn their lens towards finding out what *home* means to others. Some studies align with Taylor’s (2015) theoretical framework on the meaning of home by arguing that home is a place where cultural meanings can continue to develop (Kinefuchi, 2010) and by describing home as a place where strong attachments can occur (Cristoforetti et al.; Wiles et al., 2009).



Finally, while much has been written on how refugees with a history of forced migration view the concept of home, a review of literature shows that there has been limited research on the meaning of home as it relates to refugees as homeowners (Fischler et al., 2017; Freund, 2015). Also, while research trends often show the benefits of homeownership (Eriks et al., 2015; Phillips et al., 2009), some researchers feel that studies are needed to research the link between refugee acculturation and homeownership (Fischler et al., 2017; Poppe, 2013). Finally, research articles on homeownership within Habitat for Humanity are also rare and often inadequate.

### **Gaps in Literature**

This paper attempts to critique and synthesize what peer-reviewed literature reveals about refugee learning as constructed through acculturation, cultural fusion, and the meaning of home for Burmese refugees resettled in the U.S. Through this research, three gaps in literature emerge. First, whereas several academic articles explore the acculturation of immigrants and refugees in general, there is a clear need for studies that focus on the acculturation of refugees from Burma. These indigenous people from the mountains of Burma fled their villages from political unrest and violence. They lived in limbo in refugee camps in Thailand, many for up to 20 years before resettlement in the U.S. It is vital to study their lived experiences because their stories matter. Plus, research that explores Burmese refugee acculturation, their resettlement journeys, and their meaning of home makes a concrete contribution to a general body of knowledge.

Second, while some literature looks at the benefits and barriers to homeownership, gaps in literature fail to address the shared learning experiences of partner families that reside in Habitat homes. Habitat for Humanity, at its core, is about

homebuilding within community. In that sense, homebuilding through this environment is an excellent example of informal learning, both individually and collectively, with future neighbors and volunteer builders. Because this area of study has rarely been explored, homebuilding combined with a refugee's concept of the meaning of home through homeownership can add an insightful contribution to an unexplored area of knowledge.

Finally, while much research has been done on how refugees learn formally and informally, there is limited research that documents what refugees learn through their acculturation experiences. Also, while research looks at acculturation and cultural fusion through a theoretical lens, studies rarely look for examples of how cultural fusion impacts the daily lives of refugees who have fused cultural elements from their adopted country with elements of their own culture to make their world uniquely their own.

### **Conclusion**

The uniqueness of this project rests in its detailed summary of what literature reveals about refugee learning, the acculturation of Burmese refugees, and their understanding of the definition of home. By reviewing the literature on these topics, it became apparent that more study was needed to explore what refugees learn through their experiences of acculturation and cultural fusion. For this dissertation, I used Berry's acculturation theory and Croucher and Kramer's cultural fusion theory to form the theoretical base for an empirical study that looked at the learning that occurs through the experiences of acculturation of Burmese refugees. Specifically, I studied the resettlement journey of the Burmese Karenni and Karen ethnic groups and what they learned through this resettlement and beyond. The next chapter highlights the researcher methodology I used for this study.

### CHAPTER 3

#### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

*I once took a group of refugees to tour a local credit union. While there, the facility manager took me aside to tell me an interesting story. One of their refugee clients had come from a country that processed money differently. Distrustful of the American banking system, the client was having difficulty grasping the concept of direct deposit. Every two weeks, he came to the credit union and withdrew all the money his employer had directly deposited into his account. He would then proceed to count and recount the cash in his hands very carefully. Once satisfied the money was all there, he deposited the money back into his account and went home until his next payday.*

Moretti (2016) describes ethnography as “an embodied practice of learning in the presence of others” (p. 102). As a job readiness instructor for a local host agency, it was my responsibility to help refugee students transition from refugee camp experience to life in America. My students would frequently encounter confusion in dealing with issues that most Americans would consider routine. While my class curriculum included a field trip to a local bank to teach newly arriving refugees how to open a checking account, how to use a debit card, and the awe of holding \$100,000 in your hand, it simply never occurred to me to talk to my students about their feelings on the concept of direct deposit. My transition six years ago from employee to dedicated volunteer came with the unexpected realization that I was learning more from my students than I was teaching them. This realization, in turn, left me with a desire to know more about how refugees view their world. In time, my curiosity observing Burmese refugees build and acquire homes through Habitat for Humanity eventually led me to study the learning that

occurred that led them to seek homeownership in this unique way.

Using an ethnographical design, this study explores the impact that acculturation and cultural fusion had on the culture learning of Burmese ethnic groups that migrated to the United States as refugees and now reside in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods. As discussed in the preceding chapter, this area of study is relatively unexplored by researchers. This chapter outlines the research methods, approaches, and designs utilized in studying this important topic.

### **Overview of Research Design**

Ethnography is defined as “the scientific description of the customs of individual peoples and cultures” (Oxford Dictionaries). In essence, ethnography is the study of why people believe what they believe, explored within their natural setting. Luker (2008) explains that ethnography is a tool from which to understand life differently and tells students that “If you get to go home tonight, it’s participant observation, and if you don’t, it’s ethnography” (p. 156). LeCompte and Schensul (1999) describe ethnographers as “people who are curious about what people believe and why people behave as they do, and they are willing and able to explore and document or describe in detail such cultural behavior and beliefs in the natural setting in which they occur” (p. 168). Agar (1980) calls ethnography-questioning a “special blend of art and science” (p. 45). Finally, Wolcott (1999) describes ethnography as “a way of looking” and “a way of seeing” (p. 65).

Ethnography makes sense for this project for several reasons. First, ethnography allows for a cultural study of a specific population of people and how individuals within that group view their world (Agar, 1980; Creswell, 2013; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999;

Wolcott, 1999). When describing the study of culture within ethnographical research, Wolcott (1999) writes, “Culture refers to the various ways different groups go about their lives and to the belief systems associated with that behavior” (p. 25). Others point out that ethnography is a way to share cultural stories “from the group’s perspective as much as from the ethnographer’s point of view” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 27). Going one step further, visual ethnography through the use of photographs in a study allows researchers the opportunity to offer a glimpse at life experiences (Pink, 2013).

Having grown up in a multicultural environment, I have always been fascinated by the process of sharing cultures. My role as a volunteer has allowed me to share in the life journeys of people with ethnicities different than my own. Agar (1980) theorizes that some people gravitate towards ethnography because it “justifies their detachment from what others consider important” (p. 4). In contrast, others gravitate towards ethnography because it allows for the exploration of different cultures. As a scholar, I am confident I fall into the latter category.

Second, ethnography encourages flexibility and allows for the study to flow based on the needs of the participants. My friendships with refugees have certainly taught me the importance of flexibility when interacting with refugees. Ethnographical studies give researchers the flexibility to follow the data and change the interview direction as needed based on interviewee responses (Gibbs, 2007; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Wolcott, 1999). In describing the need for adaptability, Rubin and Rubin (1995) compare interviews to a golf game where “you think about the overall direction yet maintain flexibility to adapt to what you have heard” (p. 159).

Third, ethnography allowed me the opportunity to meet with and interview participants in their home environments, an essential interview technique promoted by several researchers (Creswell, 2013; Gibbs, 2007; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Wolcott, 1999). Many researchers see great value in understanding and explaining social experiences that occur outside of a classroom or laboratory setting (Agar, 1980; Gibbs, 2007; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Wolcott, 1999). Finally, I wanted to study the rich heritage of this ethnic community in a place where they are most comfortable—their home environments. Being fully immersed physically within these communities was an essential component of my research.

### **Site and Participant Selection**

LeCompte and Schensul (1999) argue that ethnography allows a researcher to enter a field setting as “an invited guest” who can fully engage in the natural setting of the study’s participants. Because this research study focused on the lived experiences of Burmese homeowners that dwell in Habitat for Humanity homes, the site selection for this study was one central Texas city where over 40 Burmese refugee families (Karen, Karenni, Chin, etc.) have purchased homes through the Habitat organization. Some members of the local Burmese community have purchased homes outside the Habitat for Humanity realm, and other families live in rented houses or apartments. This study, however, was inclusive of families that reside in three Habitat neighborhoods located in different areas of the city.

The first Habitat neighborhood (Community 1) is comprised of just over 150 homes on the far southwest side of the city. It hosts a melting pot of ethnicities, including several refugee/former refugee families from many counties. Because their houses were

built on donated farmland, the community is surrounded by cornfields and open space. The second Habitat neighborhood (Community 2) is a small but growing neighborhood of Habitat homes located on a plot of farmland on the city's west side. Home construction began on this site in 2016 and was recently completed. Finally, the third site (Community 3) is a small group of Habitat homes also located on the west side of the city. All the homes in this community are tucked together on three city blocks within a large residential area.

Within these proposed site selections, two culture-sharing groups can be studied. One involves the sharing of ethnicity, the Burmese community. The other consists of the sharing of homeownership within Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods. Because this research project focuses on Burmese homeowners residing in Habitat homes, all participants selected fell within these two culture-sharing groups.

### **Participants**

To gain perspective on the learning that occurs through the acculturation process of resettled refugees, participants for this study were recruited based on criteria sampling strategies (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Because one of the goals of this project was to study one specific subset of refugees living in specific neighborhoods in one central Texas city, purposeful selection was chosen for this research study (Roberts, 2010). Utilizing this strategy, only Burmese Karenni and Karen refugees/former refugees who were current Habitat for Humanity homeowners living in any of the three sites described above were invited to participate in this project. Both men and women were recruited for this project, and homeowners of all ages were encouraged to participate. Additionally, interpreters aided non-English speaking participants.

For this study, 24 community members that met the criteria were selected to participate. Of these, 10 were Burmese Karen, and 14 were Burmese Karenni (see Table 3.1) and included 16 females and eight males. To aid in the selection process, I sought the assistance of a “gatekeeper” to gain access within the community to promote a “snowball” recruitment of other participants (Creswell, 2013). Because of the nature of this subject, considering the voices of the refugees was essential to understanding their lived experiences (Young et al., 2018). Before the study began, I was mindful of the fact that respondents that participated in the interview process might have different viewpoints and life experiences, despite being from a cultural-sharing community. For instance, some of the Burmese have memories of fleeing Burma and crossing into the Thailand refugee camps seeking safety, but others were born in the refugee camps and thus have no memories of Burma. These differences have added richness to the research.

To ensure the study’s anonymity and respect the participants’ privacy, I assigned pseudonyms to participants, trying to choose names reflective of each participant’s ethnicity. Participants were recruited and selected within a two-week period. Funding from my doctoral program allowed me to present all 24 study participants gift cards to a local home improvement store in appreciation for their time.

**Table 3.1** Breakdown of Participants

	<b>Karen</b>	<b>Karenni</b>
<b>Focus Group interview members:</b>	1 group – 5	1 group – 4
<b>Other interviewed participants:</b>	1) Married father – 1 2) Single man – 1 3) Couple – 2 4) Married father – 1	1) Single mom – 1 2) Couple – 2 3) Couple – 2 4) Couple – 2 5) Couple – 2 6) Single mom – 1
<b>Total # of participants: 24</b>	10 Karen	14 Karenni



## **Data Collection Procedures**

For this study, I created a data design matrix to assist in the organization of both the data collection and data analysis procedures in this project (see Appendix A). LeCompte and Schensul (1999) encourage ethnographers to utilize a matrix as an organizational tool to assist in the development of a concrete, well-designed study. To better explore the research questions of this study centering around how Burmese refugees learned through acculturation and cultural fusion, I chose a variety of data collection sources, including two focus groups, 10 semi-structured interviews, participatory observations, field notes, and journal writing. While all are valuable data collection tools, some researchers favor some more than others. For example, LeCompte and Schensul contend that while researchers' eyes and ears are the primary tools for data collection, a researcher cannot conduct an ethnographical study without interviews. Luker (2008), on the other hand, is a strong proponent of focus groups, arguing that "the very structure of a focus group means that people are constantly creating slots for each other" (p. 183). Appendix A shows a detailed account of how the data collection sources were utilized to answer the research questions for this study.

Three interpreters were used for this project. One was a Burmese Karen who speaks the ethnic language, Karen. The second was Burmese Karenni who speaks the ethnic language Karenni, Kayah, and the third speaks the ethnic language, Karenni Kayan. Before the study began, I reviewed confidentiality guidelines with each of them to make sure they understood the importance of confidentiality.

With the assistance of these interpreters, each participant was asked to give verbal informed consent before participating in either the focus group or the individual

interviews. Each participant was provided with a written version highlighting the main elements of their verbal consent for reference after the study. No physical papers were kept because signatures were not required.

### **Impact of the Pandemic**

This study was conducted during the middle of a pandemic which necessitated two significant changes in my original procedural plan of action. The first change involved the anticipated location of the interviews. Initially, I was hoping to meet with participants inside their homes, but this was not possible due to social distancing restrictions. Not being able to enter their homes was disappointing for all of us, but it allowed me a glimpse of their lives within the context of their neighborhood. To adhere to social distancing rules, all interviews were conducted outside the participants' homes, and all interviewees, interpreters, and the researcher wore masks and sat at least 6 feet apart. All the participants were comfortable and at ease in this environment.

The second change involved the number of focus group interviews versus individual interviews. I originally planned to include four group interviews and six individual participants. Instead, I conducted two focus group interviews, five individual interviews, and five interviews involving married couples.

### **Semi-structured Interviews**

For this study, I conducted five individual interviews and five couple interviews. I worked with the “gatekeeper” to recruit volunteers and had no trouble finding participants willing to consent to be interviewed. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. Again, translators were used when needed. Before each interview, I followed a pre-written interview script written in English (see Appendix B), reminding them about

the purpose of the study and reviewing the participant's verbal consent. Again, no signatures were required. A copy of sample interview questions is attached (see Appendix C).

With their permission, interviews were audio-recorded. Many researchers stress the importance of recording interviews to capture the true essence of the conversation (Boudreault-Fournier, 2016; Creswell, 2013; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Every participant agreed to be recorded. Additionally, I took photos of home exteriors, gardens, and their surrounding neighborhood with participant permission as per the verbal consent.

### **Focus Group Interviews**

For this study, two focus group interviews were conducted. The first group was comprised of four Karenni women whom I met with twice. The initial interview lasted about 40 minutes, but I forgot the gift cards I planned to give them, so I returned the next day to find them all together once again. On the second day, we met for about 20 minutes. The second group I interviewed included five Karen women and met for approximately one hour. Initially, I had arranged to interview four women, but one of their friends, a Karen neighbor, was passing by just after I arrived, and the Karen women of the group beckoned her to join us.

Both focus group interviews were conducted outside the homes of one of the participants, and an interpreter translated for each group. At the start of each group interview, I followed a pre-written focus group script written in English (see Appendix B), reminding the participants about the purpose of the study and reviewing the verbal consent. Discussion topics included resettlement journeys, homeownership, homebuilding, learning, and the meaning of home. To protect the privacy of group

members, all transcripts were coded with pseudonyms, and the group was asked not to reveal what was discussed in the group interview with anyone else. The discussions were audiotaped to ensure accuracy. Throughout the study, I took detailed field notes. A copy of sample group interview questions is attached (see Appendix C).

For this study, I used Berry's acculturation theory and Kramer's cultural fusion theory to form a theoretical base. Thus, many of the questions asked in the interview protocol are viewed from this theoretical lens. Again, because ethnographical studies give researchers the flexibility to follow the data, the direction of each interview changed based on interviewee responses (Gibbs, 2007; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

### **Observations**

I incorporated as many observations as I could directly into the interview process to allow the interview to flow organically. Agar (1980) writes that it is more beneficial for ethnographers to include observations as part of the interview rather than to write them down on another day. Thus, while I took field notes, I also followed Agar's suggestion and worked as many of my observations into the conversation as possible. For example, during one interview, we had a long discussion about a lemon tree covered with lemons which led to a conversation about trees and plants that grow in Burma versus in the U.S. In addition to audio recording and taking notes, I asked the participants if I could take photos of items of interest that I observed.

Because I could not enter their homes, I asked them if they would be willing to step into their houses and take pictures to share with me of things they felt represented home. For instance, I was fascinated with photos that showed pictures of hallways. One participant shared with me that the picture represented that his family lived in a home

with three bedrooms. Similarly, I was mindful of any sensory impressions I experienced, such as plants in their gardens and smells from the neighborhood, and I used these observations to elicit additional information during the interview. Culhane (2016) argues that through our senses, ethnographers can “come to know ourselves and others as multisensory, embodied beings engaged in co-creating knowledge” (p. 61).

### **Field Notes and Journal Writing**

To optimize my participatory observations, I collected data by taking field notes before, during, and after each interview as I observed the participants, their homes, their neighborhoods, and their interactions with others. These notes also included descriptions of pictures the participants shared with me of artifacts from their homes, as well as notations regarding behaviors, beliefs, and other relevant observations. Similarly, I wrote journal notes throughout the study, especially after each interview. These notes were an essential component of the data collection process because they helped me reflect on my experiences throughout this study (Creswell, 2013; Luker, 2008). The details contained within the field notes and the journal reflections were instrumental when analyzing the data.

### **Data Storage**

Copies of data collection tools, consent forms, transcriptions of audio recordings, and field notes are contained within a final report. All audio files, field notes, observation notes, and transcriptions have been uploaded to Texas State OneDrive for safe storage.

Finally, in describing data analysis procedures for qualitative research, Gibbs (2007) observes that “analysis can, and should, start in the field” (p. 3). Following his suggestion, I collected and analyzed the data concurrently throughout this project,

starting from my first observations at the beginning of the project. The data collection phase of this research study took about three weeks to complete.

### **Data Management and Analysis**

Similar to data collection, a data design matrix was essential in assisting with the organization of the data analysis portion of this study (see Appendix A). As before, this system guided me in answering the research questions for this study. I set an initial timeline for this research, but due to the ethnography component of the study, the pandemic necessitated the need for me to revise it. I simply could not stay true to ethnography if I could not interact with my participants in their home environment. Thus, my revised timeline followed a data-driven approach. This is supported by theories that research should include the flexibility to redesign or adjust a study to accommodate unanticipated insights should they arise (Gibbs, 2007; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Maxwell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Wolcott, 1999).

Creswell (2013) outlines an organizational framework for the data analysis of ethnographical research, which highlights the following characteristics:

- Create and organize files for data
- Read through text, make margin notes, form initial codes
- Describe the social setting, actors, events; draw picture of setting
- Analyze data for themes and patterned regularities
- Interpret and make sense of the findings – how the culture “works”
- Present narrative presentation augmented by tables, figures, and sketches (p. 190–191)

This checklist aligns with Wolcott’s (1994) approach to analyzing data: description,

analysis, and interpretation. Broken down further, the approach is designed to “highlight specific information in description, identify patterns of regularity, contextualize with the framework from the literature review, and display findings as a narrative supported by tables, charts, diagrams, and figures” (Creswell, 2013, p. 181). The analyses of this study followed a synergetic combination of both Creswell’s and Wolcott’s approaches.

The first step in this process was to organize and thoroughly review the data. This included listening to the audio recordings after each interview session, writing initial field notes, journaling, and forming initial codes. After a thorough review, I manually transcribed the interviews, focus groups, field notes, and journal writings. In discussing initial fieldwork, Agar (1980) advises researchers to “read the transcripts in their entirety several times. Immerse yourself in the details, trying to get a sense of the interview as a whole before breaking it into parts” (p. 103). Following this advice, I compared the written transcripts to the audio recordings to check for errors. During this process, I identified spots in the audio recordings where I felt I was missing information. Thus, I asked the interpreters to listen to these parts of the audio recordings and translate the exact words. I continued this process until I was comfortable that the data was accurate.

Next, I identified patterns within the data. This vital step helps researchers find meaning within the data (Agar, 1980; Creswell, 2013; Wolcott, 1999). Wolcott (1999) advises researchers seeking patterns that “the ethnographer’s task is to bring discrete observations together in a way that makes it possible to discern cultural patterns” (p. 255). For this step, I uploaded all transcribed files to Dedoose ([www.dedoose.com](http://www.dedoose.com)), an online coding software that helps researchers identify emergent themes that arise from qualitative data. Through Dedoose, I created an initial set of codes (Level 1) and a higher

level of codes (Level 2) to help better scrutinize the data. Lastly, I compiled a list of codes and their descriptions and updated them as needed. (Saldaña, 2009). For example, after coding the first interview, I decided to split the *Homebuilding* code into three parts – *Homebuilding in Burma*, *Homebuilding in Thailand*, and *Homebuilding through Habitat for Humanity*. A copy of this codebook is included within this study (see Appendix D).

In the third step of the data analysis process, I analyzed and compared themes that emerge from data collection to themes identified during the literature review. This step, according to LeCompte and Schensul (1999), allows researchers to “make sense of what they have learned” (p. 147) in the context of a larger body of theoretical knowledge.

During the final step in data analysis, I completed the study by drawing conclusions from the previous steps and preparing a comprehensive narrative supported by findings. Wolcott (1994) argues that the final document of ethnography should begin with a straightforward, detailed description of the culture-sharing group and their setting. Therefore, as part of the detailed supporting documentation, this dissertation includes a thorough description of the Habitat for Humanity organization as well as vignettes of each participant who completed an individual interview with me. Like data collection documents, all documentation relating to the data analysis portion of this study was uploaded to Texas State OneDrive for secure storage.

