Research Proposal

Library Use Barriers and Benefits: The Burmese Refugee Perspective

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Introduction

There are numerous studies and reports demonstrating the benefits that immigrants derive

from using library programs and services in their new country, including increased access to

necessary information in a number of areas (for examples, see Audunson, Essmat & Aabo, 2012;

Fisher, Durrance & Hinton, 2004; Naficy, 2009; Pender & Garcia, 2013). At the same time,

immigrants are among the United States' most information poor citizens (Fisher, Marcoux,

Miller, Sanchez & Ramirez-Cunningham, 2004), and face considerable barriers to accessing

library services (Davis, 2009). Refugees, as a sub-set of immigrants, may face even more

challenges accessing information and services, as many suffer from the negative psychological

effects of trauma, violence, and forced separation (Koo, Cho, & Gross, 2011). An immigrant is

defined by Li (2003) as an individual who "migrates from one country to another on a permanent

basis" (as cited in Caidi, Allard, & Quirke, 2010, p. 495), while a refugee is officially defined by

the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees as one who has "a well-founded fear of

persecution," has vacated their country of origin, and "cannot or will not, out of fearfulness, seek

the protection of his or her own government" (as cited in Mason, 1999). To ensure that crucial

library services reach those whom they benefit, it is important that library staff understand the

barriers to library access and use faced by refugees in their communities.

For Seattle-area libraries including Seattle Public Library (SPL) and King County Library

System (KCLS), it is particularly important to learn more about barriers faced by refugees from

Burma, officially named the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. The largest numbers of

refugees arriving in Washington State since 2008 have come from Burma (Office of Refugee

Resettlement, 2013). In addition, information about Burmese refugees' backgrounds and

experiences seems to indicate that they face significant barriers, as identified in the literature, to

accessing needed information and library services in the U.S. SPL and KCLS have recognized a

growing immigrant population and implemented a variety of outreach programs, including

English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, settings for ESL learners to practice their English,

library materials produced in several languages, and citizenship help (King County Library

System, 2013; Seattle Public Library, 2013). Understanding the barriers faced by refugees from

Burma will help local practitioners ensure that this specific and significant population can access

and benefit from services offered.

    Previous research in the Library and Information Science (LIS) literature has included

practitioner-based articles on barriers to immigrant library use or access to specific types of

information. Through a nationwide quantitative survey of library staff (Davis, 2009), and articles

which offer library staff's reflections on difficulty that immigrants had accessing specific types

of information when using the library's programs and services (Allen, Matthew and Boland,

2004; Naficy, 2009), key barriers to participation have been identified from the practitioner's

perspective. A number of small studies focusing on specific groups of immigrants in particular

areas of the U.S. have identified barriers to library use in local contexts (Burke, 2007).

Other research in the LIS field has focused more broadly on the information practices of

immigrants to offer insights into the challenges they face. Information practices are generally

defined as encompassing a range of activities including information seeking, use, and sharing

(Lloyd, Kennan, Thompson, & Qayyum, 2013). Savolainen (2008) emphasizes that these

practices are culturally and socially defined, as well as habitual (as cited in Caidi et al., 2010).

The challenges immigrants face, then, could be described as stemming from being in a new

information environment where their old information habits no longer serve them well.

To understand the information needs and challenges faced by Afghan refugees to San Francisco, Smith (2008) used sense-making methodology in qualitative interviews. Sense-making methodology, as described by Dervin (2004) asks respondents to describe situations where they had an information need; "gaps" or "discontinuities" that stopped them from accessing the needed information; the "steps" they took, or strategies they used, to cross the gap; the "helps" they needed to cross the gap; and how the process affected their perceptions of the information sources or institutions used.

In order to understand, in-depth, the barriers to library use for refugees from Burma living in the Seattle area, we propose a longitudinal study to examine how refugees from Burma establish new information practices over time which allow – or prevent – them from using SPL and KCLS services. While do not expect all of the refugees in our study to make use of the library, for those that do, we propose to use sense-making methodology, as defined above, to examine the "gaps" they encountered, the "helps" they needed, and how these affected their perception of the library. This method should provide a rich understanding of the barriers to successful library use from the perspective of the user. Including interviews of SPL and KCLS library practitioners who have worked with this population will allow for multiple perspectives.

While it seems clear our findings will help Seattle-area library practitioners serve the information needs of refugees from Burma, we