### **Trustworthiness of Study**

While my relationship with the potential participants for this study has been previously documented, I wish to elaborate once more on this issue. For nearly all, I was their first teacher in the U.S., an employee of the host agency that oversaw their resettlement. Sometimes, I was part of the welcoming committee that greeted their first



step on American soil. Often, I was the person that showed them how to use the stove, how to put sheets on a bed, how to shop in a grocery store, and how to ride the city bus to work. More recently, several of the Burmese adults attended a citizenship class I taught on Sunday mornings, and I am often invited to visit families in their homes.

This relationship, of course, raises issues of validity, reliability, and positionality, all necessary components to establishing the trustworthiness of a study. For example, did my familiarity with my participants cause me to make certain assumptions that made it difficult to validate the results of the study? Or did my closeness to the participants make me less likely to listen carefully to the participants, thereby making this study less reliable? Finally, did my positionality interfere with my ability to truly observe what I see, hear, and smell during interviews?

To help optimize the validity of this information, I followed a triangulation approach by using multiple data sources to compare various statements and observations. Promoted by many ethnographical researchers, triangulation is a process whereby researchers obtain different viewpoints on a subject matter by using multiple data sources to reflect meaning more accurately within the data (Gibbs, 2007; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999) and to ensure correct interpretations are made (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). In describing the importance of using triangulation in ethnography, LeCompte and Schensul (1999) write that ethnography “requires reconstruction of the cultural characteristics of the people or groups under study; doing so is a complex process that requires multiple sources of data, each of which is used to confirm the accuracy of the others” (p.130).

Next, to ensure the reliability of this study, I used a high-quality recorder to record all interviews where the respondent gave permission. For many ethnographers, recording interviews is critical to ensuring that the data collection will be accurate and reliable (Boudreault-Fournier, 2016; Creswell, 2013; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Also, I transcribed all the interviews myself to minimize errors and safeguard respondent identity for accuracy and reliability. Once completed, I reviewed the interview audio files and compared them to the transcripts for errors. Additionally, I carefully created a codebook (Saldaña, 2009) to ensure that all interviews, observations, and field notes were coded similarly.

Finally, while my unique relationship with potential participants gives me a distinct level of positionality, some researchers argue that any study that includes a researcher/interviewee component automatically gives power to the researcher (Dempsey, 2018). Based on Chavez's (2008) description of outsider versus insider, I am an outsider who spends a lot of time on the inside; thus, I have easy access to Burmese homeowners living in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods and am familiar with the basic inner workings of the community. According to Chavez, this comes with both advantages and disadvantages, noting the potential for researchers to miss meaning among the familiar. Ultimately, he recommends that novice scholars like me "develop strong observational skills that help them to differentiate what they know from what they see" (p. 491). Similarly, Luker (2008) agrees that researchers who know their participants well should be extra vigilant in their observations, particularly when writing journal notes. "Because you know the setting so well, you (may) overlook what to the outside observer would seem quite strange" (p. 157), he argues. Taking the solution one step

further, Luker encourages researchers to write journal notes as soon as the interview is complete, reasoning that overlooked nuances are more likely to be discovered through the flow of written words. Based on these recommendations, I chose to incorporate journaling as a data collection source.

Further reflecting on positionality and my role as an observer, I did my best to monitor my beliefs, unintended stereotypes, and observation styles. Wolcott (1999) contends that ethnographers tend to become too passive or too active while engaging in the interview process. In describing the importance of an observer's role, Wolcott writes, "Firsthand experience as a participant observer is both starting point and the filter through which everything else is screened as we make sense of all that we have observed" (p. 51). Observers, he argues, must find the balance between passive and active observation through careful preassessment of their beliefs and observation styles. Another researcher offers a cautionary tale on the critical need for researchers not to let preconceived stereotypes and personal egos get in the way of their ability to interact with the study's participants (Petty, 1997). After reflecting on her failed attempts to secure interviews with families from a different race than her, she concluded that her initial viewpoint, labeling herself as "the expert," ultimately led to the project's failure.

My role in this study, thus, came with the responsibility to earnestly self-reflect on my positionality, my role as a researcher, and my unintentional assumptions before, during, and after the data collection and analysis process. In addition to self-reflecting and journaling, I was continually mindful of the fact that refugees are considered a vulnerable population. As such, I took extra precautions to preserve this study's integrity,

safeguard the identity of participants, and ensure that participants were not viewed from a deficit lens.

### **Conclusion**

There is a clear need to further study the learning that occurs through the acculturation of newly resettled refugees so that communities that welcome them can better understand their challenges and successes and thus better assist them. At present, little has been written on how the lessons are learned through acculturation, and this research paper informs knowledge by exploring this link. The focus of my research involved the learning that occurs through refugee acculturation; thus, ethnography was ideally suited for this project. This empirical study was carefully planned and structured utilizing a data collection/analysis matrix outlined by LeCompte and Schensul (1999). Because I know many of the potential participants for this study, I reflected deeply on this project and its validity, reliability, and positionality.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **PARTICIPANTS**

Wolcott (1999) posits that a good ethnographer helps other people tell their stories. Following this approach, this qualitative study explores the lived experiences of the Burmese refugees who left their ancestral lands to find a resting place where they and their families could live with the promise of a better future. From the mountains of Burma to resettlement in the U.S., they have found happiness as homeowners, living in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods in relative peace and harmony. These are the people in the neighborhood. Their stories of resilience and perseverance are powerful, captivating, and inspirational.

Before presenting this study's findings, this chapter introduces these remarkable participants through a series of vignettes that offer a glimpse into the world of a group of people very rarely studied. I am both honored and humbled at the opportunity to help them document their stories.

In total, twenty-four Burmese homeowners participated in the project, including five couples (10), five individuals (5), and two focus groups (9). Each interview and focus group conversation added strength, insight, and richness to the dialogue and helped unpack the research questions of this study. To ensure the study's anonymity and respect the participants' privacy, I assigned pseudonyms to the participants, choosing names reflective of each participant's ethnicity.

## Mi Meh

Mi Meh, a single mother, is standing on the front porch of her blue Habitat home when I arrive. She is expecting me, and a big smile appears on her face when I pull up. I park behind a car with large letters written across the back windshield. I look at the letters, but they are written in a language I recognize but cannot read. As I pass by the front of the car, I see the word *Karenni* written in equally large English letters across the front windshield.

The car belongs to her oldest son, I find out later. Adjusting my mask, I step out of my car and close the door. On the front porch, I notice Mi Meh pulling on her mask as well. Walking up the sidewalk, I say hello and ask if the interpreter has arrived yet. Mi Meh shakes her head, then opens her front door and motions me inside. Sadly, I shake my head in reply and, looking around, am relieved to see the interpreter walking up the driveway. Through

the interpreter, I explain that while I want to enter, I am restricted by my university from entering anyone's home during this time of COVID.

We agree to sit outside on the back porch. As we walk to the backyard, I am stunned by the lush gardens springing forth from all corners of the yard. Mi Meh leads me to a large, wooden deck attached to the house. The vivid, honey-brown lacquer shining off the wood gives the setting an almost magical glow. As I take off my shoes to



**Figure 4.1** Karenni Car at Sunset  
*Source.* Author

step onto the deck, I notice that I am standing next to an outdoor kitchen with a workbench, a propane tank, a large wok, and several large cooking utensils. High above us is a wooden overhang that covers both the deck and the outdoor kitchen. In the middle of the deck stands a thin, ginger-colored kitten with a swollen eye.



**Figure 4.2** Backyard Garden  
*Source.* Author

Also on the deck but closer to the back door is a familiar grouping of shoes, something I have seen many times at refugee homes I have visited and now also at my own. The shoes, mostly sandals, are neatly placed in pairs but do not necessarily align with the other shoes.

It is a hot day but does not feel too hot, thanks to a comfortable breeze that blows through the air. Here, the houses are close

together, and there is activity in several of the backyards that share a fence line with Mi Meh. Behind and to the left, the neighbors are hosting a birthday party. I take a moment to inhale the smell of barbequed chicken on the grill. The party is in full swing. No social distancing going on over there, I think to myself as I take in the loud music, the balloon arch, and the scores of children scrambling over a gigantic water slide taking up most of the driveway.

The neighbors directly to the right of Mi Meh's home are also outside, enjoying the evening and barbequing. They see me and wave, recognizing me as a teacher and

friend from our local church. Waving back, I grin beneath my mask as they beckon me to come to eat with them. Maybe another time, I shout back.

Mi Meh goes into her home and returns with two teas, two bottles of water, and a bowl of figs that she sets on the ground at my feet. She beckons me to sit, and we sit on opposite ends of the porch with our masks on and our legs tucked under us. The kitten promptly comes over to investigate the figs. As she attempts to shoo the kitten away, Mi Meh tells me through the interpreter that it is not hers; it just shows up sometimes. She is trying not to feed it because she does not want it to stay.

As she sits, I admire her traditional Karenni skirt, red and black, with a white floral top. Eventually, the kitten settles down between us and takes a nap. Between the meowing, the music, the sounds of kids playing, and the masks, I am concerned that our voices may come out muffled on the recorder, but they come out amazingly clear, much to my relief. With the interpreter's assistance, I explain to Mi Meh again why I have come and obtaining oral consent, I push record on the recorder, and we begin.



## Hsaw Reh and Pray Meh

As I walk up to the home of Hsaw Reh and Pray Meh, one of their daughters opens the front door and directs me to the side of the house, where I enter the backyard through a gate in the wooden fence. Immediately, I am again transported into a garden paradise. In front of me is a large wooden shed from which Hsaw Reh emerges, holding three lawn chairs. He greets me and directs me to the back porch, a simple concrete slab with a picnic table on it.

Hsaw Reh hands me a chair, and I place it on one side of a picnic table.



**Figure 4.3** Lemongrass  
*Source.* Author

Pray Meh steps outside, and the couple sits in the chairs on the opposite side of the picnic table. The interpreter stands close to the participants as I set the recorder on top of the table between us. Silently, I say a quick prayer that our conversation will record clearly, despite our masks.

Like most Burmese refugees I encounter, Hsaw Reh and Pray Meh are shy, soft-spoken, gentle people. Of the two, Hsaw Reh appears to be

the most reserved and, with a stoic face, offers short answers to my questions. On the other hand, Pray Meh gives lengthy responses, and her smile is apparent, despite her mask. They live next door to Mi Meh, and as I was leaving her home the day before, one of their older daughters ran out to hand me a plate full of food.

Unfortunately, I ate most of it in my excitement before it occurred to me to take a picture. After I compliment Hsaw Reh and Pray Meh on the food they gave me the day before, Pray Meh promptly invites me to stay after the interview so they can feed me again. Perhaps another time, I say.

During our discussion, I ask about the neighbors. On one side is Mi Meh and her family, with whom they get along very well. However, Pray Meh



**Figure 4.4** Meal-to-go  
*Source.* Author

shared that the neighbors on the other side got upset with them one day when they could not understand what the neighbors were trying to say to them. They only know that the people must be unhappy with them about something because, after the incident, the neighbors put up the tall, green privacy fence.

Before I go, I tell them I will ask one final question, then I ask, “Who is the most shy—mother or father?” His quick, decisive response makes both his wife and the interpreter laugh, and the interpreter tells me his words, “I am not shy!” We all laugh at both his quick response and his hearty laugh that follows. When I leave, he thanks me for always trying to help them. Despite the mask, the delighted look he gives me is the most animated I have ever seen his face.

## David Say and Sa Rah Meh

David Say and Sa Rah Meh, a young couple with two sons, have the distinction of being the first Karenni family to purchase a Habitat home. Their home resides in a fully established Habitat neighborhood where homebuilding has ceased. As I pull up, I see several children of varying ages chasing each other back and forth across the front yard, the driveway, and the street in front of their house. The kids are of different ethnicities, yet I can hear their laughter as they call out to each other in English, their common language. David tells me that they often come over to his house to play, but sometimes they play at the neighbor's house, who gives them all special treats. The family's new puppy is happily enjoying the chase, as evidenced by her raspy bark and wagging tail.

It is early evening, and the sun will be setting soon. We sit on the back porch to talk. My face feels sweaty and



**Figure 4.5** Back Porch of Home  
*Source.* Author

uncomfortable under my mask, but I enjoy the cool breeze after a hot day. Our chairs are placed 8 feet apart for social distancing and sitting on a concrete slab that is 14 inches high. David Say proudly tells me that one of his neighbors has just put it in for them, and both he and his wife are pleased with the way it turned out.

The house backs up into a large open field, giving it a spacious feel that the other homes lack. Close to the back fence, a small tree is covered with so many lemons that two of its branches touch the ground. Glancing up, I notice a lone shoe on the roof. When

I point this out to the couple, David Say tells me that the shoe belongs to his son.

Laughing, he says, “My child plays too much.”



**Figure 4.6** Lemon Tree  
*Source.* Author

After almost an hour of fascinating conversation, the couple says they have made me some Karenni food and asks if I wish to eat now. Regretfully, I tell them that I cannot stay due to COVID restrictions but will happily take just a little bit of food to go. A few minutes later, I walk to my car with two plates overflowing with food. I say *dubwe* (thank you), and they walk with me to the front of the house where the kids are playing. Sa

Rah Meh notices that one of her sons is not wearing shoes. Shaking her head, she retrieves his sandals from the front porch, scoops up the protesting child, puts the shoes on his feet, then sets him down. With an exasperated sigh, Sa Rah Meh tells me that she cannot keep him from going outside without his shoes. Trying not to wince at the thought of boys’ bare feet on the hot ground, I walk away, resisting the urge to glance up at the lone shoe on the rooftop.

## Mu Ria

When I knock on the door, Mu Ria invites me in but does not understand why I do not enter, despite my English explanation that I cannot come in due to COVID restrictions. Standing in the doorway, she shakes her head at me, not fully understanding. Mu Ria is a single mother who lives with an adult son and a nephew. She is also a Karenni Kayan, a Burmese woman known as a Karenni long neck, who started wearing brass coils around her neck when she was five years old.

Now, Mu Ria only wears coils on special occasions. They are plastic, not brass, which



**Figure 4.7** Kayan Woman  
*Source.* Author

allows her the freedom to wear them at will. Today, she is not wearing the coils, but rather she has a high collar around her neck, glasses, a mask, and a long black ponytail that swings across her back as she walks.

Like other Karenni, Mu Ria knows some English, but it takes her a while

before she is confident in communicating with me. While both Mu Ria and my usual interpreter are both Karenni, they are of different ethnicities and do not share a common language. Thus, I have arranged for her son to interpret. He is coming soon but has not yet arrived, so to distract her, I ask if she can show me her backyard. Nodding her head, Mu Ria closes her front door then leads me to the side of her house and through a wide gate to the backyard. As we walk, she repeatedly complains, saying English words over and over. *Too hot. Too hot. Inside inside.* Entering her backyard, her mood shifts as she

eagerly starts to describe her garden to me in halting English. *This is pepper. Good food. Good. Amazing. Amazing.*

The excitement of her voice, her enchanting mannerisms, and her lush garden all leave me entranced by the moment. Her garden is indeed impressive. There is so much to see. As she leads me from plant to plant, I am awed by the beauty. *Good. No good. Good. Need water. Need water. Amazing.* As I follow her, I notice a hideous spider on her neck. It is about the size of a nickel, has long legs, and a red ball on its back. Trying not to panic, I quickly brush it off her. Mu Ria continues talking as she turns, looks down at the ground, picks the spider up, squashes it in her fingers, then rubs her fingers together to let



**Figure 4.8** Vining Plants  
*Source.* Author

the spider fall to the ground. Still, she talks. *Amazing. Amazing. Need water. Too hot.*

When she finishes her fascinating tour, Mu Ria turns on the faucet and kicks off her sandals to rinse her feet with the water hose. Directing me to meet her on the front porch, she heads back inside. I walk around the house just in time to see her son walking up the pathway.

He lives four houses down, and after greeting me, he tells me that his wife has prepared food for me at their home. I

remind them about my study, and we discuss the day's heat. Perhaps Wednesday would be a better day to interview her. The weather will be cooler, I say, and Mu Ria agrees.



## Pray Reh and Nga Meh

Despite moving into their Habitat home the day before, Pray Reh, Nga Meh, and their children are not the block's newest residents. A moving truck is parked in front of the house next door, and the neighbors are unloading furniture and carrying it into the house. As I park, Pray Reh is adjusting the sprinkler so that most of the water lands on the grass. Mask in place, I dart up the driveway, trying with limited success to time my steps to avoid the water droplets. It is almost dark, and I worry there will not be enough light for me to read the questions on my paper but to my relief, the front porch light lets off a bright glow. The shades in the house are also up, letting more light shine onto the porch.

Glancing in through the front window, I see that much of the house is empty. There is minimal furniture inside. I see pots and pans, cups, plates, and food items on the stove and the kitchen counters. The doors to the bedrooms are open, and two of the three bedrooms have mattresses resting on the floor, piled high with blankets. Three kids play with a ball in the living room, navigating around what appears to be newly purchased items – a broom, a bucket and mop, a few cleaning supplies. The kids run to the window and stare at me when they see me. I wave, and the oldest child shyly returns my wave. The other two run to their mother who has just walked into the living room carrying an infant in her arms. Nga Meh waves to me, ushers the kids away, and steps outside.



**Figure 4.9** Planted Tree  
*Source.* Pray Reh

Pray Reh has set up a chair for me on one end of the porch, and after initial greetings, I sit and pull out my recorder and notes from my bookbag. From the window, three curious faces continue to peer out at me. The interpreter has not arrived yet, so I take the opportunity to ask Pray Reh and Nga Meh how things are going and what they



**Figure 4.10** New Garden  
*Source.* Pray Reh

need for their home. I will make a list, I tell him, and we will see if we can get donations from the church. Pray Reh understands most of what I am saying if I talk slow enough.

Between my simplified English and hand gestures and his halting responses in English, a list emerges. A dining room table and chairs. A bed for his daughter. A television. Their one sofa must be out of my sightline because I do not notice it, but they ask if they can please have another. A

bike for his oldest son. As I write down the list, I also jot down a reminder to email our parish's refugee support ministry volunteers to help secure these items. As we talk, I can tell that the young couple is very excited to be in their new house. Despite the masks blocking their expressions, their joy shines through.



## Bu Htoo

Bu Htoo, a Burmese Karen, has a bright smile, contagious laughter, and helpful demeanor that makes him a friend to all. Bu Htoo is also the recent owner of a new Habitat home, having moved in two months before. His move-in date was delayed for several months due to COVID restrictions, yet Bu Htoo has already met his neighbors on either side. While they have not had much opportunity to converse yet, they have exchanged food. One day Bu Htoo offered Burmese food to a neighbor, and a few hours later, the neighbor came to his door asking if he could pay him for more, Bu Htoo recalls with amusement.



**Figure 4.11** Front Porch  
*Source.* Bu Htoo

Happy in his new home, Bu Htoo once dreamed of attending Harvard University. When he was in high school, Bu Htoo met a couple of visiting doctors at the refugee camp who encouraged him to come to America for a good education. They had attended Harvard University and suggested that he do the same. That one conversation planted a seed in his young mind that perhaps one day, he too might receive his education at Harvard. While he never made it to Harvard, Bu Htoo realized part of his dream of coming to the U.S. for an education by recently completing a pastoral degree at an online Bible college. He is currently furthering his education by attending a local community college while working full-time, plus enjoying his new status as a homeowner.

Wearing masks, we sit in chairs on opposite ends of his beautifully decorated front porch with the recorder on a small table between us. Because he knows English well, our conversation flows smoothly as I listen to his animated stories regarding his journey to America, his excitement over his new home, and his ministry. As a youth pastor, he mentors many of the Burmese youth in the neighborhood.

Bu Htoo's bright, yellow house is accentuated with white trim and colorful flowers. On the front porch hang soft, white curtains. I compliment him on the beauty of the home then ask him why he chose the color. He says his goal was white trim, but since other neighbors had

already selected color pallets that contained white trim, his options were limited. We agree that yellow, the color of the sun, is indeed a glorious color for a home.



**Figure 4.12** Yellow Home  
*Source.* Author

## Pa Noe

Pulling up to the home of Pa Noe and his family always thrills me. Amidst all the pastels in this Habitat neighborhood sits a beautiful, bright red house with red trim and red street address numbers. As I walk with the interpreter up the front pathway, the fragrant smells of flowers drift up to me. Some are in pots; others are planted in front of the red railing.

Behind the railing sits a small shelf overflowing with shoes of all sizes. On the front door hangs a wreath wrapped in red ribbon and adorned with flowers. We knock and the door swings open, revealing a slender man dressed in traditional Karen clothing. Through the interpreter, I say hello and ask Pa Noe if he remembers me. Of course I remember you, he says. We were



**Figure 4.13** Karen Man and his Red House  
*Source.* Author

his first mentors. He then proceeds to tell story after story, laughing and waving his hands with excitement. One story was about the many times his children missed the bus and how my husband would come to pick them up and take them to school. Another story was about how I once took him and his young daughter to a garage sale, and the woman gave the little girl a colorful hat. The stories come so fast that the interpreter can barely keep up, and I wish that the recorder was on already to record these first few minutes.

Gesturing us in, Pa Noe is disappointed to hear that I cannot come in due to COVID. He goes inside and brings out his mask plus three folding chairs that he places

on the beautifully manicured lawn in front of the house. This is supposed to be a couple's interview, but his wife has gone to the store and has not returned, he tells me when I



**Figure 4.14** Pool Garden  
*Source.* Author

inquire. At one point during the interview, I hear the faint sound of Christmas music. It starts far away, then gets louder and louder. The sound confuses me as Christmas is months away until I see an ice cream truck rounding the corner. We are silent for a few minutes as we wait for the loud vehicle to pass.

In the middle of the interview, Pa Noe again says that we are welcome to come inside. He tells us that he is not sick, and his children are not sick. I tell Pa Noe that my husband and I will come back for a visit once the pandemic is over. This pleases him, as is evident when his eyes brighten. I can tell that he is smiling, despite the mask. He tells me that he remembers visiting our home when he first arrived. We had some sort of military something hanging on the wall, he says. Looking up at his colorful house, I cannot help wondering if perhaps the cranberry red walls in our home planted the seed for the beautiful color of this lovely home.

## Nay Reh and Tu Meh

One of the first Karenni families to apply for a Habitat home, Nay Reh and Tu Meh reside in a small neighborhood comprised of only about 20 Habitat homes. As I drive up to their house, I stumble upon an amusing scene. A little dog runs down the street, chased by a middle-aged Karenni man who lives in one of the nearby Habitat homes



**Figure 4.15** Green Garden  
*Source.* Author

and who also happens to be one of my former students. He slows when he sees me, laughing sheepishly before resuming his pursuit. Nay Reh is standing in his front yard, laughing at the scene unfolding before him, and I hop out of my car and stand next to him. I cannot tell if the dog understands Karenni or not because it certainly is not listening to the man. Together, Nay Reh and I join in the chase until the neighbor catches up with the dog, tucks it under his arm with a scolding, and walks away. As we walk back to the house, I tell Nay Reh that when the Karenni first came to the U.S., I remember that they were all afraid of dogs. In turn, he explains to me that dogs in Thailand were aggressive, but that here in America, many refugee families now have dogs. We both laugh as we walk back to the house.

As we walk to the backyard, Tu Meh steps out onto the back step wearing a t-shirt and pajama pants and putting on a mask. At her feet are a pile of shoes that have been shed whenever anyone enters the home. Nay Reh reaches into the shed, pulls out a chair, and beckons me to sit. As he places the chair before me, Nay Reh proudly proclaims, “The neighbor over here gave me these chairs.” Looking around, I am amazed at the size

of the backyard. The house sits about three o'clock on a cul de sac, and the fence lines extend farther sideways and back than any of the other homes I have been to recently.

At the back of their property line stands a tall privacy fence. A trampoline with a large net sits in the middle of the yard. Sitting next to it is a child's jeep. Several bags of crushed soda cans lean up against the house next to the open gate. When I inquired about them, Nay Reh says his father-in-law likes to collect them.



**Figure 4.16** Shoes at the Door  
Source. Author

Three times during the interview, Nay Reh, Tu Meh, and I pause our conversation at the neighborhood's boisterous sounds. Someplace nearby, a motorcycle revs its engine on and off. Next door, two kids on a swing set scream very loudly at each other, struggling to be heard over the sounds of the lawnmower their mother is pushing across the yard.

As a mother of five, the sounds amuse me. Nay Reh shrugs apologetically. When I ask if their kids ever play outside with the neighbor's children, Nay Reh says no but that they are good friends. They tell me that there are several Burmese families on the block, including one of their siblings. As parents of two young children, they are grateful to live near a community of family and friends.

## Saw Moo

During this project, I discovered that it is nearly impossible for me to drive through some Habitat neighborhoods without seeing people I know. Everyone is so kind and incredibly friendly. Come into my home, they say from their front porches as they smile broadly and beckon me with arms waving. Sadly, I respectfully decline, telling them that I will return as soon as COVID is over. I have not seen some of these Burmese families in years, and whereas I often do not remember their names, they always remember mine. *Thamu Rey*, they call out to me. This is how I reconnect with Saw Moo.

As I halt at a stop sign while driving through one of the neighborhoods, I look to the right and see him walking up the street towards me. Recognizing me, he greets me, proudly proclaiming in halted English that he now owns a Habitat home and may I come to visit. Coincidentally, I am looking for one more couple to interview, so I agree to visit in two days.

After I drive away, I realize that in my excitement, I forgot to ask exactly where he lives. Also, much to my dismay, I only remember part of his name. It takes an interpreter and me several attempts to find him, but we finally succeed when I spot one of his sons playing basketball in the street with his friends. The son directs us to the family home.



**Figure 4.17** Vines over Fence  
*Source.* Author

Saw Moo greets us at the door wearing a traditional Karen vest over a white shirt and dark slacks. A slender man with a big smile, Saw Moo is pleased to see us. However,



his excitement turns to disappointment when we explain that I cannot enter the home due to COVID restrictions. As he steps back into the living room to retrieve a mask, I catch a glimpse of the room through the open doorway.

Inside are several long tables surrounded by brown folding chairs. At the front of the room sits a large whiteboard with Bible verses listed on it. My assumption that a Bible study group recently met is confirmed when he tells me that I just missed a Karen youth group that comes for weekly study

We sit on the front porch, wearing masks and with our chairs socially distant. As I



**Figure 4.18** Hand Sanitizer on Porch  
*Source.* Author

sit, I notice a giant bottle of hand sanitizer on the front porch rail, a symbol of our times of COVID, I think to myself. I inquire about Saw Moo's wife, and he tells me that she is in bed because her back hurts.

As we talk, a large, slow-moving

military cargo plane flies overhead. Planes fly over often, Saw Moo tells me, which makes sense, given that the neighborhood is near an Air Force base. Through the mask, I catch a whiff of BBQ chicken one of the neighbors is cooking on the grill, and I smile to myself as I look out onto the quiet street with the newly laid lawns and the picturesque homes. The new memory that forms in my mind intermingles with my own childhood memories of family and friends, fresh air, and dinner on the grill. Contentment.



## Albert Aung and Heh Htoo Mu

As I pull up to Albert Aung and Heh Htoo Mu's home, a group of basketball players stops mid-play to let my car pass. I have seen this setup many times during my visits. Two basketball poles sit on the sidewalks directly across the street from each other, and groups of teenage boys and their fathers play in the street between the two baskets. They race back and forth, passing the ball to each other and shooting baskets. When a car nears, they all shout *car*, then run to the closest sidewalk. As the vehicle passes, they run back into the street to resume their game. Past the basketball players, the sun is starting to set, bathing the neighborhood in magical light.

Albert Aung and Heh Htoo Mu are on their front porch watching the basketball players as they wait for me. A handsome Karen couple with two teenage children, they

appear much younger than I would expect. Albert Aung is dressed in blue jeans and a t-shirt, while Heh Htoo Mu is wearing a traditional skirt and a black sleeveless top. Her long, dark hair is neatly coiled on top of her head. Both put on masks when they spot me walking towards them.

They greet me warmly, then lead me to a mat on the grass in the front yard. We are all wearing masks, yet I find it interesting that I can identify expressions by the movement of their eyebrows and the tilt of their heads. They beam at me, and I beam



**Figure 4.19** Banana Tree  
Source. Heh Htoo Mu

back. It has been a long time since we last spoke, and I am as happy to see them as they are to see me.

During the interview, Huh Htoo Mu tells me that she has honeydew growing in her yard. When she shows it to me, I raise my eyebrows in curiosity. It is much larger than I expect it to be, and it is hanging down from the vine. I have never seen a honeydew hanging down on a vine before, I tell her. She says with a laugh that she knows that it is a honeydew because she cuts them at work every day.

As we speak, a woman waves to us across the street while she waters her grass. Next door, another woman wheels a brown trash can to the curb. This is my last interview of the day, and I do not notice until I prepare to depart that the sun has set, the moon is rising, and a cool breeze has gently floated in.



**Figure 4.20** Honeydew Melon  
*Source.* Heh Htoo Mu

## Group Interview 1

When the pandemic set in, I wondered how I was going to pull together a group of people willing to meet with me. Then as I drive away from my first interview, I round a corner and see them. Four young, beautiful Karenni moms are sitting in front of one of the Habitat homes. Chatting. Enjoying life. Holding babies. Watching the world go by. *Bingo*, my first focus group.

As my car nears, it is dusk and several people are milling about. The setting sun, as usual, gives the neighborhood an almost magical look. The women sit in a row on



**Figure 4.21** Sunset in Habitat Neighborhood  
*Source.* Author

a sidewalk that leads from the front porch to the driveway. Two are holding babies in their arms, and other children of various ages play around them. The women all look up as I pass, waving and smiling at me in recognition. I stop, put my mask back on, and slowly park in front of

them. I roll down my car window and greet them from the safety of my car. Three of the four know some English, one better than the others. Due to the pandemic, it has been months since I have seen them, and we are excited to see each other. I have missed you, I say to them. We missed you too, they reply. I tell them about my project and ask if I can interview them as a group. They say yes, and I agree to meet them at the same time the following evening.

I arrived at 8:15 pm to find the mothers sitting in the same spot as the day before. They are surrounded by trucks, dolls, bikes, and the happy sounds of children playing on a warm summer evening. They greet me as I approach, standing as they slide their facemasks into place and directing me to the driveway. One of the mothers puts the tailgate of a black truck down and lifts her daughter into the truck bed to play. Soon several other young girls raise their arms eagerly, ready to be hoisted into the truck where they sit and play with Barbie dolls and little ponies. On the sidewalk in front of the house, three boys whiz by on scooters, followed by a young girl riding on a bike with training wheels who is trying desperately to keep up with them.

While we talk, one of the mothers nurses an infant. The child keeps stopping to peek her head out at me from under the blanket that has been put in place to discreetly cover breast and baby. Another participant stands to the side to rock a crying baby in a sling at her hip. Made from traditional Karenni fabric, the sling was similar to one gifted to me by another Karenni mother a few years ago. The mom asks another to help her adjust the sling, and the two women quietly work in unison to make the baby comfortable.



**Figure 4.22** Ethnic Food  
*Source.* Author

This house is usually the central hub for their meetings because it is located between the other women's homes, one participant tells me. During our conversation, something interesting occurs. I know these women well as I have been their teacher off and on for many years. One knows minimal English, one knows English well, and two

know enough English to carry on a conversation with me, which they have often done. Yet, the two latter participants reply solely in Karenni when answering my questions. When I asked them about this, one replies in perfect English, “We are afraid the words aren’t right,” before reverting to the Karenni language once again.

Two days later, I return to the same house, hoping to distribute gift cards that I



**Figure 4.23** Backyard Pool  
*Source.* Author

had forgotten to pass out during my initial visit. When I ring the doorbell, I am directed to the side gate leading to the backyard. As I round the corner, I hear the sound of children laughing as they splash each other in a kiddie pool. The mothers are hard at work preparing a meal in the outdoor kitchen. When they see me, they wave and eagerly motion me to sit so they can serve me a plate.

Regretfully, I decline due to social distancing precautions

but ask for a plate to go. Ignoring my request for *just a little bit*, two women pile a plate high with food. They give me a tour of the garden, showing me the peppers and the bamboo plant they are grinding up to make a spicy paste for their dinner. In the fading sun, I look around the backyard while the children play and the women cook. I am reminded of all the backyards of my youth and my days as a young mom with a houseful of kids scurrying at my feet. Under my mask, I smile at the memories.

## Group Interview 2

I first notice them when I hear the sound of laughter wafting in through my car window. A group of beautiful Karen women are chatting away at the house across the street and two over from where I met the first focus group earlier in the week. The women hear my car passing by and look up. Smiling in recognition, they wave their arms in my direction and call out to me.

*Thramu Rey*, they say in excited voices. I wave back, surprised to see another group of women assembling in this time of social distancing. Perhaps this can be my second focus group, I ask myself as I glance at the clock. Sadly, I am late for my next interview, so I make

a mental note to ask my Karen interpreter to inquire before slowly continuing on my way.

With an invitation secured, the interpreter and I return a few days later. It has been a warm day, but the sun is slowly fading, making it an ideal time to sit outside with friends and enjoy conversation. We join the women sitting on mats laid out on the grass between two houses. As they position their masks, they greet us warmly. The women work together during the week and get together for fellowship on the weekends. This spot in the grass is a favorite meeting spot for them, one of the women tells me when I inquire. Like the first focus group, this home is centrally located between their families, thus creating an ideal meeting spot.



**Figure 4.24** Front Garden  
*Source.* Author



We started with four participants, but much to my delight, another Karen lady walks by and the other women beckon her to join us. From our location, we can see the Karenni women that I interviewed a few days earlier. They too are sitting outside enjoying the evening, and when they notice us, we all wave to each other. Through the interpreter, one of the Karen women tells me that they see the Karenni women across the street all the time, but they can only wave and smile at each other. While they are all from the same country, the fact that they do not share a common language catches me off guard again. *Again!* I shake my head at myself for once again assuming that Burmese people speak the same language. Even after all this time, I still sometimes get that wrong.



**Figure 4.25** Flower Garden  
*Source.* Author

As I look around the group, I notice three participants wearing long, traditional Karen skirts with colorful patterns, and two are in cropped pants. All are barefoot, having kicked off their sandals on the grass near the edge of the mat. The rust-colored mat we are sitting on is actually two mats sewn together and large enough for the seven of us to sit together comfortably socially distanced in a large circle. In front of the seated participants are cell phones in colorful cases and plastic water bottles that are mostly empty. In the center are more water bottles, which one of the women offers me, but I politely decline, pointing to my own bottle. Small bottles of hand sanitizer also lay on the mat in front of three women.

As the conversation flows, the women become more and more animated. Peals of giggles erupt often, and I have difficulty at times redirecting the conversation through my own amusement. Collectively, this group is older than the first focus group, yet while they know little if any English, they chat easily with each other. The woman in the black and blue skirt appears to be the unofficial leader of the group. She turns her head carefully to look at the others, making sure everyone has an opportunity to answer my questions. She is also the one that laughs the merriest. The group's oldest woman says the most with her expressions, raising her eyebrows in amusement as she rocks back and forth with her arms wrapped around her knees.

As friends, they share many of the same passions – gardening, cooking, raising kids. We spend several minutes talking about cooking and about the beautiful flowers they have in their yards. When I say that everything I plant dies, they burst out laughing at the absurdity of such a statement. One woman, however, whispers to the interpreter that she has the same problem, causing more gales of laughter.

After I turn off the recorder, we continue to chat, and they ask for my advice on several issues that concern them. One lady has a daughter that is disabled and needs help regaining her SSI. Several inquire about the citizenship process, and we discuss how difficult it is for them to learn English while working full-time plus taking care of their families. Still another expresses concern for her family back in Burma, where war continues. She asks me to please do something to make the fighting stop and to make it safe for her family members still struggling in Burma. I say that it is indeed a difficult situation, but the only thing I have to offer is prayer. She thanks me, saying that she too believes in the power of prayer. We all nod our heads in agreement.



As the interview concludes, the women express gratitude for the many things I have done to help them since they first came to the U.S. Most especially, they thank me for being their teacher many years ago. One of them says that it was the only time in her life that she was able to attend school, a sentiment shared by all. I tell them they have taught me more than I could ever hope to teach them. I also express my appreciation for the interview, and they offer me an open invitation to join them anytime. With a promise to return as soon as the pandemic is over, I walk away, slightly envious of their lives as co-workers, neighbors, and friends.

### **Conclusion**

In my family home, there is a sign that says, *Bloom where you are planted*. These participants have certainly done that in this corner of the world. As a researcher, I have the honor to step into the landscape of a people rarely studied and catch a glimpse of their lives. This ethnography study has allowed me to better know and understand this remarkable group of people on a deeper level. This chapter introduces the participants of this study and shares a little bit of their world. The next chapter will present the study's findings.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

This empirical study uses ethnography as a methodology to study Burmese refugees and the lessons they learned through the processes of acculturation and cultural fusion in their adopted country. Specifically, this research addresses three questions:

1. What have resettled Burmese refugees learned through their experiences of acculturation?
2. What does home mean to Burmese refugees living in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods?
3. How have Burmese refugees living in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods fused cultures as they learned to live in the U.S.?

By reflecting on our conversations, I discovered that the answers to these questions are best understood by analyzing their memories of homes in Burma and Thailand, their recollections of initial resettlement, and their homeownership experiences through Habitat Humanity.

Study findings are presented in three parts. First, this chapter documents the memories Burmese refugees have of past homes in Burma and the refugee camps in Thailand. The second part of the chapter looks at culture learning by comparing these memories with their first impressions of the U.S. as new arrivals in their quest to find a place to call home. This chapter concludes with an extensive look at the participants' lives as homeowners through Habitat for Humanity. It shows the learning involved in physical homebuilding and the interconnections built when starting a new community. Further, it demonstrates what home means to Burmese refugees living in Habitat

neighborhoods through the use of visual imagery using their photos and the words they used to describe their present lives. Pseudonyms assigned in the previous chapter are continued.

### **Seeking a Place to Call Home**

Chicago. One simple word signaled to Pa Noe that he and his five young children had arrived in America. Since he had first boarded the plane in Thailand over 24 hours earlier, he had not understood a single word people were trying to say to him. Yet, now, finally, he understood a word. It was not until Pa Noe heard the word Chicago that he realized he was in America. And he was glad. While others he knew were fearful about coming to live in this foreign land, Pa Noe was not. As a single father whose children faced an uncertain future in a refugee camp, he was not afraid because he had no options. As Pa Noe described the plane ride, he also told of his arrival into his new city:

I remember riding the airplane, but I couldn't understand any words people were saying. They would send us, and we would get on the plane. But when we were getting off, they said Chicago, and I understood that word. (laughter) I was with my five kids. There were also other people that helped me. They gave me the I-94s, but when I got to (my new city), they couldn't find them. Then the Catholic came to help. They were able to find it. ... You were there (nodding his head to me).

Indeed, when Pa Noe and his young family arrived at their final destination, I was there to greet them. Excitedly awaiting their arrival, I was standing at the bottom of a long escalator next to a caseworker from the local resettlement agency. I had recently completed my mentor training with the local resettlement agency and was tasked with

going to the airport to help transport a newly arriving refugee family to their new home. Eagerly, I rocked on my heels, simultaneously nervous and excited to meet the family I was to mentor. Pa Noe recalled the moment:

When we first got here, you waited for us. We didn't know where to go, so we just kept going because we were taught to just keep going until we went down an escalator. Once we got there, we didn't see anyone. We saw you in your short hair. You saw us but didn't know us. Then you saw that I was carrying the IOM bag, so you went to call (the interpreter but) I didn't know how to speak Burmese either.

Yes, I remember that white plastic IOM bag from the International Organization for Migration. It was hard to see at first because the man holding it had a sleeping toddler draped over one shoulder with the white bag tucked under one arm. Four other weary children surrounded him. The resettlement agency had also assigned an interpreter to assist the family, but it quickly became apparent that the two men did not share a common language. We did the best we could to greet them by smiling and using hand motions. Much to my surprise, we retrieved only one medium-sized item from baggage claim, a colorful bag that contained all the family possessions.

Because two cars were needed to transport the large family to their new apartment, Pa Noe and two children crawled into the caseworker's car while I loaded three exhausted children in my vehicle. "Seatbelt," I said to them as I showed them how to secure themselves into my back seat. One child, an eight-year-old with short, cropped hair, dark brown eyes, and a sleepy smile repeated the word back to me to show me she understood. Once the children were settled, I excitedly jumped into the driver's seat,

started the engine, and slowly backed out of the parking slot. As I started driving away, a small voice drifted in from the back seat. “Seatbelt,” the eight-year-old gently remind me. Sheepishly, I reached over my shoulder, fastened my seatbelt, then drove them away to begin their new life in America.

When he reflects on this time in his life, Pa Noe’s stories are about him, his family, and their acculturation into their newly adopted homeland. But his family stories from that first year are also about my family and me, our shared memories interwoven as we helped them adjust to life in America. As mentors, my family and I introduced them to local grocery stores, parks, garage sales, ice cream cones, playing basketball, and so much more. We taught them about American culture. In turn, they taught us about Burmese culture – taking off our shoes at the door, eating Karen food, being content with silence, and again, so much more.

Years later, when I interviewed him for this project, I watched with delight as he told stories about our shared family adventures with animated hand motions and infectious laughter. At the end of our interview, he thanked me for my mentorship that first year, saying, “*Thramu* Rey, you love us very much. Whenever you came to my house, you would teach us and labeled things around the house with yellow paper because we didn’t know anything.”

Pa Noe’s story is not unique. Many of the refugees interviewed for this study spoke of challenges in traveling to the U.S., recalling the fear and panic they felt when they experienced their first plane ride. One participant told of being awed by the sheer size of the airplane. Another described how the plane’s motion made her sick, adding that she still experiences bouts of motion sickness whenever she rides in a car. Sa Rah Meh

was a teenager when she came to America with her mother and her younger sister. She recalled being frozen with fear at the thought of getting on the plane because she did not know how to board it. Ultimately, she boarded the plane because she was more afraid that she would be left behind. Laughing with her at the memory, her husband, David Say, also described his experience of flying in a plane for the first time. When he finished, I casually mentioned that many Americans had also never ridden in a plane before. With a playful grin, he replied, “You probably had never flown, but you had seen a plane. We had never seen a plane.”

### **Memories of Past Homes**

For many Burmese refugees I interviewed for this study, their life stories began in their home country of Burma. For the rest, their narrations began with their birth in refugee camps on the Burma/Thailand border, the next generation of those that fled Burma before them. To better grasp how they define the concept of home, I had to first look at their memories of where they lived in the past. Thus, the initial questions I asked were related primarily to their memories of past shelters in Burma and in the refugee camps. Listening to these stories helped me better understand their lives before I met them and the context through which Burmese refugees survived before resettlement in the U.S.

### **Shelter in Burma**

Many participants of this study were old enough to remember living in their home country and shared some of their stories. Out of respect for difficult memories, I limited my questions to inquiring about their recollections of shelter. Recalling their village homes, they described living in bamboo huts made from trees in the surrounding forests.

These houses were built with the assistance of several members of the community.

Explaining the process of building these bamboo homes, one respondent said, “We went to cut down the trees and bamboo in the forest, and then we would bring it back and build our house.” One Karen woman remembers helping her parents build a house:

They would use the whole bamboo. They would cut open the bamboo in half and make it flat to make walls and floors. In order to make the roof, we sewed the leaves together, which kept poking my hands. It hurt very much.

Only David Say described a house made out of something other than bamboo. Describing the difference, David Say said that it “looked like straw, like concrete” and that it was stronger than a bamboo house.

While some participants lived on flat land, most resided on the mountainside. Pa Noe recalled that the houses in his village were built on stilts. Nay Reh, whose home in the mountains was far from a major water source, stated, “Every day we needed to gather water. We walked about 30 minutes or an hour each way.” Describing happy memories of her hilltop house, one woman recalled, “My house back in Burma was very high, so I can see what is going on below me.”

Many described treacherous and sad journeys from their homes in the mountains of Burma to border camps in Thailand. A few spoke about having to unexpectedly flee their village with no notice and only a few possessions. As they fled the soldiers, many people were killed, and families were split up. A Burmese man that did not participate in this study once told me a story about his family’s journey from Burma to the refugee camp. They had been walking for days when they came across a minefield. He recalled feeling terrified as his father picked up one of his siblings, placed the child on his back,

and carefully stepped his way across the minefield. Once he made it safely across, the father slowly walked back across the field, pick up the next child, and gingerly maneuvered his way back, returning for the next child. When his father finally brought his mother over, he remembers breathing a massive sigh of relief, until his mother made the father take one more trip back across the minefield to retrieve the family loom. Something not as important to his father as it was to his mother, he recounted with a laugh.

A few participants shared similar memories of their perilous journeys from Burma to Thailand. Describing the journey she made with her mother, Mi Meh said, “We left and we just walked. We didn’t have nothing. No water. If we are tired, we stop in the forest, then we keep going.” Saw Moo, who also traveled from Burma to a

Thailand refugee camp with just one parent, recalled, “I was five

when I moved. The war had started.

I was born in 1970, and in 1974, the war started ... I came with my dad. He carried me on his back.” Still another shared, “I didn’t have my parents anymore, and me and my siblings were separated, so I was alone.”

### **Shelter in Refugee Camps**

After a long and perilous journey, shelter was the first thing these displaced people looked for when they arrived in Thailand. What they found was housing similar



**Figure 5.1** Refugee Camp on Thailand Border

*Source.* Marko Phe Bya



were similar to what they left behind in Burma – bamboo huts built from materials given to them by camp officials or from trees they could find in the forests. Like Burma, some of the refugee camps' homes were built on hills, and often, several community members stepped in to assist in homebuilding. Many Burmese families had to walk downhill to get water and carry it back up to their homes. In other camps, the terrain was both mountainous and flat. Tu Meh remembered that the village had a soccer field in the middle and that “some people lived in the hill and some people lived beside the grove.” When asked about their proximity to a water source, Nay Reh remembered that PVC piping was used to bring water from far away to the refugee camp where he resided.

Recalling her first impressions of the camp upon arrival, Mi Meh expressed dismay at her unfamiliar surroundings, explaining:

At first, when we came to Thailand, there was no house. There were just trees and other plants everywhere, so people would just cut the trees and wood to make the house. And people fear the Burmese soldiers since they would fire shots often, so people would sneak to cut trees and stuff to make their house.



**Figure 5.2** Building in Community  
*Source.* Marko Phe Bya

Similarly, a few pointed out that housing in Thailand and Burma was also free. One member of the Karenni group I interviewed explained that it does not cost any money to go into the woods, find a few trees, and then carry them back to build a house. The downside, of course, is that homes

often collapsed after strong winds or torrential rainstorms. In describing his home in the camp, Bu Htoo said, “Over there, you can’t guarantee. Even though how you are living, even how you are laying, or you’re sleeping at night. Maybe it could fall down anytime, with the winds or anything like that.”

Some respondents recalled having to rebuild their homes every two or three years. Pray Reh described his family home in the camp as having only one room and the roof covered with leaves. One group member spoke of building a house with her mother, recalling, “We would go cut bamboo, and we (had) a hard time since it’s only my mom and me. With the bamboos we got, we made a tiny house.”

While both hail from the same camp, David Say has different memories of shelter in the camp than his wife Sa Rah Meh because David Say lived in a boarding house with other single young men, all students, whereas Sa Rah Meh grew up in a more typical refugee structure. David Say recalled living in a pre-built building with wooden walls, a concrete floor, and a metal rooftop, and Sa Rah Meh described living in a bamboo hut with a roof made from tree leaves.

Respondents also noted that while food in Thailand was mostly free, there was never enough. The scarcity of jobs meant that families survived on meager food rations distributed by camp officials or what they could scrounge in the nearby woods. Pray Meh summed it up best by saying, “If you eat today, you worry about tomorrow and worry if it’s not going to be enough to feed the kid, the children.” Describing the meager rations her family received in the camp, Pray Meh



**Figure 5.3** Kitchen in Camp  
*Source.* Marko Phe Bya

explained:

When I am in the village, there is one kind of happiness. Back in Thailand, I was happy, but you have to work day to day. It's kind of hard to feed the family, but we also have free time. There is often no work. If you work today, you get a meal. But if you don't work tomorrow, then you don't get a meal. We have to wait for the people to give us the food ... We received a bag of rice or oil from the community leaders, but it wasn't enough.

### **Homebuilding in Burma and Thailand**

Participants also discussed the structural designs of the homes in Burma and Thailand. Explaining what he learned about homebuilding in his native homeland, Pa Noe said, "To build each house, you have to dig holes so you can put the foundation of bamboo or wood, so then you can build a house." Sa Rah Meh similarly described this process, explaining:

We dig a hole for the pole first. Then we put a pole for the home pole. Then we (find) bamboo, we cut bamboo, we made string like that. And then we put in poles on the floor for the floor, and then sometimes we put in the cover for the wood, and then on the roof, we put leaves. Tree leaves.

At one point during a group interview, I asked the women if they used a hammer and nails to connect the bamboo. The women laughed at me with great delight before one of them explained, "We didn't have nails. We had to cut the bamboo into thin strips where they would be flexible enough to bend. That is how they would tie the logs and the walls together so they would stay put." Out of all the participants I interviewed, Nay Reh was only one of two participants that had used a hammer before coming to the U.S. He

explained that they were not commonly used because only wealthy families could afford them.

Others were more specific in their descriptions. For example, Pray Meh pointed out that homes in Thailand did not have windows and that “it was just wide open. You could see through and everything.” Nay Reh described the kitchens, sharing that “in Thailand, we don’t have concrete. We made the kitchen on the floor, on the ground, and there was a lot of dust.” Finally, one participant pointed out that houses in Thailand did not have restrooms, saying, “We have to go into the forest far from our house at night, and it’s scary. But here, the restroom is also in the house.”

### **Summary**

To better understand what Burmese refugees learned through the acculturation process that occurred during their resettlement in the U.S., I first needed to consider where they came from. The memories they shared regarding their time in Burma and the Thailand refugee camps helped me imagine their lives as residents of a country in turmoil, then as displaced persons in camps awaiting resettlement. Their stories depicted hardships yet simultaneously reflected a sense of working for better days to come. As I listened, I could not help noticing the parallels between the shelters they lived in and the lives they lived. Their houses were temporary shelters that needed to be rebuilt regularly. Similarly, their lives were in a state of semi-permanence. Both held their hopes for a brighter future.

### **Memories of Refugee Resettlement**

When newly arriving refugees come to the U.S. for resettlement, they come in contact with other cultures, thus beginning a process known as acculturation (Berry,

1997). Burmese refugees and their way of life began to change because most were unaware of the many changes that were about to occur. Refugees coming to America for resettlement had to learn how to step onto a plane and put on a seatbelt. They had to learn how to use a telephone, turn on a stove, change a lightbulb, ride a bus, and so much more than can be documented here. As study participants shared their joys and challenges of adjusting to life in their new surroundings, it became apparent that vast amounts of learning occurred through their acculturation. These findings reflect on some of those lessons learned.

### **Adjusting to a New Home**

I always wondered what Pa Noe thought when he stepped off that plane and into his adopted homeland. This study allowed me to put his words with mine. Burmese refugees like Pa Noe arrived in the U.S. hoping for a better future for themselves and their children. To better understand what home means to Burmese refugees living in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods, I asked participants to share memories of their first few months of resettlement in the U.S. Listening to their initial impressions of American housing, food, language, and more highlighted for me what I take for granted in my own life. It made me imagine what my life would have been like if the tables had been turned. How would my family survive if we were dropped off in the mountains of Burma? I wondered about where we would live and what we would eat. Would we be able to find enough bamboo to build a shelter or enough food to feed our family?

Reflecting on their initial impressions of life in the U.S., study participants described more differences than parallels between their old lives and their new ones. Understandably, many respondents described their anxieties and disorientation related to

their new situation. For example, Pray Reh noted:

Everything was so different from the way we talk, the way we go and come. It's far from the same. I was filled with mixed feelings, scared and worried. I heard we have to pay rent and I didn't have a job, so I was scared.

Bu Htoo also felt overwhelmed at times by his new surroundings. Remembering his first few days, he explained, "I would say it's a different world for us (from) when we were living over there ... we close our eyes, we open eyes, and we see things different. So yes, everything was different and everything scary too." Reflecting on his situation at that time, Bu Htoo recalled:

I was laying in my bed one day. I thought, how am I going to get a job? What can I do here? I don't speak the language. I don't know the people. And all these things stressed me out.

Similarly, Mi Meh found those initial days very stressful, stating:

Back in Thailand, there was a different type of struggle, and same with here. Arriving here with the thought of not being able to speak the language and not being educated, I was worried if I'd be able to feed my kids at all. And my parents cannot work either, so we'll be the only one working. So whether it's Thailand or America, it was hard either way.

Another said she was surprised by the differences in climate. Reflecting on the weather, Tu Meh recalled:

I just remember all my family; they were getting sick. My brother coughed a lot. I just remember this way because this weather is different. ... In Thailand, it's not too cold, and it's not too hot. Here, it is too hot and too cold for me.

Despite the acculturation hardships, interviewed participants recognized and appreciated the many opportunities available in America, which kept them going through the first days and months of doubt and confusion. A mother from the Karenni group interview explained it this way:

Living in Thailand, everything was limited, and we didn't have money or anything to eat. So coming to America is like being more prosper and successful. Being here also means having enough food and being able to have money.

Finally, some respondents recognized the technological opportunities available in the U.S. When asked to identify the biggest difference between living in the refugee camp versus residing in America, Tu Meh pointed out that "here we can use internet, technology. There, we didn't have anything." Her husband, Nay Reh, agreed, saying, "Yeah, over there, there was no internet. Right here, if you want food, some for delivery, you can call on the phone. They can bring it to your home, right? There. No, no nothing."

### **On Apartments**

Study participants' first U.S. residences were very different from the housing they were used to and required interesting adjustments. Their former houses were made primarily of bamboo and were one-room structures with an outdoor kitchen and no running water or electricity. When they arrived in the U.S., they were placed in apartment complexes that looked vastly different. All arrived weary and hungry after long days of travel. Reflecting on those early experiences, from the first glimpse of their new housing to the months after, many respondents laughed at their recollections. A few participants shared their surprise at the sheer size of the large structures they were driven to when they first arrived, assuming that the whole apartment building was their new home. Upon

entering the apartments, all study participants expressed amazement at the amenities they encountered.

Pray Meh was awed by her new surroundings, stating, “We had never seen this kind of a house before, so really surprised and impressed by it. Oh, this is how you live. And it was really clean.” Pah Reh, her husband, agreed, adding that “when I got here, everything looks like better and everything just different compared to what we used to have back in Thailand.”

For some study participants, the adjustment was fairly easy. One participant quickly acclimated to the apartment when he became enamored with the air conditioning. Another found it difficult at first but within a week said that he “became familiar with it and I started liking it.” Saw Moo and his family were already familiar with the basics of living in an urban setting. Nodding his head with remembrance, he explained:

Before we moved here, we had to stay in Bangkok for a couple of weeks before departing to America, and I’ve seen what a kitchen looked like. Their kitchen looked like an American kitchen. They taught us how to turn off the lights and showed us how to shower.

They were the only family in this study, however, to have that experience. After a lifetime of residing in bamboo huts, many study participants found their new apartments simply baffling. For example, Nay Reh did not understand many things about the apartment, including “how to turn on all the lights, how to use the water, how to get the heat or cold.” One member of the Karenni group also recalled that she “did not know how to turn on the lights, and I didn’t know how to cook.”

Vast differences in household functionality were also perplexing. Participants



laughed as they recalled their initial struggles with learning how to use American kitchens. After years of cooking over an open flame, many found it unsettling to cook by merely turning a knob. “In the camp, we had to cook with the wood. We had to go into the forest to find food and then cook it with the wood. In here, it is different,” said one respondent, recalling how difficult it was to find wood during the rainy season. Nga Meh recalled, “I learn quickly but when I first saw the stove, I was afraid to touch it and couldn’t turn on the knob. Since back in the camp, we would make fire ourselves and cook that way (laughter).”

One Karen mother laughed as she recalled her adjustment to an enclosed kitchen in America, sharing, “The smoke alarm would always go off. I got scared and didn’t know what to do, so I ran outside.” Finally, Pa Noe remembered, “I remember you showed me how to turn on the stove. ... I didn’t know how to cook rice here or how to do anything. And you showed us what to do.”

Others struggled with learning how to use the bathroom in their new apartment. Nga Meh told me that “when I first arrive, ...I don’t know how to turn (the water) on, so I was afraid to shower.” One member from a group interview expressed surprise that the bathroom was in the house, stating, “We have to go into the forest far from our house at night, and it’s scary. But here, the restroom is also in the house.” Mu Ria, laughing, shared that “the bathrooms in Thailand are very low. They are on the ground, and then you have to sit (squat) like this, but here you sit down with your butt, and I find that comfortable.” Finally, reflecting on her initial impressions of American bathrooms, one respondent stated with laughter, “When I first came to America, everything is so different for me and back in the refugee camp the toilet like this not something I would see us

using the toilet here was uncomfortable for me.”

One participant recalled her initial confusion with the apartments’ unfamiliar beds, stating, “We would just sleep on the cold and hard bamboo floor (in Thailand). ... We’ve never seen soft mattress or soft blankets.” This sentiment was shared by others who said they quickly learned to appreciate the opportunity to sleep in a soft bed.

In the first few days, there were miscommunications with the caseworkers assigned to assist them. One caseworker dropped a family off at their apartment and did not return for three days, leaving the family with very little food. When I expressed horror at this situation, Tu Reh laughed as he recalled, “No nothing. No chili, no salt, no nothing.” When the caseworker finally arrived, he was told that he needed to call the caseworker if the family needed anything. Yet, he had no idea how to use the telephone in his apartment.

David Say and his family had a similar issue upon arrival. The resettlement agency’s responsibility was to pay the electric bill for the first few months, but twice, the caseworker paid late and the power was shut off. David Say recalled that “at that time, sorry no light. I do not know how to go out. I do not know how to pay the lights. Very difficult for me at first.”

Finally, several respondents discussed their fear of venturing out of the apartment when they first arrived. Laughing at the memories of those first few months, one participant stated, “We got inside the apartment and stayed there. We didn’t know where to go. Sometimes we would go somewhere but couldn’t recognize anything.” On the other end of the spectrum, others felt claustrophobic in a house with four solid walls. Remembering how confined she initially felt, one Karen mother explained, “The houses

in Thailand were open, and the wind would just blow through. The houses here are completely closed. I felt suffocated because if I wanted to see natural light, I had to go outside.”

### **On People**

Many Burmese refugees came to the U.S. with preconceived ideas about the people they would meet in America because before arrival, they had little contact with people outside of their own community. Some shared that they felt instantly welcomed by their first encounters with Americans. Others recalled they were initially fearful of the first people they encountered, but by learning to trust, they eventually developed social connections with people of other ethnicities. During these interviews, I reflected on how complicated the acculturation process must be for refugees who grew up in villages where everyone shared the same ethnicity.

In response to my inquiries about their first impressions of the people they met, the members of one group explained that Burmese refugees are from villages where people look the same, and everyone speaks the same language. When they fled to the refugee camps across the Thailand border, they were assigned to camps with people who shared similar backgrounds. As a result, their first encounter with people that looked and sounded different from themselves occurred when they occasionally saw White relief workers or other visitors to their camps. One member of the group explained:

Whenever the Americans visited the camp, I would stare at them for a long time because they are light-skinned and different from us. And then, when I came here, seeing white people made me happy because I received a lot of help and a lot of love. Even though we are helpless towards them, they chose to help us. I’m

thankful for that.

Many respondents stated that they had never seen people with darker skin until they came to the U.S. In describing his reactions to seeing people of color in America, Albert Aung recalled:

I didn't even know (other) people even existed. I thought only white people live here. Before we even came to America, we didn't even know about Mexicans and all the others. All we knew were white Americans. That's the only race that we knew existed here.

One Karen mother from the group interview admitted to being nervous about interacting with people that sounded and looked different from her. But, expressing faith that God would help guide her journey, she said:

I came here because I am a widow. When I was in Thailand, I kept asking questions about America because I was unsure of the unknown since I didn't have any siblings here or didn't know anyone. One of my friends that moved to America told me that they offer help for widows like me. When I first came here, I was scared because I didn't know what was going on and I didn't know what to do. But I was also happy because I know that God will help me during these hard times. I also met amazing friends along the way that God has chosen for me.

Additionally, some participants spoke of having preconceived notions of Americans. Several were afraid to interact with Americans when they first came because they had been advised by their friends in Thailand not to trust new people they met. Such was the case with Pray Reh and Nga Meh, who arrived for resettlement in the U.S. four years ago with their three young children. While many resettled refugees are housed in

apartments near families who share their ethnicity, Pray Reh and his family were placed in an apartment complex across town. Without other Burmese nearby and without knowing any English, the young family felt alone and afraid. Pray Reh explained that before he came to the U.S., he was “kind of scared since back (at the camp) I heard that there’s gangs and robbers out here so if we go, we must be careful. So I was afraid. But all those rumors that I heard from people weren’t necessarily true.”

Pray Reh and Nga Meh reminded me of an incident with a neighbor when they first came. The school told the family that they lived too close for their kindergarten child to ride the bus. They lived just under the two-mile barrier to qualify. Pray Reh recalled, “My wife had to walk. You [Rey] gave us a baby stroller. It took one hour pushing babies coming in and then going to pick up.” One day, another resident from the complex whose son attended the same school approached Nga Meh as she struggled to push the stroller with three young children crowded inside and offered her a ride. However, Nga Meh did not understand the woman’s words and was afraid, so she kept walking. The woman, however, persisted, and despite the language barrier, the two women got to know each other. Rocking a baby gently in her arms, Nga Meh recounts the story:

Since I go back and forth every early morning and in the hot evening, a Mexican lady near my house saw me and helped me, and that made things much better for me. When she first saw me, she probably wanted to help me, but since I don’t know the language, she couldn’t help me, so I just continued walking.

David Say was “amazed” at the people he encountered, stating:

In my country and in refugee camp, there are only the Burmese, teacher. When I came here, there are a lot of people, different people I meet. It’s something like

amazing, really amazing. Because different people can make more powerful, ya know. Different ideas, many people.

He also shared that coming to the U.S. was his first opportunity to meet Burmese people with ethnicities different from his own.

And my people also in Burma, they had different people come here. But refugee, we had different location; we don't know each other. And then we come together right now in America, and it is very different from Burma. And then I feel amazing that America has more people from my country, they came to USA.

Finally, while many respondents at some point encountered people with ill intentions, all felt strongly connected to and expressed gratitude for the mentors and other volunteers who assisted them in their adopted country. For example, Bu Htoo recalled getting spoons, plates, and a pot from a Vietnamese lady that lived in a nearby apartment. Likewise, Albert Aung credits his family's quick adjustment to the people that helped them when they arrived. By interacting with American volunteers, he said he and his family "adjusted to the American life quickly. We've adapted to their lifestyles, their culture, and their housings." In describing the help she received, one participant recalled, "They are always looking for ways to help us. They were really helpful towards us."

Expressing similar gratefulness, one Karen mom declared with laughter:

When I first came, the Americans gave us love and affection. Even though they don't know us, they were willing to help us and took care of us. I was at peace because I felt loved by them.

### **On Language**

Through their stories, I learned that almost all the respondents felt that

communication was their most significant obstacle to successful resettlement. Only one of the participants of this study knew a little English before resettlement. All the others stated they wish they had been able to better communicate with the people trying to help them when they first arrived.

Several respondents shared that most Burmese refugees had rarely heard someone speak a language different than their own before leaving the camps. Most indigenous villages from the mountain regions of Burma have limited contact with the outside world, including other Burmese different from their ethnicities. Thus, communication is a problem, even among the different Burmese groups, because they often only know their own tribal languages. Pray Meh explained, “Back in Burma, you didn’t have the language thing, so it’s really free and you can communicate so easily.”

As I listened to their stories, I was surprised that their memories of their interactions with me were not the same as my recollections of our initial encounters. During one of the group interviews, one participant admitted that when she first met me, she was scared of me. This comment brought up some stifled laughter from the rest of the group. *You were afraid of me?* I asked with an overly exaggerated tone in my voice that made them all laugh. Apologetically, she explained that it was because she could not speak English. Another explained that “since we grew up in a poor country, seeing Americans speak their language fluently makes us feel shy because we can’t speak their language.”

Albert Aung also spoke of the difficulties of conducting everyday business, stating, “It was hard because we don’t know their language and we don’t know how to read and write. If we have to go to the office, we don’t know how to go.” Likewise, one

group interviewee explained that “we could not talk to anyone. It was hard because of the language.”

As a newly arrived refugee, Bu Htoo was eager to learn the language of his adopted country so he could talk to the people around him. But more so, he wanted very much to fulfill his childhood dream of attending Harvard. Describing his resettlement to America, he shared:

I came from Thailand to Boston. ... I didn't realize that Harvard University was in Boston until later, maybe a month later when I found out. Oh, I wanted to scream so bad. Oh, the university is here! ... I wanted to go to Harvard University so bad, so I got three jobs at the same time.

After learning English, Bu Htoo applied to Harvard three times but was not admitted. Reflecting on his naiveté, Bu Htoo chuckled as he told me the story, saying he was grateful for the opportunity to continue his education in the U.S. Bu Htoo also shared that he understood English much better after moving to Texas. Laughing at the memories, he said, “I did not quite understand all that they're talking, their accent. The people in Boston, they talk a little bit different (than the people) in Texas.”

Finally, David Say recalled how good it felt to finally figure out how to ask someone for help in an emergency. Recounting a story that I had forgotten about, he said, “I remember one time my mother-in-law (needed to go) to the hospital. I do not know how to say that. That's why I call you. You had time or not, I do not know, but you helped.”

### **On Employment**

Several participants also discussed the differences in employment opportunities



available in their adopted country and in the refugee camps. Before coming to the U.S., their employment prospects were limited because they could not leave the camps.

Unfortunately, not working meant there would not be enough food for their families that day. In the U.S., the work culture was markedly different, and jobs were readily available in comparison. When they first arrived, most were placed in factories and restaurants where their quiet demeanor and strong work ethic impressed their supervisors. While they were overall pleased with their employment options, there were several things they had to learn to be successful, such as safety protocols, wearing proper attire and navigating transportation to and from work.

Overall, participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to be gainfully employed in the U.S., and those who were lucky enough to find work in the camps found those jobs much harder than the jobs they found here. For example, Mu Ria was concerned when she first arrived that there would have limited job opportunities for her, but she found the opposite to be true, saying that “the work environment is so much easier. ... The work that I used to do, it wasn’t like the easiest job ... but comparing to the situation in Thailand, it was so much easier for me.” Pah Reh spoke about the scarcity of employment in the camps by explaining, “Back in Thailand, you lived in a camp, so you could not go out and find a job in the city. You have to stay in that community and just wait for the community leaders to give you the food. And you’re worried about it.” Pa Noe shared a similar message:

Life in Burma and Thailand is different because jobs there are hard. Jobs here are easy because you have the freedom to work. Even if you get fired, it’s better than there. Here, you can always find a new job. Over there, it is difficult. You work

hard and sweat a lot from working in the bean fields in the sun, and they don't even give you one cup of water, and you have to work in secrecy. It is illegal to travel outside of the border, so we had to illegally work.

Saw Moo, on the other hand, had a different experience. As a carpenter, he felt more independent working in the camp because "back in Thailand when you work, you work for yourself but here, you have to work under a company.

Reflecting on their initial American work experiences, other participants mentioned their early struggles with transportation to and from work. Pray Reh was surprised by "the way they travel back and forth and the jobs here. Everything is different. I thought the work was going to be the same as the refugee camp, but it's different." Also remembering early transportation difficulties, Pray Meh recalled, "I got lost one time. I went to work, and I got back and I could not find the house." Likewise, David Say, Sa Reh Meh, and I shared a hearty laugh at David's recollections of riding a bus to and from work in the early days. "At the beginning, we had many troubles because we did not know how to go by bus. Sometimes we are lost, and we call you and say, Rey, can you help us go this way?" he recalled, waving his hands in excited animation.

### **On Food**

Finally, when discussing their adjustment to the U.S., food was the topic participants had the most to say about, laughing as they recalled their initial impressions of American cuisine. While these refugees felt blessed to have enough food, they discovered that feeding themselves and their families was more complicated in America than they expected because shopping for food in a grocery store was very different from what they were used to, such as growing food in community gardens or finding food in

the woods.

Before coming to America, several participants were excited at the thought of not having to worry about how to feed their families. Expressing gratitude for this blessing, Pray Meh said, “Back in Thailand, there are people that give you limited amount of food but here, you can eat whatever you want.” One of the single mothers in a group interview shared that while in the refugee camp, she heard stories from several people that she and her children would get plenty of food in America because it was a large country. Her friends told her that in America, “there will be plenty of food (for your family) living in a country that is so big,” she recalled. Mu Ria heard similar rumors from her friends in Thailand. Reflecting on food and the size of the people she saw when she first came, Mu Ria said:

Back in Thailand, whatever I want to eat, I couldn’t. But here in America, I can eat whatever I want, and people are bigger here. But in Thailand, you work hard for it and just eat a bit, and so people are not as big as here.

For many, their early experiences of going into grocery stores were overwhelming. Others were afraid to venture out, despite being shown the path from their apartments to the grocery store. Some described having food but being afraid to use the stove. Still others shared stories regarding the minimal food in their apartment when they first arrived due to miscommunications with their caseworkers. Reflecting on these struggles, one participant recalled that when he first came, the resettlement agency “gave us that cooked chicken that they put in the fridge. ... They gave a bag of rice, but we don’t have a pot to cook.” Fortunately, a kind neighbor gave them one until the casework’s next visit.

One participant recalled that when they first came to the U.S., I helped them solve a food issue. “You gave us the box to put the rice in,” one participant asked me. “Do you remember?” Yes, I remember, I told her, struggling to keep a straight face at the memory. Remembering times when they did not have enough food, newly arrived refugee families started stockpiling rice bags. Unfortunately for this family, the excess bags of rice in the apartment caused a major rodent issue. As a resettlement agency employee, I was tasked with trying to resolve this issue for this family. I went in to assess the situation, worked with the apartment management to hire exterminators, and bought bins to secure the rice. I was also instructed to toss any bags of rice that showed signs of rodent infestation. The food was still edible in the refugees’ minds, and throwing out the food was unnecessary. For people that had known much hunger in their days, it was heartbreaking for them to watch me throw out large sacks of rice. According to the agency’s leadership, it was necessary, but it did not make it any easier for refugee families with food insecurity issues to watch.

Another food issue that arose was that many participants initially disliked American foods because they differed from what they had eaten in the past. For example, in describing her experiences with American cuisine, one Karen mother stated, “When I landed, I thought I would eat to my heart’s content, but in reality, I didn’t like to eat anything. I felt like the food was fake.” Others shared similar memories. For example, a few respondents noted that while fruits were abundant, they were not fruits they recognized. Plus, it was not nearly as fresh as the fruit they had picked off the trees near the camps. In discussing fresh food, one Karenni mother explained:

In Thailand, people go look for the food on their own. Like when you find

bamboo shoots, you do that on your own. And then over here, the foods are already prepared for you. Sometimes they're not as fresh as compared to the food in Thailand.

While some respondents took a while to adjust to the different foods, some quickly developed a fondness for certain foods. For instance, Nay Reh, who was very impressed with American cuisine, shared, "America has more of the best. In my country, I have never seen the food. HEB, Walmart. I see here. I eat here. Right there, no. Like strawberry, I live there and never eat a strawberry ... a lot of meat here." Bu Htoo also remembers being quite impressed with "something called a burrito." He was not sure what it was exactly, only that he enjoyed every bite that his coworker shared with him one day during lunch.

The topic of food was particularly fascinating to the Karen women in one of the group interviews. One mother admitted to developing a fondness for donuts. Never having tasted anything sweet before coming to America, she recalled being offered her first donut at a local church. That one donut became an addiction, and she would often put two or three packages of donuts in her cart whenever she went to the grocery store. She stopped, she said, when she started gaining too much weight. Another amused group member admitted that she initially disliked pizza or hamburgers but changed her mind after living in the U.S. a while, stating, "I love eating (them) now, but I cannot afford it anymore." These comments and similar others elicited squeals of laughter from the women in the group, who hooted with great delight at these memories.

Finally, I recall two incidents involving Burmese refugees and food. When I first started working with Burmese refugees, I took several people to the grocery store. One

group of four single Burmese men, none of which are part of this study, asked me to help them find whale. *Whale?* I asked. *As in fish?* Yes, they replied, nodding their heads. No, said I. There is no whale in Texas. After much discussion in halted English and in their native language, they slowly sounded out the word to me. *Whale*. Deciding I needed another approach, I spelled the word with my finger into the palm of my hand. W-h-a-l-e? They stopped, looked at each other, conversed more in their native language, then one of them said no, *o-i-l*, spelling the word back to me in his palm. They were looking for fish oil but had been taught by a relief worker to say the word with an Australian accent. After some giggling on my part, I showed them the oils. They next asked me for fish standing up in a tin can. I was not sure what that was, but I said, come on, let's go, and off we went.

Another time, the resettlement agency I was working for sent me to look in on a refugee family. A volunteer reported that the family had so little food in their apartment that they were eating frogs out of desperation. Through an interpreter, I found the family had plenty of food—they just liked the taste of frog. The father described his excitement at seeing two frogs hopping in the grass near their apartment. Finally, familiar food they could appreciate! It was much easier to cook frogs on a stick over an open fire than over their electric stove, the father exclaimed with a chuckle.

## **Summary**

As I listened to their initial impressions of life in their adopted homeland, a picture of their acculturation materialized and the lessons they had to learn to survive in their adopted country. They had to learn how to live in an apartment with indoor plumbing and electricity. At their new jobs, they had to learn how to perform specific

tasks, follow safety rules, and fill out paperwork so they could sign up for health plans. Many had never heard languages other than their own nor met people different than themselves, and they had to learn to trust people outside their own community so they could develop social connections with the volunteers that welcomed them,

Study participants stepped into a world very different than the one they left behind, and they look back on that time with amusement. They were amazed by so many things (indoor plumbing, soft beds, grocery stores), yet initially fearful of others (people that looked different than themselves, large buses, loud noises). Listening to the stories they shared of their lived experiences helped me better understand what Burmese refugees learned through their acculturation into the U.S. Reflecting on their words helped me appreciate that, despite the challenges they faced, all were grateful to live in a world where they could find peace.

### **Burmese Refugees and a Place to Call Home**

After several years of living in apartments, study participants eventually began to explore different housing options. They described feeling a need for a place of their own where they did not have to deal with difficult neighbors and apartment mismanagement. Many respondents were also struggling financially and saw an opportunity to save money by owning a home through Habitat for Humanity. Most of all, several stated that they applied to become Habitat homeowners because they desired to live in community among other Burmese. For example, one single mother shared that one of her neighbors in the apartment was also a single Burmese mother, and they decided to apply for Habitat homes together. This decision was mutually beneficial for both families as both women are now paying less for housing, and the two families live across the street from each

other. Another powerful example involves a group of five Burmese refugee families that were not part of this study. Seven years ago, they joined forces and applied for Habitat homes together. They now reside on the same city block with four families on one side of the street and three more living across from them. With the assistance of community volunteers and Burmese leaders, over 40 Burmese families now reside in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods across the city.

### **Homebuilding in Community**

One of Habitat for Humanity's organizational tenets is homebuilding in community, a concept Burmese refugees know well. From the mountains of Burma to the refugee camps in Thailand to Habitat neighborhoods in the U.S., Burmese families often work together in shared community to build their homes. Listening to their stories gave me a better sense of the context of learning that occurs through homebuilding, as well as



**Figure 5.4** Habitat Volunteers  
*Source.* Habitat for Humanity

the social connections established through the building of home. Their stories of what they learned encompassed both physical homebuilding as well as the building of a community.

Since several Habitat homes were built simultaneously, constructing homes as

a community added a social component to the homebuilding process. Working side-by-side with professional Habitat homebuilders and a steady stream of volunteers, Burmese participants learned basic housebuilding skills such as painting and laying down flooring. Some of what they learned about homebuilding was taught to them by staff on site. Other



times, they learned informally by observing others complete tasks.

While initially unfamiliar with many of the skills taught, the Burmese participants learned quickly. For example, most of the participants had never held a hammer before, and it was a new experience they enjoyed. Nay Reh explained that “before, we don’t use nails. We tie the bamboo. We make string.” Pa Noe recalling that he learned “how to build a roof, how to paint, and so on. But I didn’t know where you’re supposed to buy the materials.”

Like several others, Bu Htoo noticed that homes in Burma/Thailand and America were built differently. Describing the structural design differences, he said, “Everything must be exactly like the blueprint. But back in Thailand or in Burma, we don’t have blueprints. We just build whatever we want. That’s why it’s as sturdy as it is here.” Similarly, Mi Meh shook her head with amazement when speaking about her Habitat home’s foundation, saying:

Back (in Burma and Thailand), people would use the soil as the foundation, but here it’s different. They use all these machines and stuff to build the house. We would use wood to stick into the ground. Here, they use walls and nails to hold the house up. I don’t know how it stays in place.

While there were several differences when comparing homebuilding in Burma and Thailand to the U.S. construction, the most apparent similarity involved the fact that homes were built by a community of people working together for a common cause. Several participants remembered family members and friends pitching in assist in the



**Figure 5.5** Painting a House  
*Source.* Pray Reh

construction of homes. Describing these community builds, Saw Moo stated, “Our Karen people have a tradition of helping others who are in need. Whoever was available helped us built our house.” A similar sentiment was expressed by Pray Meh, who shared:

Back in Burma, we are fair and equal to each other in our village. And when we need help, we help one another. Back in Burma, the community always helps each other. You help with the houses, and you help with the farming. You come together to help each other.

Similarly, participants noted that many hands helped construct their homes in Habitat, and they were grateful to those who helped. David Say was one of many who expressed gratitude for the Habitat staff members and the volunteers who helped build his house:

The community helped us a lot. ... Who built my home? ... St Francis Church. I do not know them. They do not know me. I am Catholic too. ... I see many organizations that chip in. The students too, many students come to help low-income people. ... Really amazing people because they don’t get money. They work very hard.

One of the things that attracted participants like Bu Htoo to homeownership through Habitat was that they were building new neighborhoods simultaneously. Expressing fascination with this, he said, “I know when they build a house, they build a whole community, like a new community. So they don’t mix with it like old house or anything like that. It was kind of interesting.” This style of neighborhood building allowed families the opportunity to select lots near other Burmese families.

Building in community also allowed homeowners to meet their future neighbors.

Expressing gratitude for his neighbor's kindness, Pa Noe said, "They built their house around the same time. We didn't have a car then, so she would take us whenever she goes to the (Habitat) office downtown." While they could not converse much because of Pa Noe's limited English, the rides gave them the start of a neighborly connection.

As an initial step toward Habitat homeownership, the Burmese families first assisted in the construction of their neighbors' homes. Nay Reh shared how much he enjoyed the homebuilding process and pointed with pride to other homes in his neighborhood that he helped build. Saw Moo expressed satisfaction in his work building additional homes in his Habitat neighborhood, adding, "I've helped build other people's houses multiple times." Ultimately, the shared building of a new neighborhood helped establish interconnections within the community.

### **Living in Community**

Before coming to the U.S., Burmese families lived in communities with other Burmese people as neighbors and friends. Searching for affordable housing, they discovered that the Habitat for Humanity organization offered them an affordable way to recreate this close community. Once they started moving into their new homes, most found themselves living near other Burmese families, which pleased them greatly. Listening to these homeowners share stories about their neighbors helped me better understand their neighborhood dynamics. While living near people who share their ethnicity is vital to both the Karen and Karenni communities, their stories also demonstrate a web of connections to neighbors of other races.

Often, Burmese families that are related apply for Habitat homes all at the same time, then pick adjacent lots so that they can remove the fence between the two properties

and, thus, more easily share resources. Such was the case for Saw Moo and his oldest son, who selected two lots of land that share a property line at the back of their homes. Even though the homes are on two different streets, the two families happily pass back and forth between them.

Mi Meh, a Burmese Karenni, considers herself fortunate to live on a block with several other Burmese families. As a result, she has Karenni neighbors on one side and Karen neighbors on the other. Discussing her contentment with her neighborhood, Mi Meh said:

I am happy I live here. I got a good place. Lots of Karenni family that live around here. Ten families, living around these people makes me happy. I've been living here for a year, and I don't see nothing like trouble or anything. In the neighborhood, they are all nice and kind.

Mi Meh and her Karen neighbor can often be found passing plates of food to each other over the fence that borders their homes. Both women enjoy gardening and are often outdoors cooking at the same time. However, while they are both Burmese, they do not share a common language. Food, in their case, becomes their universal language.

David Say and Sa Rah Meh are comfortable with all their neighbors. They are both Karenni but of different ethnicities, so they primarily converse with each other in Burmese. This gives them a common language with their Karen neighbors, a young couple who also have young children. The two couples speak every day. The fathers work at the same factory and carpool into work several days a week. While the fathers are away, the moms and children gather to play. During our interview, David Say shared with me that another neighbor helped them lay down the home's new concrete back

porch and that several neighborhood children of all ethnicities run back and forth between their house and the house next door.

Nay Reh and Tu Meh described themselves as closely connected to several families in their Habitat neighborhood. They both speak some English; however, Nay Reh feels more comfortable conversing in English than his wife. While Tu Meh speaks English with me, she is timid about talking to others, afraid the words will come out wrong. When I inquired about their neighborhood interactions, they told me about several Karenni families in their cul-de-sac and mentioned that Tu Meh's brother lives six houses away. I was curious about their connection with their non-Burmese neighbors, so I asked about the next-door neighbors who gave them the chairs. Nay Reh replied, "I don't know his name, but I know him. They gave me a pool. A big pool." He laughed as he admitted to understanding everything the neighbor tells him but that "sometimes when they talk to me, I don't know what to say back."

Trying to communicate with a neighbor despite not entirely understanding what they are saying or perhaps not knowing how to reply appears to be a common problem. Heh Htoo Mu described a similar situation with her neighbors. She explained that her neighbors are very friendly, and she often waves to them when they see each other across their beautifully manicured lawns. However, she admitted that sometimes, she does not fully understand what they are saying when they try and talk to her.

Many still have minimal knowledge of English, and this bothers them. Others know enough English to understand what people say to them but are too shy to respond for fear of getting the words wrong. Several members of one group felt "too shy" to talk to their neighbors, saying things like "I might say the wrong thing," and "we understand

but we don't know what to say," and "we are afraid the words aren't right." As a result, while they wave to their neighbors, they only really speak to their core group of friends.

Despite language barriers, many other participants felt some connection with their neighbors. One mother said she and her neighbors on either side of her interact with simple greetings and a wave. "Hi. Good morning. How are you?" she said with a laugh. Another participant explained:

We are all human beings even though we don't speak the same language. ... They don't know how to speak our language either, and we don't know how to speak theirs, so when we see each other, we just say hi. ... I like them because they help us if we need help. If we need help, we ask them, and they would show it to us.

For others, not knowing English has led to strained relationships with their neighbors. One group participant admitted she was afraid to talk to her neighbors, explaining, "I do not talk to any of my neighbors. It's been over two years since I talked to my neighbors because I am scared." Still, another respondent longed for more interaction with her neighbors but was unsure how to proceed, saying, "I have a neighbor that lives behind me. Whenever I go to the backyard, they go back inside, so I never got the chance to talk to them."

Pray Meh and Pah Reh are a Karenni couple that wishes they lived on a block like the one Mi Meh lives on. Although they only live a few streets away and are not dissatisfied with their neighbors, they stated they "would be even happier if we moved close to all Karenni, like all around." Part of the problem stems from a disagreement they had with their immediate neighbors. A few months ago, the neighbors came to talk to them, but Pray Meh and Pah Reh could not understand what the neighbors were saying,

only that there was some kind of a problem. The neighbors left frustrated and erected a tall, green fence on their side of the property line a week later. Pray Meh and Pah Reh understand this situation may have been avoided if they spoke English but feel the language is impossible for them to learn. Still unsure what went wrong, Pray Meh said that “it will be easier if we live close to Karenni. ... I want to get close to everybody, but the languages.”

On the whole, however, relationships with their non-Burmese neighbors are pleasant. For example, one couple told me that sometimes their Congolese neighbor on the right barbecues then offers them a plate. They, in turn, often reciprocate. Bu Htoo shared a similar story describing the connections he has with one of his neighbors:

Well, they are all friendly here. ... When they cook, they share with me. When I cook, I share too. One day he came out and said, if you have time, I buy food from you. I say, Oh, I’m sorry. You don’t have to buy. Every time I cook, I give you for free. (laughter) He liked my fried rice with shrimp, I believe.

### **Impact of COVID**

Because this study was conducted during a pandemic, I was curious about the impact of COVID on their daily lives. I was especially intrigued about the two groups of women I came across that were just hanging out in their front yards. When I inquired, they described creating a bubble within their community, saying they only hung out with each other. One group of women told me that they work together during the day and get together in the evenings. The other group was comprised of at-home mothers who gather daily to cook and socialize. Both groups said getting the virus concerned them but that they felt comfortable with each other.

Some participants spoke of COVID's impact on their families. The mother of a 2-month-old baby worried that she would get COVID and give it to the infant. Other parents voiced concerns about their children attending school online. One young mother shared that her children "don't really understand it, and we don't understand it either. But in school, the teachers can teach them and help them, and it's easier on us."

Still others spoke of wanting the pandemic to be over so they could resume their normal activities. Pray Meh explained, "Everything is cut short. We cannot see each other, talk to each other as often. And if I go work, (they) don't let us hang out in crowds, and we have to wear face masks. One or two layers." Another participant shared:

I want this virus to be gone already because it's making it hard for everything, such as going to the store and getting groceries. And we want to gather around and talk about what's happening on the news, but we can't either because of this virus. The church too, we can't go out anymore. So everything is hard.

When discussing the pandemic, one participant shared that while life can be difficult at times, "we all help each other." This sentiment is reflective of the social connections Burmese refugees have with each other. Pray Reh, who had recently moved in, hopes to establish a similar relationship with his new neighbors. He told me he has not spoken to the families on either side of him because he is concerned about social restrictions but admitted that he is also shy about speaking English. Yet, Pray Reh hopes they will be friends and help each other out when needed.

## **Summary**

Study participants shared with me several stories about living in Habitat for Humanity homes. These stories told me something about the social connections they have



formed with their neighbors. While some have issues that concern them, overall, almost all of their interactions with neighbors are friendly, even if they are often limited to activities such as waving and sharing food. Visiting their neighborhoods, I saw these connections reflected in the children of all nationalities running, jumping, and chasing each other from house to house. I saw them in the sons and fathers that gather nightly to play basketball in the middle of the street. And I saw them in the circle of women sitting on a blanket in the front yard with small bottles of hand sanitizer at their feet.

### **Settling into a Place Called Home**

To fully immerse myself in this study, I went to the homes of Burmese homeowners living in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods and sat with them in their yards surrounded by lush gardens and inhaling the smells of fresh-cut grass and summer barbeques through my mask. What I found was a peaceful community of people hand-watering their lawns, tending to their gardens, and enjoying the simplicities of life.

This section highlights findings that helped me answer the second research question, *What does home mean to Burmese refugees living in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods?* Because of social distancing rules associated with the pandemic, I was not able to enter their home. Thus, I asked if they would step into their homes and take photos to share with me that they felt documented their lives as homeowners. These pictures allowed us to dialog more in-depth about their feelings behind the photos and the concept of home. What follows is a compilation of the photos they shared and their stories that help explain these visual images and document their feelings of home. Through visual ethnography, I am better able to offer a glimpse of the participants' life experiences (Pink, 2013).

## **Pa Noe**

Pa Noe spoke of his present home both in reflection of past memories and as a physical space. Here are some of the words Pa Noe used to describe his concept of home:

*My home is here because I live here.*

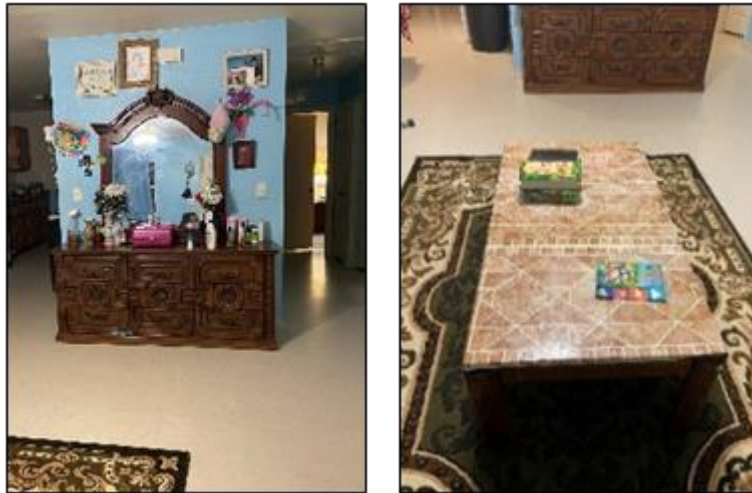
*Life in America is not as scary as Burma. I like it here because I don't have to worry about wars and police.*

*When I lived in Burma, we were always scared of the Burmese army coming and then killing people. So coming here is a better place.*

*This is the center of the house. We have a frame on there. And then we have most of the stuff on there.*

*This is where we pray at night. That's why there are bibles there.*

*There's nothing I don't like. I enjoy (living here) because I get to grow my own garden in the backyard.*



**Figure 5.6** Burmese Living Room and Place to Pray  
*Source.* Pa Noe

## Bu Htoo

Bu Htoo spoke philosophically about his home as a place of comfort. He was also the only participant I interviewed that owned fish. Here are his words:

*If I have all the opportunities and everything like equally ... I would say that this is home to me. ... The building, it just gives you a shell, a shelter for you to rest. But the thing is, what the real home means to you is whatever makes you more secure and more comfortable, more peaceful. I think that's the home for me.*

*Whenever I come home, I have friends. They are so friendly. Whenever I come home, they know when I come home. They kind of like following me whenever I go, they kind of like move around. ... The fish has given me a peace of mind.*

*This part is kind of like make you relax, Peaceful. When you're stressed from work or whatever it is, when I come home, I feel so relaxed. This is my home. This is my house that I could relax. And I could like release my stress.*

*A home means to me is a place that I can lay down peacefully.*

*No matter where I live, if I have a peace in my mind, then I'm happy, all the happiness. I think that's the home to me.*



**Figure 5.7** Burmese Home Interior and Fish Friends

Source. Bu Htoo

## David Say and Sa Ra Meh

When discussing their beliefs about the meaning of home, David Say and Sa Ra Meh talked about home in relation to past homes and about finding true happiness, security, and peace in their present home. Here are some of their words:

*Home. I feel security and peace and safe.*

*I feel like nothing can compare like home because I can grow my family. I can plant a tree. I can grow any plant I want. I can play freely. ... That's why nothing can compare.*

*There is not another place like home. ... I live in my father's home, I lived in my country. I miss my home sometimes because I lived there a long time. But it was not a good home. I miss it. Home is a good place to live. America is a little different. Even when I lived in the apartment, I missed them. But the more you live, the more you remember you miss the place. But right now, I have my own home. ... America is also the first step. Our life started here, where we grow our family.*

*We are happy. I am happy with this life. I like working. I like taking care of my family.*



**Figure 5.8** Living Area in Burmese Home and Tending the Garden  
*Sources.* David Say and Author

## Saw Moo

For Saw Moo, the concept of home revolves around God and family. However, he also spoke of home as a physical place. Below are his words:

*Home is very important for us. It means family.*

*I like living here.*

*If we look at this as a religious perspective, this is our Father's land. Wherever we go, this world belongs to God.*

*This is my house now, and I have to be cautious of what I can do to it.*

*We live in a three-bedroom house.*

*This is my kitchen. It's different because in Thailand we used to cook on charcoal stoves. We don't have money to buy an actual stove. Sometimes, we just start a fire with twigs to cook.*



**Figure 5.9** Kitchen and Hallway in Burmese Home  
Source. Saw Moo

## Mi Meh

Mi Meh primarily spoke of home in relation to her garden and of finding contentment in her outdoor kitchen. Here are the words she shared with me:

*In the apartment, the rooms are small. And here, the living room is more bigger. It is your own house. And whenever you want to cook outside, you can.*

*I cook outside all the time. All the time. I use the plants in my garden to cook.*

*Back in the apartment, the kitchen is small and crowded, and cooking inside the house smells, so I wanted to build this.*

*Sometimes we share with food.*



**Figure 5.10** Burmese Bedroom

Source. Mi Meh



**Figure 5.11** Outdoor Kitchen and Garden of Burmese Home

Source. Mi Meh



## Albert Aung and Heh Htoo Mu

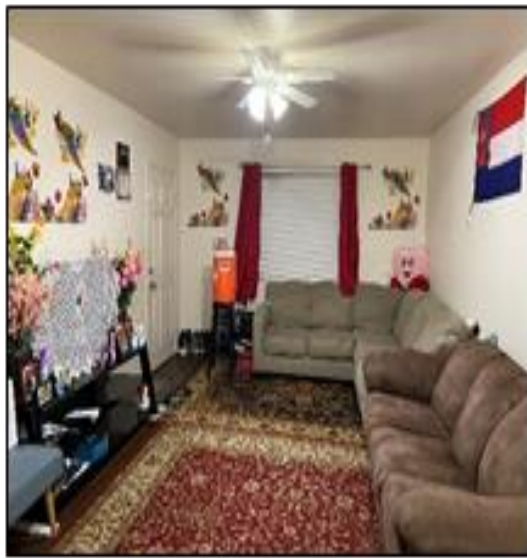
Albert Aung and Heh Htoo Mu shared that home to them revolved around their family and the hope for a better future for their children. They also offered descriptions of their gardens.

*In my heart, I consider here as my home. I still remember the times when I lived over there but this is home for me.*

*Home means the future for the kids. Because without a home, the kids wouldn't have a place to stay, and that's what matters the most.*

*Home is the foundation of our family. If the house starts breaking apart, we can fix it. But if our family starts breaking apart, then we have nothing else.*

*My backyard, I love it. I like to plant in my garden... That is a different species of eggplant. It's round instead of long. ... We make chili paste with it. ... This is a banana tree. Back in Thailand, we had a lot of those, and we would eat a lot of bananas. We would cut down the trunk and make soup out of it.*



**Figure 5.12** Interior of Burmese Home and Tree in Backyard  
Source. Heh Htoo Mu

## Pah Reh and Pray Meh

Pah Reh and Pray Meh shared that they felt connected to past homes through the garden in their present home. They also spoke of home in relation to family. Below are some of the words they shared:

*Having a garden reminds me of home back in Thailand. I'm happy and grateful that I'm allowed to grow these vegetables and keep the tradition alive.*

*Home feels empty if there's no altar in the house because we have it in every house we used to live, and that's for our family worship.*

*It feels incomplete without having family portraits on the wall or in the house, so it's nice to be able to have a few pictures of family around and remind ourselves that we love one another.*

*I miss my country and let me tell you, but America is very comfortable. Here it is better here than in other place.*



**Figure 5.13** Vegetable Garden and Family Worship Area of Burmese Home  
*Source.* Pah Reh



## Nay Reh and Tu Meh

Nay Reh and Tu Meh spoke of the meaning of home as a place where they could find comfort and security. They shared these words:

*Home is a safe place*

*The living room is very nice for sit and rest. We can relax and watch the TV.*

*Our kitchen is nice. More cleaner than in Thailand and in Burma.*

*Our beds are soft.*



**Figure 5.14** Images of Burmese Home Interior  
*Source.* Nay Reh

## Mu Ria

Mu Ria expressed her feelings of home in relation to her garden, a passion she enjoys every day. Here are her words:

*The best thing about it is living in my own house.*

*I want a big house so I could use the backyard to plant beans and other vegetables.*

*And every morning when I wake up and see the vegetables, I am happy to see everything growing. My own vegetable. (laughter)*

*I'm happy to be here. I feel the happiest when I am at home.*



**Figure 5.15** Images of Garden in Backyard of Burmese Home  
*Source.* Author

## Pray Reh and Nga Meh

Pray Reh and Nga Meh discussed the meaning of home as a physical place where they can find comfort for themselves and their young family. They shared these words:

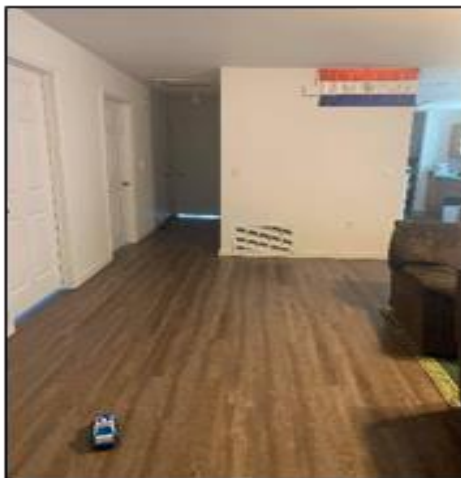
*Home is a place, a place to live, and a place to rest. Home is when we go back and forth, and it's there for us to rest and wind down.*

*It's very important to us.*

*This is my home.*



**Figure 5.16** Burmese Home Exterior  
Source. Nga Meh



**Figure 5.17** Burmese Home Interior and Garden  
Source. Nga Meh

## Focus Group Participants

Members of the two groups I interviewed spoke of home in relation to their gardens and the food they prepared for their families. While the groups do not speak the same language, their shared passions connect them. Here are their words:

*Home is good. Good.*

*We get to have the backyard. We can plant vegetables and the kids can play in the backyard. But in the apartment, we cannot play and cannot have a barbeque. Every day, I cook outside. ... I eat rice every day. ... We have more than 12 bags of rice.*

*There is a thing that cooks the rice. These are the things I use every day to cook.*

*We use what we have in our garden. We just cut some bamboo. It is sticky inside. I have to cut all the bamboo outside and put the inside in rice so I can eat sticky rice.*

*We make a paste with chili. We can eat it with anything like cucumber and eat with rice.*



**Figure 5.16** Spices, Food Preparation, and Garden Area of Burmese Home

Source. Focus Group Participants

These eloquent words and photos are a testament to Burmese homeowners' contentment in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods. Their lives are far from perfect, but they have built a life of peace and stability, surrounded by family and friends. These homeowners have taken elements from their own country and blended them with parts of their new country to make their homes their own. Reflecting on their stories, it became clear that for many, the concept of home is connected to memories of the past, contentment in the present, and hopes for the future.

### **Where do You Consider Home?**

Listening to the people talk about their homes in their native country and in Thailand made me curious about how connected they still felt to other places they had lived. By asking where they truly felt at home in their heart, I discovered that while many found a sense of peace and contentment in their current homes, some still felt a tug to their native homeland, the place of their birth. Asking this question brought up an almost contrary view of home. How could they be content in one world yet still feel such longing for another? The answer to this question lies in feelings that I know well. As a military spouse, I lived in many places, all far from the small town where I grew up. While I love our life, the places we have lived, and the homes we created over the years, my bones have always felt a pull towards the land of *mi gente*, my people.

For some respondents, this question brought up memories, both good and bad, of feelings tied to both home as a place and as a connection to family. While some were very decisive in their responses, others had mixed feeling about their connections to home.

On the one hand, some participants thought of Burma as their idyllic home, despite the painful memories and despite not living there for most of their lives. Describing this connection, one respondent said, “Home for me, home would be Burma. ... I don’t know how to get the citizenship. I don’t know the language. So I am thinking back on Burma.” Another respondent said he considers Burma his home because “I will never forget because I was born there,” and still another simply stated, “I was born there.” Pray Meh felt connected to her homeland through memories of her home on a mountainside, explaining that “even though we live here, I still think about the house back in Burma. I miss it. And even though we moved from apartment to here, home is still Burma.”

Others felt connected to their native homeland by the family they left behind. One Karen group member explained:

For me, I always think about my house in Burma. Even though there’s no opportunities, no freedom, no nothing. We’re always on the run, and we always have to be cautious and scared. When we fled to Thailand, life was better than Burma. And when we came to America, life was better than Thailand. But I will never forget about it because my siblings live in Burma, I am always worried for them. I am always missing them.

On the other hand, some participants answered quickly and decisively that they felt a real connection with the U.S. For example, Mu Ria answered my inquiry with a resolute nod of her head, saying, “My heart belongs to America. I’ll live and die here.” One Karenni participant said that she considers the U.S. her home because her children were born here. Tu Meh chose the U.S. for practical reasons, explaining, “We can be safe

inside. If it too hot, we can use the a/c.” Still another respondent, who felt similarly connected to America, shared:

Because in the camp, even if we go back, we don’t have any house, a place to live in. We can’t go to camp to find the money. There’s not a lot of place to work in the camp. We would have to live in the forest and find the food.

When asked the question, one respondent hesitated before responding. Her answer hinted at the troubling reasons why she had to flee Burma:

I like living here. If you compare the way we used to live, we would always be scared of the Burmese soldiers. When dogs bark, we would get scared. Even when branches fall down, we would get scared. When we live here, we get to sleep peacefully.

For others, the question appeared more complex, and they answered with a mixed sense of loyalty. Mi Meh expressed hesitancy in her response, saying,

Home would be here, but it is a language barrier that makes it hard. If we could speak English, it would be much better. ... I don’t think of myself becoming Americanized. My heart is still troubled. I am never at ease. If my heart is at peace, I think I will understand some of the words. But there is a lot that is always troubling me.

Likewise, one Karen group member explained:

Since I am originally from Burma, it will always be a part of me, but I like it here better. Even though the house in Burma was mine, I did not want to live there forever. I would want to go there to visit and then come back because it is better here.



Conversations about past homes brought up difficult memories for many participants. A few became pensive as they reflected on their past. For example, Pray Meh spoke of the hardships of Burma, saying,

Back in Burma, the community helps each other, but the Burmese soldiers came in and took the people away and using them from another thing. I am really worried about that. I love it there, but I don't want the Burmese soldier thing to happen again.

While happy to be free from Burma's political unrest, some expressed deep concern for those they left behind. Speaking of family connections in Burma, one participant shared:

I like living here but I miss it sometimes because my parents and my siblings are back in Burma. It's good that I am here, that way I can give them a happy life. If I am living a happy life, I also want them to live a happy life.

Another described the difficulties of living in a country without freedom, explaining:

We came to America, and we got to eat anything we want. But I can never forget the hardships we had to endure living in Burma. I am thankful that we escaped from it but, our families always have to live in fear. They will never know when the Burmese soldiers will kill them. They have to live this life full of fear, just like we experienced years ago. Except we already escaped from it.

Still another asked if there was something I could do to help:

As Karen people living in Burma, they always have to worry about war. Not only the Karen people but for many minorities that are living in Burma and Thailand. They always have to be scared, and some of them are being tortured by the



Burmese soldiers. And not long ago, they killed a Karen girl. They are always killing. As for us, we can't do anything to help them. We've already escaped from them, but I am still worried about my Karen brothers and sisters. Can you please help them?

As I write this, I think about the Burmese people's concern for their friends and family that stayed behind in Burma. The last few years brought hope that the country was slowly starting to stabilize and that there would be some semblance of peace as Aung San Suu Kyi and others worked to bring democracy to the nation. However, hope for equality and peace was recently dashed when a military regime overthrew her democratic party. The participants of this study are understandably devastated to hear this news. They are trying their best to help their family and friends from afar by posting on social media, holding protests, donating money, and contacting their U.S. representatives. This is one situation where I, too, am helpless. As a mother, daughter, sister, and friend, I feel their heartache and offer my wholehearted support to all Burmese people, both in the U.S. and those still living in conflict.

### **On Gratitude**

Finally, these study participants felt blessed to live in a country that allowed them the freedom to work, worship, and reside in peace and security. Some were very specific in their appreciation. For example, Heh Htoo Mu expressed gratitude that their children could receive an education. Saw Moo said that he was "really happy because I got to see things I've never seen before. It makes me happy."

All were appreciative of the Habitat for Humanity organization and the many volunteers that helped them on their journeys towards homeownership. Sa Rah Meh said

that she wanted to “thank those who helped me. And Habitat. ... I am really thankful that the government let me come here.” Her husband, David Say, agreed, saying that as refugees, “we had no future in the refugee camp. I am really thankful to the American government. And the American people.”

Nga Meh stated that she was very appreciative of the assistance, saying, “I am really grateful to the volunteers and the Habitat (staff members) that helped us. And the Catholic Church and everyone else that helped us.” Mu Ria also expressed appreciation for all the people that helped build her home. Describing her reaction to seeing the finished product, she said, “The volunteers and staff did it, and when it was done, I thought the house was pretty. When I saw it, I was very pleased with how the house turned out.”

Many respondents spoke of the money they were saving by owning rather than renting, calling Habitat a more affordable option. Pleased with the price difference, Nga Meh said, “The monthly payment is suitable for me since the rent at the apartment is expensive, and Habitat’s (payment) is half, which makes it easier for me.” Others like Albert Aung noticed that his home’s utility bills are were much more affordable than the utility bills he received when he lived in an apartment. One Karenni participant noted that “we weren’t born here so money is one of our many concerns. We are glad that Habitat is cheap and affordable for us.” When discussing cost savings, Mi Meh shared, “Although life is hard, living here makes it a bit easier.” Finally, Bu Htoo stated that the affordability allowed him to save money for a rainy day, saying, “I tried to have a little something on the side. If this thing happened or something like that, I can cover it.”

Participants of this study also spoke of feeling safe and secure in their Habitat homes. For instance, when asked to comment on if she felt safe in her home, Sa Ra Meh remarked, “I feel security and peace and safe.” She also spoke of feeling comfortable walking her children to their nearby school, sharing that she has a driver’s license but is afraid to drive. Albert Aung and Heh Htoo Mu also stated that they felt a sense of security living in their Habitat neighborhood. Heh Htoo Mu commented that “I feel more secure because we have our own house and we could do what we want to it, more privacy and freedom basically to do what we want.” Pray Reh offered similar comments, stating, “I feel safe living in this house. It is better for my family. It’ll be easier for me, and in the family, things will be more fulfilled and enough.”

Finally, Nay Reh expressed appreciation for the opportunity to live in a home with a lock on it by declaring that “in my own home, nobody is coming in.” Explaining further, he shared that in Thailand, his family home was located by the side of a road on the edge of the refugee camp and that sometimes, random strangers and drunk people would unexpectedly walk in. Nay Reh added that unlike the sturdy locks on his current home, doors in Thailand and Burma were held closed with string made from bamboo trees. “We just tied it up,” he said with a wave of his hand.

## **Summary**

In summary, these findings revealed some commonalities about what home means to Burmese homeowners living in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods. Some participants described home as a physical place. Other respondents spoke of home in relation to family. Still others referenced home relative to the gardens that surround them. Collectively, their pictures and the conversations surrounding their narrations of home

allowed me to gain a deeper sense of their present world through the physical buildings that shelter them, the gardens that surround them, the family and neighbors they interact with, and the nostalgic tug of their native homeland.

### **Conclusion**

This dissertation's findings offer a glimpse at the world of Burmese refugees from their ancestral lands to their present lives as homeowners through Habitat for Humanity. The first part of this chapter documents their memories of past homes in Burma and the refugee camps in Thailand. Listening to their memories made me reflect on their lives before coming to the U.S. While there were some happy memories, there was also great sorrow. Many spent up to 20 years in refugee camps waiting for resettlement. They could not go back to their home country, and they could not stay where they were. Their lives, like their homes, lacked a solid foundation.

The second part of this chapter details participants' first impressions of U.S. housing, people, language, employment, and more. Once they landed in the U.S., they had many lessons to learn within the context of acculturation. While it is impossible to document all their learning experiences, many examples are recorded in this chapter, including using indoor plumbing, communicating with a caseworker, maintaining a job, and paying bills.

This chapter concludes with a look at the participants' lives as homeowners through Habitat for Humanity. It shows the learning involved in physical homebuilding and the interconnections built when starting a new community. Further, it demonstrates what home means to Burmese refugees living in Habitat neighborhoods through their own words and photos. Reflecting on these photos and our shared conversations gave me

a better understanding of their feelings of home and as homeowners content in their homes and the secure world they have created for themselves and their families.

Identifying the memories Burmese refugees have of past homes in Burma and the refugee camps in Thailand, comparing these memories with their first impressions of the U.S. as new arrivals in their quest to find a place to call home and looking at the participants' lives as homeowners through Habitat for Humanity, enabled me to look more carefully at their processes of acculturation and cultural fusion. The next chapter discusses the answers to the research questions in more detail by examining how they have fused elements of their own culture with their adopted culture and made them their own.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **LEARNING, ACCULTURATION, AND CULTURAL FUSION**

In her book *The Vulnerable Observer*, Ruth Behar (1996) writes, “Nothing is stranger than this business of humans observing other humans in order to write about them” (p. 5). The people I interviewed for this study started out as displaced persons forced to leave their beloved homeland and flee over the border to refugee camps, where they lived for up to 20 years waiting for resettlement. During that time, they married, had children, raised their families, built homes. They helped each other survive. But they lived a life of uncertainty. They could not return to their native country, and they could not stay in temporary camps that offered minimal job prospects, a scarcity of food, and limited education for their children. With much trepidation yet hope for a peaceful future, they carried their one bag per family towards a giant metal flying machine and bravely stepped on board. Through resettlement, they had to leave home to find home.

The primary purpose of this dissertation was to look at what Burmese refugees and former refugees living in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods learned through the experiences of acculturation and cultural fusion and help host communities gain a deeper understanding of the challenges they face and the successes they achieve. Thus, this chapter interprets the findings from Chapter 5 by examining this learning and highlighting examples of the fusion of cultures that can be viewed through the participants’ understanding of the meaning of home.

First, I reflect on what the study participants learned through acculturation by comparing their lives before and after resettlement. Next, I review what home means to these homeowners living in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods. Finally, through

analysis of their photos and words detailing their understanding of the meaning of home, I provide examples of how culture learning has influenced their daily lives as adult learners who have fused their own culture with their adopted culture to create a world that is distinctively their own.

### **Learning through Acculturation**

When I first started this project, I thought it would be best to view Burmese refugees through the combined theoretical frameworks of Berry's (1997) acculturation and Croucher and Kramer's (2017) cultural fusion. However, as the study evolved, I began to minimize the acculturation aspect and focus this study entirely on cultural fusion. It seemed that acculturation research was too well-known. Too dull. Written about too much. That somehow, this study would be richer if I focused exclusively on cultural fusion, which sounded much more exciting. But as I progressed in my analysis of the Burmese and their resettlement stories, I realized that their stories, in fact, show evidence of both.

While the acculturation of immigrants and refugees is widely studied, the results of what they ultimately learn through their acculturation are not. Some researchers focus their studies on acculturation from a theoretical perspective (Berry 1997; Schwartz et al., 2020; Ward & Geeraert, 2016). Others explore how refugee mental or physical health impacts acculturation (Alidu & Grunfeld, 2018; Ma et al., 2020). While many researchers look at *how* refugees gain knowledge – both formally in classroom settings (Larrotta, 2017; Sheikh & Anderson, 2018) and informally through community gardens, art classes, and more (Gerber et al., 2017; Hauck et al., 2014; Morrice, 2012), none document the specific learning that occurs through refugee acculturation. Ultimately, research on what

refugees learn through their acculturation experiences can help host communities more fully understand the challenges resettled refugees face so that they may be better prepared to assist them towards self-sufficiency.

To answer the first research question, *What have resettled Burmese refugees learned through their experiences of acculturation?* I asked Burmese refugees about their memories of past homes in Burma and the refugee camps in Thailand and compared these memories with their recollections of their initial resettlement recollections. While Burmese refugees have learned much more through their acculturation than is documented here, the fact that they had never seen an airplane before leaving Thailand says a lot about how far they have come, both in physical distance and in catching up with the technological advances that have occurred in the U.S. Reflecting on our remarkable conversations, I now have a greater understanding of the people I interviewed and what they learned as they adjusted to landing on foreign soil where nothing looked, smelled, felt, or sounded familiar. This study's findings document their first impressions of the food, the housing, the language, and the Americans they met as they adjusted to life in the U.S. In contrast with their life before resettlement, their new life was "far from the same," as Pray Reh so eloquently put it.

Study participants had to adjust to a world where people looked and sounded different from themselves, a new experience for them. Seeing people different from themselves for the first time both confused and delighted them. After learning to overcome their nervousness around volunteers who spoke a different language, almost all of the participants developed lasting friendships with the people who reached out helping hands to assist them as they adapted to living in the U.S.



Upon arrival in the U.S., the Burmese people had to learn to adjust to the nuances of living in a different style of shelter. In Burma and Thailand, their homes were small huts primarily made from bamboo. In the U.S., they were placed in enclosed, multi-room apartments situated within larger buildings that all looked the same. They traded a world of greenery and nature for a world of concrete, and after arrival, several were afraid to stay in their new homes but also afraid to leave. In addition, they grew up in a world without electricity, so they had to learn how to turn lights on and off, how to plug lamps into electrical sockets, and how to run a vacuum cleaner. Heating and air conditioning units were a luxury they quickly learned to operate and appreciate. Similarly, after a lifetime of sleeping on hard surfaces, they discovered the comforts of sleeping on a soft mattress covered with warm blankets.

Living in America also meant getting used to indoor kitchens and bathrooms. In Burma and Thailand, the participants had to collect wood to make a fire before preparing a meal. However, in the U.S., they learned to cook by simply turning a knob. One woman spoke of needing to learn not to run outside in terror every time her cooking caused the smoke alarm to activate. They learned to put food in the giant box in their kitchen that made funny noises at night. They found that they no longer had to haul water to their homes each day but instead came out of a faucet through indoor plumbing. They also learned how to sit on the toilet, then flush when finished, a process they preferred to going out in the woods.

Further, they learned to shop in a supermarket after having grown or foraged for food their whole lives. In Burma and Thailand, their food choices were limited to what they could find in the forest, what they could grow in community gardens, and what was

distributed by camp officials. As a result, food was limited, and the people were often hungry, a sentiment best expressed by the statement, “If you eat today, you worry about tomorrow.” In contrast, study participants had to learn to maneuver U.S. grocery stores with seemingly endless choices. Not only were they astounded by the volume of food choices available, but they were also amazed by all the different colors simultaneously within their vision.

Finally, study findings show that the Burmese people gained knowledge through their jobs and the transportation that got them there. After spending many years waiting for employment, Burmese refugees who arrived in the U.S. were eager to support their families by working for pay. All they wanted was a chance. Through their first jobs in America, they learned to wear proper work attire, take lunch breaks, schedule vacation days and set up health plans. They also had to learn how to ride public transportation, something the majority of them struggled with initially, from knowing when to get on the bus to knowing where to get off.

### **Learning through Homebuilding**

Once they transitioned from their apartments into Habitat homes, the Burmese people I interviewed had to acculturate to another new way of life as homeowners. This journey began with them learning about the process of becoming homeowners and the physical building of their homes. As part of their application process, interviewed participants attended workshops on home maintenance, safety, budgeting, strategies for being good neighbors, and more. Then, through small group training, hands-on learning, and observation, they basically “learned how to build a house from the beginning,” as Saw Moo proudly proclaimed when describing what he had learned about homebuilding.

Several knew how to build a house, but they had to learn to build a house differently here in America. For instance, in Burma and Thailand, homes were built with natural materials found in the forests, and the soil served as their foundation. However, in the U.S., every Habitat home followed a blueprint that outlined specific measurements, much to David Say's fascination when he observed that every house had light switches in the same place heading down the main hallway.

Learning how to use a hammer and nails was another skill all but two of the respondents first learned through building with Habitat. In Burma and Thailand, most homes were tied together using string made from bamboo trees. Using nails to connect building materials was a learned skill for them. While Americans may take for granted that using a hammer and nails is common knowledge, as my interviews progressed, it became apparent that almost all study participants had never used a hammer before.

Listening to respondents express their gratitude for the opportunity to learn these homebuilding skills, I realized that not many people living in the U.S. can say that they have helped build their own house. Even fewer can say they have helped build almost all the homes that have sheltered them. Further, this study's participants likely know more about home maintenance than most American homeowners. When asked, almost all felt confident that they would know how to fix it if something were to break around the house.

Once they were in their new homes, the new residents had to learn things associated with homeownership. For example, they had to learn what color trash can to put their household waste into and what days to set them on the street by the curb. Some respondents spoke of building fences and painting the interiors of their homes. Most had

never started a lawnmower before. They also had to learn the significance of a breaker box when their dryers did not work, mainly because the breaker was often not turned on for that appliance when they moved in.

While refugee acculturation and learning topics in general are well-researched, Burmese homeowners living in Habitat neighborhoods are not. Nor are the lessons they learned as they journeyed to reach their present lives of stability within community. By approaching this issue from an ethnographical standpoint, findings from this research paint a clear picture of the true spirit of what they learned through their acculturation experiences as resettled refugees and beyond.

This study's findings reinforce the notion that knowledge can be constructed by blending what people know with what they learn, a concept argued by Selvi (2007). Findings also somewhat follow works by researchers who seek to understand learning through the challenges sojourners face when navigating daily life in a different cultural environment (Masgoret & Ward, 2006; Pacheco, 2020). One very notable difference, however, is that researchers of culture learning almost always focus on the learning that international students face during their short-term residence in a new country. In contrast, this study focuses on participants whose resettlement is intended to be permanent.

### **The Meaning of Home**

The first part of this chapter focused on the link between acculturation and culture learning. The next part explores refugees and cultural fusion by looking at how refugees fuse parts of the host culture with their own. Asking Burmese refugees to explain their understanding of the meaning of home illuminates this fusion. To get to the third research question, I first needed the second question as a bridge. To answer the second research

question, *What does home mean to Burmese refugees living in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods?* I asked the participants to share stories and photos with me that detailed their concept of the meaning of home. As I analyzed their stories, I better understood that their thoughts on the meaning of home were connected to their memories of past homes, their contentment in their present home, and their hopes for the future.

Through their stories, I also learned that some Burmese homeowners have mixed responses regarding the country in which they consider themselves to be most at home. Whereas some feel fully connected to America, their adopted country (*My heart belongs to America, I'll live and die here*), others said they felt that in their hearts, Burma is their true home (*I will never forget because I was born there*). Still others appeared to toggle between both countries (*Since I am originally from Burma, it will always be a part of me, but I like it here better*). They like their homes in the U.S. but are connected by memories as well as family and friends they left behind.

I was especially intrigued with the idea that the Burmese people I interviewed purposely set out to create a community where they could reside together, a place to be among their people. These findings also suggest that living in community is something that we, as life-long Americans, can learn from our immigrant neighbors. This study also underscores that, as these Burmese families have discovered, applying for homeownership through Habitat for Humanity allows families the unique opportunity to create a community together, a place to live among family and friends. This is evident in the story of two single mothers who applied together and are now neighbors. It is also hard to imagine five life-long American families comprised of relatives and friends

purposely choosing to spend their lives together on one city block then finding an economical solution to support this decision.

These findings support current literature that Burmese refugees strongly connect to their local ethnic communities and often live near other refugee families who share common languages and similar experiences (Hauck et al., 2014; Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011; Mitschke et al., 2011). Findings also align with researchers such as Mallett (2004), who posits that the place where someone is born retains “symbolic power as a formative dwelling place ... but home is not necessarily confined to this place” (p. 63).

Moreover, the concept of using the participants’ photos and words to highlight their understanding of the meaning of home aligns with Taylor (2015), who theorizes that the perspective of home should truly flow from the narratives of the population being studied. Freund (2015) also stresses the critical need for researchers to explore the oral histories of refugees to better understand their thoughts regarding the meaning of home. In discussing the concept of home, Freund writes, “making home is an ongoing process in people’s lives, before their initial displacement, throughout their long journeys and during their resettlement” (p. 83).

### **The Fusion of Cultures**

Croucher and Kramer (2017) describe cultural fusion as a process that occurs when newcomers assimilate behaviors from their adopted culture while maintaining elements of their native identity, and in the process, their adopted culture is also transformed (p. 98). When I first started this study, I assumed that I would easily find examples of cultural fusion. However, immediately after the interviews, I did not think that would be the case because of the language barriers. However, once I started

organizing, coding, and analyzing the data, I found many examples of how these homeowners' lives were infused with what they learned through their interaction with cultures different from their own.

Similar to acculturation, cultural fusion is often viewed in literature from a theoretical lens (Croucher & Kramer, 2017; Kramer, 2018; Sandel & Liang, 2010). Bilge (2019) posits the important need to document cultural fusion from both sides of the issue – the refugee's and the host country's adaptation. While certainly an important point, I chose to concentrate on documenting how interactions with people from other cultures have influenced the lives of a specific group of homeowners.

By reflecting on these influences of cultural fusion, I have developed a better understanding of how the Burmese people were able to take what they learned and merge those things with knowledge from their own culture to make homes that are distinctively their own.

Through participant photos and our conversations on their understanding of the meaning of home, I found the answer to the third question of this study, *How have Burmese refugees living in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods fused cultures as they learned to live in the U.S.?* Study findings showed several ways that the respondents fused their native culture with what they learned in their interactions with mentors, neighbors, co-workers, and others they met who helped them adjust to life in America. The examples I have chosen to exemplify here highlight some areas of their lives where Burmese homeowners have blended elements of another culture with their own to make their own.

First, evidence of cultural fusion is reflected in the photos and descriptions of the participants' outdoor kitchens. Cooking outside was all they knew before coming to America and after resettlement, they found cooking indoors stifling. Moving into their Habitat homes allowed them the freedom to create outdoor kitchens, something they enjoy immensely. While several of their outdoor kitchens have grills that require charcoal and wood, most participants use burners that require propane tanks. Many Americans enjoy cookouts in their backyards, yet the Burmese are the only people I know that cook outside every day. They usually make meals using what they grow in their gardens and often share plates of food back and forth over the fence with their neighbors.

The fusion of both cultures is also evident in the way the Burmese people tend their gardens. Gardening in America is not new; however, study participants have fused what they have learned from American gardeners with their experiences of gardening from their home country. The addition of wooden structures built on top of the gardens to support large produce is a tradition they bring to their Habitat gardens. Many of the items they plant in their backyards are plants and trees they knew from their youth, such as banana trees, bamboo trees, lemongrass, and certain types of beans and pepper plants that grow in their native country. They find comfort in the familiarity of these foods because they order seeds directly from Thailand, and all parts of the plants are used to make traditional Burmese dishes.

At the same time, several participants now often incorporate fruits and vegetables typically found in U.S. gardens, such as honeydew melon, mint, okra, and *American* cucumbers. This has led to some creative cooking as they adjust to cooking with unfamiliar produce. For example, one family has a yuzu tree growing in their yard,



planted when the home was built. A volunteer, eager to give them a tree that would make them feel comfortable, had evidently done some research on trees known to Asians. The new Burmese homeowners were unfamiliar with a yuzu tree but were intrigued when it started bearing fruit. While the family finds the fruit too sour for their tastes, the participant's mother-in-law figured out that leaves from the tree, when mixed with meat, make a tasty meal.

Evidence of cultural fusion can also be seen through the study participants' use of technology. The internet allows them to stay connected to friends and family that are not in proximity. These findings align with recent research by Kristjánsdóttir and Skaptadóttir (2018), who concluded that social media allows Muslim refugees the opportunity to communicate with friends and relatives that reside elsewhere. For example, one Burmese family not part of this study recently sent me this picture (Fig. 6.1). Taken during their daily prayer time then posted on social media, the picture depicts their home altar with a laptop computer resting beside it. The computer shows a picture of a recently deceased person whom they were offering up in prayer. The man being prayed for is my father-in-law.



**Figure 6.1** Family Altar

Source. Soe Mang

In a few of the homes, there is a guest book with the words *Mi casa es su casa* written on the first page. “My house is your house” is the English translation. The book is

handed to all who enter the home. Some visitors simply write their names. Others write long messages that explain why they have come to visit. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, I did not enter participants' homes thus, I was not asked to sign one in conjunction with this study. However, I have signed them in the past. The idea for the guest book comes from my family home, where we have had a guest book for over 25 years.

Finally, the lives of families such as mine who stepped in to lend a helping hand were transformed through the mutual sharing of cultures. As we taught them about American holidays, parks, garage sales, and guest books, they introduced us to their food, music, and traditions. Examples of how we as a family have fused the Burmese culture with our own are evident in our way of life. For example, when babysitting, I now use a Burmese sling when holding my granddaughter to give me more freedom of movement. As we enter our house, my family and I now leave our shoes in a pile near the front door. When we attend Burmese celebrations, I often wear traditional Burmese sandals and carry a traditional shoulder bag, and my husband wears a traditional Karenni vest. I am certain there are many other examples of cultural adaptation among the other community volunteers.

### **Conclusion**

These examples of learning through refugee acculturation and cultural fusion are metaphoric of the many lessons the Burmese had to learn in order to survive and thrive in the U.S. This chapter interpreted the findings regarding culture learning of the participants and was presented in three parts. First, by comparing the lives of the study participants before and after resettlement, I offered a better understanding of what they

learned through their experiences of acculturation. Next, by analyzing their stories and pictures describing their understanding of the meaning of home, it is clear the Burmese people were able to find comfort and security within their Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods. Finally, through the analysis of their concept of the meaning of home, I showed how Burmese learners have fused their own culture with their adopted culture to make it their own.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **CONCLUSION**

We all have stories to share about the homes of our childhoods. Growing up, I lived in a small town that I adored. Although I left for college and never moved back, I often visited, taking comfort in returning to the home where I grew up. Yet, as literature shows, feelings of home are not the same for everyone. My memories of home are certainly not the same as those of my children, whose memories included moving from state to state following their father's military reassignments. They are not the same as those of the foster child in our home who has never experienced permanency. And they are certainly not the same as those of my husband who, like me, had a solid home to grow up in and come back to but does not share the same level of nostalgia, focusing more on what is coming next rather than the world he left behind.

Similarly, the experiences of home of each of the Burmese respondents of this study are not the same. Each participant's experiences are infused with unique backgrounds, relationships, and personalities. Essentially, home for anyone can be a complex, multidimensional concept encompassing a wide array of feelings, memories, and values.

Viewed through the theoretical lenses of acculturation and cultural fusion, this research examined what resettled Burmese refugees learned through their acculturation experiences. Second, this study documented their understanding of the meaning of home living in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods. Finally, by analyzing how they view the concept of home, this study highlighted how they have fused cultures while finding contentment living in the U.S.

This final chapter will first offer a summary of these findings, recommend implications for theory and practice, and highlight the study's limitations and delimitations. Finally, this study will conclude with recommendations for future research and a few final thoughts.

### **Dissertation Recap**

To answer the first research question, *What have resettled Burmese refugees learned through their experiences of acculturation?* I looked for cultural learning examples by comparing the memories of Burmese refugees' lives in Burma and Thailand with their recollections of their initial resettlement and beyond. By analyzing their experiences, I discovered that learning can and does occur through refugee acculturation. While they have certainly learned more than can be documented in these findings, this study offers several examples. Their lives before resettlement in the U.S. involved a world without electricity, technology, seatbelts. Not only had they never rode in an airplane before coming to America, but they had also never even seen one. For the first time in their lives, the majority of the participants saw people different from themselves. Upon arrival in the U.S., study participants had to learn to live in housing that was significantly different from what they had known. They also learned to buy meat and vegetables in a grocery store after having grown or foraged for food their whole lives. Furthermore, the participants learned new skills to be effective workers and to use transportation to get them to their workplaces.

To answer the second research question, *What does home mean to Burmese refugees living in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods?* I asked the participants to share stories and photos with me that detailed their understanding of the meaning of home. As I

analyzed their stories, I understood that their thoughts on the meaning of home were connected to their memories of past homes, their contentment in their present home, and their hopes for the future. I was especially intrigued with the idea that the Burmese people I interviewed purposely set out to create a community where they could reside together, a place to be among their people. Through their stories, I also learned that while they like their homes in the U.S., several participants still feel strong connections to their home country, due in part to the family and friends they left behind. These findings support current literature that refugees often share strong bonds to their local ethnic communities (Hauck et al., 2014; Mitschke et al., 2011) and that they often still feel strong connections to their countries of origin (Taylor, 2015).

Finally, to answer the third research question, *How have Burmese refugees living in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods fused cultures as they learned to live in the U.S.?* I looked for answers by analyzing how Burmese refugees view their understanding of the meaning of home. Embedded in their stories and pictures of home are several examples of how Burmese refugees fused an element from their adopted country with something from their own country and made it a blend of both worlds for themselves and their families. Evidence of this fusion of cultures can be seen through the study participants' outdoor kitchens, where they utilize propane burners for cooking traditional meals and use produce grown in their gardens with origins from both Burmese and American traditions. The fusion of both cultures is also evident in their use of technology, including cell phones and computers that offer them access to social media.

In summary, through this study, I learned that the acculturation and cultural fusion experiences of Burmese refugees enhances their agency by helping them learn what it is

to live in the U.S. and make it their own. In essence, they have blended the lessons they have learned from their adopted country with what they know from their native land and have found contentment in their small corner of the world without losing their own culture.

### **Implications for Theory, Practice, and Policy**

In exploring the acculturation of Burmese refugees and their concepts of home, this study offers implications for research by adding to the depth of theoretical knowledge, as well as offering suggestions for practitioners and policymakers.

#### **Implications for Theory**

From a theoretical perspective, this study first sheds light on the acculturation and cultural fusion of a subset of refugees whose resettlement journeys have only been minimally studied. While some studies explore the acculturation of refugees in their adopted homelands (Berry, 1997; Schwartz et al., 2020; Ward & Geeraert, 2016), only a limited number of articles examine acculturation as it pertains to Burmese refugees.

More specifically, while a handful of articles describe the acculturation of Burmese Karen (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011; Mitschke et al., 2011; Myers & Nelson, 2018), hardly any focus on other Burmese ethnic groups, such as the Burmese Karenni.

This research also expands current literature of cultural fusion by documenting the distinct ways two rarely studied refugee groups learned to survive within the confines of a vastly different world by combining elements of the host country with what they know from their own experiences. Croucher and Kramer (2017) identify three boundaries to help researchers situate cultural fusion theory. These boundaries suggest that newcomers are already socialized in one culture before they connect with another, that

newcomers are dependent on their new dominant culture, and that communication happens between the newcomers and members of the host culture. They also identify four assumptions to this theory—that humans have a capacity to adapt, have a desire to maintain their cultural identities, cultural fusion is a dynamic system that depends on communication, and that the process changes individuals and their surrounding environments. This study’s findings support this theory by chronicling practical examples of cultural fusion in the studied population and in the volunteers such as myself who serve them.

This study also helps broaden the theory of culture learning. Literature on this subject primarily looks at the challenges international students face when navigating daily life in their temporary cultural environment (Masgoret & Ward, 2006; Pacheco, 2020). Whereas international students have an expectation of returning home, that option is not available to resettled refugees. This study helps expand the theory of culture learning outside the realm of college students by identifying the context through which refugees learn through acculturation and the connections they established that showed evidence of cultural fusion. This research shows that Burmese refugees feel the safest and most secure when learning and living together in community. Community is an integral part of their cultural identity and this research captures the many ways the participants learned within that community, from their experiences as newly arrived refugees to their present lives as homeowners.

Moreover, while several researchers from different disciplines have explored various themes surrounding the meaning of home (Coward, 2018; Freund, 2015; Taylor, 2015; Woodhall-Melnik et al., 2016), few studies have offered insight into how Burmese



refugees view the concepts of home, particularly in regard to homeownership. Research articles on homeownership within Habitat for Humanity are also rare.

Study findings on how Burmese refugees living in Habitat homes view the meaning of home support the results of other research by concluding that many refugees view home as a multidimensional concept (Parra, 2012; Taylor, 2015; Wiles et al., 2009). Participants from this study most often described home as an attachment to place and often pointed to their gardens as proof of their attachment. Several also viewed home relative to the relationships they established with their friends and neighbors.

Further, study findings support current literature that many Burmese still feel strong connections to their countries of origin, despite feeling comfortable and secure within their current homes (Taylor, 2015). Finally, this research adds knowledge by chronicling the lived experiences of Burmese refugees that purposely set out to create a community where they could reside together by purchasing homes near each other in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods.

### **Implications for Practice**

By responding to gaps in the literature, this dissertation also offers implications for practice by highlighting what we, as a society, need to do to help refugees transition to their new lives. Resettlement agencies preparing for new arrivals may utilize this study's findings to design more culturally responsive policies applicable to dealing with refugees during their resettlement. In my experience, the caseworkers that served the respondents of this study were dedicated employees overwhelmed by large caseloads. These burdens, however, can lead to challenges similar to those outlined in the study findings. Four study participants recalled misunderstandings between themselves and the

caseworkers assigned to assist them. One was left alone in his apartment for three days by a caseworker expecting a phone call if he needed anything; however, the participant did not fully understand how to use a telephone. This study highlights the need for more funding to lighten the loads of caseworkers and more professional development designed to promote better cultural awareness among the incoming clients.

Communities with an influx of refugees can utilize this study as an informational resource to help them better understand the challenges resettled refugees face and assist them in creating a welcoming environment for all newly arriving refugees. Similarly, organizations can use this study as a research tool to help them better develop mentorship programs with volunteers willing to assist refugees in their acculturation.

### **Implications for Policy**

Lastly, from a political perspective, it is my sincere hope that this study will remind policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels of the success of refugee resettlement programs in the U.S. and their positive impact on U.S. society in general. Historically, the U.S. has welcomed more displaced persons than any other country ([www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)). Yet, resettlement programs across the nation continue to struggle in handling newly arriving refugees, but with less funding for services, a change brought about by the policies of the previous U.S. administration (Fix et al., 2017; Greenberg et al., 2018). Policymakers should increase the number of admitted refugees and the financial resources that support them. While immigration is a complex issue that continues to be mired in controversy, the U.S. refugee resettlement program enables the legal entry of displaced persons and is beneficial for both resettled refugees and their adopted country ([www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)).

## **Limitations and Delimitations**

This research study has two limitations and two delimitations. The first limitation is the differences in language. The Burmese people I interviewed spoke five different languages. Despite working with the Burmese people for over 10 years, I am not fluent in any of their native languages. Moreover, several of the Burmese homeowners are still not fluent in English. To mitigate this limitation, I used qualified interpreters whenever needed to communicate with someone with limited English language skills.

The second limitation is my ability to get information from timid people. From my experience, the Burmese people tend to be very reserved by nature, and thus their answers may be unclear. This is an important note for me to remember because experience has taught me that while most Burmese Karen and Karenni people are uncomfortable talking with people outside of their community, often, it is the women that are the most timid. During the interview process, I was mindful of their cultural shyness and, for the most part, let the respondent dictate the pace of the interview. I also carefully noted any sensory impressions I experienced, such as plants from their gardens and smells from their outdoor kitchens, and wove these observations into the conversation with the hope of creating a better connection between myself and the participant.

The study has two delimitations. First, while Texas is home to a multitude of refugee families, only Burmese families were included in this study, and specifically, two ethnic groups within the Burmese population. The second delimitation is that while many Burmese own homes throughout this central Texas city, this study only includes Burmese participants that currently dwell in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods. While this study focuses on Burmese refugees, findings may not transfer to other ethnicities residing in

Habitat homes or perhaps to Burmese refugees living in Habitat homes in other parts of the country.

### **Recommendations for Future Study**

The participants of this study were all Burmese Karen and Karenni homeowners. However, studies involving other refugee ethnic groups would help broaden the understanding of the connection between acculturation and what refugees learn through cultural fusion as they interact with people of other cultures. Moreover, this study focused on two Burmese ethnicities living in Habitat homes, yet other refugees have purchased Habitat homes, including other Burmese ethnic groups, that are not included in this study. Therefore, further study is also recommended to explore the link between culture learning and the acculturation experiences of Burmese homeowners living in non-Habitat neighborhoods and Burmese families that choose to continue dwelling in apartments.

I also recommend that a needs assessment be done on this study's participants and other refugee groups to identify what their dreams are for themselves and their children in the country. Finding a way to help them address their hopes for the future is a way to gain knowledge by helping add to a better world. This needs assessment should include the development of an action plan for their continued learning. The majority of these participants have a minimal grasp of the English language and desire to continue their education through ESL courses but are unsure how to find those courses within the constraints of their jobs and a pandemic. Several also expressed a longing to attend classes that help them prepare for U.S. citizenship. A plan of action is certainly needed to help them achieve their goals, and a needs assessment can be woven into research on how

this group and others continue to learn both formally and informally.

Next, while this study focused on refugees living in their present Habitat homes, future studies should look at the participants' plans for future housing. During the course of this study, three participants stated that they considered their current Habitat residences to be their first home and briefly mentioned their hopes for future homes. A follow-up study in five years should explore if families are still content in their current neighborhoods or if they have moved on. This research could also benefit from a longitudinal study that documents the migration patterns of future Burmese refugees arriving in the U.S. to better understand how refugee families and friends from similar backgrounds build cultural communities both with each other and with their neighbors whose ethnicities differ from their own.

Finally, once the pandemic is over, further research is needed to document the cultural fusion that occurs from the perspective of both refugee homeowners and their neighbors. A true study of cultural fusion looks at cultural transformation that occurs from both sides of the issue (Bilge, 2019; Croucher & Kramer; 2017). While this was beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is essential research worthy of future study.

### **Final Thoughts**

When I was younger, I dreamed of joining the Peace Corp to work with indigenous people from underprivileged countries. Life happened, and I never made it, but through my volunteer work with refugees resettled in my home state, I feel that the Peace Corps has somehow come to me. This study allowed me to ask questions I have never asked before. About life in their home country and the camps. About their first impressions of the U.S. upon arrival. I enjoyed our conversations immensely, and I

viewed the pictures they shared with me with great honor and humbleness. In writing these stories, I offer a glimpse of the Burmese refugees as they navigate their little corner of the world. And I also offer a glimpse of my world, one that my family and I are honored to share with them. More than ever, I miss my pre-pandemic life. I miss walking through the Habitat neighborhoods, greeting people I know, watching the sunset, and listening to children call out to each other in play, alternating between English and their native dialects. I miss the beauty of watching women passing their babies back and forth to each other with the ease of friendship and with me not quite sure whose baby belongs to whom. I miss taking carloads of teenagers to taste their first ice cream cone. I miss the world of quiet fathers squatting in a circle of contentment as they watch their children play.

Wolcott (1999) writes that ethnography is sometimes seen as a teaching tool, and through the spirit of ethnography comes hope “that we might someday achieve a society more truly tolerant of and committed to cultural diversity” (p. 281). As I write, a wave of anti-Asian violence has overtaken this country, and their home country is in political disarray. This makes me both very angry and very sad. The recent violence in Burma is indicative of why they had to flee their ancestral lands in the first place. They are heartbroken for their country and their family and friends that still reside there. I am heartbroken thinking about the increased violence against Asians in this country. The Burmese participants of this study are hard-working, soft-spoken, and kind, but also resilient and resourceful. My hope is that this dissertation serves as a window to their world and illustrates that they are an essential addition to our American fabric.

## APPENDIX SECTION

### Appendix A. Data Design Matrix: Data Collection and Data Analysis Strategy

Research Question	Data Source	Analysis Strategy	Output
What have resettled Burmese refugees learned through their experiences of acculturation?	10 – 45 to 60 minute interviews with Burmese H for H homeowners; 2 – 60 minute focus groups with 4 - 5 Burmese H for H homeowners in each group; observations; field notes and journaling;	1. Categorize by acculturation, community, learning experiences 2. Code categories by meaning unit 3. Cluster codes for themes	Descriptions by theme & subthemes of learning through acculturation, experiences of home in Burma, Thailand refugee camps, U.S. apartments, H for H homeownership. Will follow Creswell's (2013) organizational framework for data analysis and write-up of findings
What does home mean to Burmese refugees living in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods?	10 – 45 to 60 minute interviews with Burmese H for H homeowners; 2 – 60 minute focus groups with 4 - 6 Burmese H for H homeowners in each group; observations; field notes and journaling;	1. Categorize by the meaning of home and learning experiences 2. Code categories by meaning unit 3. Cluster codes for themes	Descriptions by theme & subthemes of the meaning of home. Followed Creswell's (2013) organizational framework for data analysis and write-up of findings
How have Burmese refugees living in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods fused cultures as they learned to live in the U.S.?	10 – 45 to 60 minute interviews with Burmese H for H homeowners; 2 – 60 minute focus groups with 4 - 6 Burmese H for H homeowners in each group observations; field notes and journaling;	1. Categorize by the meaning of home; learning and lived experiences 2. Code categories by meaning unit 3. Cluster codes for themes	Descriptions by theme & subthemes of examples of cultural fusion through the meaning of home, lived experiences, and H for H homeownership
Habitat for Humanity's Organizational description	H for H's vision/ mission statements; PR self-presentation docs; media docs about H for H; observation notes		Context description
Vignettes of Burmese H for H homeowners		"Paint" narrative picture of each participant	Vignettes of Burmese H for H homeowners

## **Appendix B. Focus Group and Individual/Couple Interview Scripts**

### **Study Title: Culture Learning in Community: Burmese Refugees and the Meaning of Home**

Principal Investigator: Sonia Rey Lopez

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Ann Brooks

Sponsor: Texas State University

#### **Script for focus group:**

“Welcome and thank you for participating in this focus group.”

“The purpose of this interview is to get your feedback so I can learn more about the role that homeownership has on the acculturation and learning of Burmese refugees that have chosen to build and live in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods. I want to understand what you have learned through the process of homeownership, what you think about living in a Habitat community of blended cultures, and what *home* means to you. The information gathered will be used to inform researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.”

“Many of you lived in Burma, then had to flee to a refugee camp in Thailand for many years before coming to the United States as a refugee. Others were born in Thailand then were resettled in the U.S. I believe that Burmese refugees that live in Habitat homes have specific knowledge on what home means to refugees. I want to hear your story about coming to the U.S., what you have learned about building a house, and what living in a Habitat community means to you.”

“I would like to remind you that to protect the privacy of focus group members, I will give you all a different name when I transcribe this focus group. Please do not discuss what others say in the focus group with anyone.”

“The focus group will last about 60 to 90 minutes, and I will audiotape the discussion to make sure that it is recorded accurately. I will also take notes during the focus group.”

“Do you have any questions for me before we begin?”



**Script for interviews:**

“Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today.”

“The purpose of this interview is to get your feedback so I can learn more about the role that homeownership has on the acculturation and learning of Burmese refugees that have chosen to build and live in Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods. I want to understand what you have learned through the process of homeownership, what you think about living in a Habitat community of blended cultures, and what *home* means to you. The information gathered will be used to inform researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.”

“Many of you lived in Burma, then had to flee to a refugee camp in Thailand for many years before coming to the United States as a refugee. Others were born in Thailand then were resettled in the U.S. I believe that Burmese refugees that live in Habitat homes have specific knowledge on what home means to refugees. I want to hear your story about coming to the U.S., what you have learned about building a house, and what living in a Habitat community means to you.”

“With your permission, I would like to audiotape and take notes during this interview. The taping is to record the information you provide accurately. If you choose not to be audiotaped, I will only take notes instead. I would also like to take some pictures of your home but will only do so if you give me permission. To protect your privacy, I will give you a different name when I transcribe this interview.”

“This interview will last about 45 to 60 minutes.”

“Do you have any questions for me before we begin?”

## Appendix C. Interview Questions

### Focus Group Questions

<b>Study Title: Culture Learning in Community: Burmese Refugees and the Meaning of Home</b>	
Principal Investigator: Sonia Rey Lopez	Faculty Advisor: Dr. Ann Brooks
Sponsor: Texas State University	

1. Can you briefly tell me about your journey from Burma or Thailand to America?  
*Probing question: Were you born in Thailand or Burma? What did you think about the plane ride?*
2. What was it like for you when you first got to the U.S.?  
*Probing question: What did you think about your apartment when you first came?*
3. How was it different than you expected?  
*Probing question: Was it hard to get used to living here? For example, how was getting food different than in the refugee camp?*
4. How do you feel about living in a Habitat neighborhood? (Financially, socially, language)  
*Probing question: Can you tell me about your friends in the neighborhood?*
5. Where do you consider home?  
*Probing question: What does the word home mean to you? Are you more at home here or in Burma or in the refugee camp? Why?*
6. What are the most useful lessons you learned from the process of building a home through Habitat for Humanity?  
*Probing question: What did you learn in the classes they offer?*
7. Is there anything else related to Habitat or refugees that you think I should be asking?

## Individual/Couple Interview Questions

### **Study Title: Culture Learning in Community: Burmese Refugees and the Meaning of Home**

Principal Investigator: Sonia Rey Lopez

Sponsor: Texas State University

1. Can you tell me more about your journey from Burma or Thailand to America?
2. What was it like for you when you first got to the U.S.?  
*Probing question: What did you think about the people when you first came?*
3. How was it different than you expected?
4. How well do you think you have adjusted to life in the U.S.?  
*Probing questions: Do you think you are doing ok here in America? Was it hard to get used to living here? Can you share some examples?*
5. How difficult was it for you to apply for and move into a Habitat home?  
*Probing questions: Who helped you fill out the application? How much did you depend on others to complete the whole process?*
6. What does living in a Habitat home mean to you? (Financially, socially, language)  
*Probing questions: What do you think about living here? Are you more at home in the U.S, in Burma, or in Thailand? Why?*
7. What are the most useful lessons you learned from the process of building a home through Habitat for Humanity?  
*Probing questions: What did you learn in the classes they offer?*
8. How is homebuilding different in the U.S. than it was in Burma or Thailand?
9. How well do you know your neighbors? What do you talk to them about?  
*Probing questions: Who lives near you? Where are they from?*
10. How does living in a Habitat home help you develop a better appreciation for other cultures?
11. How has living in a Habitat home helped you adjust to life in the U.S.?  
*Probing questions: What does “being home” mean to you? Do you feel like this is your home? Can you give some examples?*
12. Is there anything else related to Habitat or refugees that you think I should be asking?

## Appendix D. Codebook

Parent and child codes	Detailed Description
Adjusting to life in the US	Sharing story about adjusting to life in the US
Apartments	Sharing story about living in an apartment
Food	Sharing story about food in the US
Other struggles	Other struggles during resettlement and beyond
Transportation	Sharing story about transportation
Burma	Sharing story about living in Burma
Journey from Burma to Thailand	Story about journey from Burma to Thailand
Burmese	Sharing story about Burmese they encounter that are not Karenni or Karen, such as Chin or Mon
Born in Burma	Participant was born in Burma
Born in Thailand	Participant was born in Thailand
Karen	Sharing story about Karen people
Karenni	Sharing story about Karenni people
Citizenship	Sharing story about becoming a citizen or being a citizen or the citizenship process
COVID	Sharing story about how COVID has impacted their life
Differences	Differences between Burma, Thailand, America
Diff btn building house in Habitat vs Burma or Thailand	Sharing story about difference in homebuilding
Diff btn Habitat home and apartment	Sharing story about differences between Habitat and apartment that they first resided in
Diff btn kitchen/bath in US and camp	Sharing story about how kitchens and bathrooms differ
Diff btn US and refugee camp	Sharing story about differences between US and camp
Employment	Sharing story about employment in the U.S.
Friendship	Sharing story about friends
Future	Sharing story about looking towards the future.
Gardens	Sharing story about gardening or gardens
Gratitude	Sharing story that expresses gratitude
Home	
Meaning of home	Sharing story about what home means
Where do you consider home?	Ask to choose between Burma, Thailand, and the U.S.
Homebuilding	Sharing story about homebuilding in general
Building by self or family	Sharing story about families building homes alone
Building in community	Sharing story about families building in community
Physical building Habitat	Physical building within Habitat
Physical home in Burma	Physical home in Burma
Physical home in Thailand	Physical home in Thailand
Interesting fact	Something that stands out as interesting or unusual
Language	Example of language

Laughter	Example of language
Learning	
Education outside of Habitat	Other mentioning of education or uneducated
Learning within Habitat	What participants learned through Habitat about homebuilding
Living in Habitat	
Comfort	Shows a sense of comfort with living in a Habitat home
On Saving money	Sharing story about saving money by living in a Habitat home
Safety/security	Sharing story about feeling secure and safe in a Habitat home
Living in US	
Impressions before coming to US	Sharing story about impressions before coming to the U.S.
Impressions of language	Sharing story about first impressions of language
Impressions of First Apartment	Sharing first impressions of apartment life
US First Impressions	Sharing story about first impressions of the U.S.
US People first impression	Sharing story about first impressions of meeting and seeing Americans when first in the U.S.
Neighbors	Describes interactions with neighbors
Non-Burmese neighbors	Sharing story about neighbors that are not Burmese
Sharing food	Examples of neighbors sharing with neighbors, especially food
On applying for Habitat home	Sharing story about the application process for obtaining a Habitat home
Photo comments	Comments from photo
Refugee	On what it means to be a Refugee
Religion	Sharing story that involves God, prayer, and religion
Teacher Rey	Sharing story about Teacher Rey
Technology	Sharing story about use of technology
Thailand refugee camp	Living in refugee camp

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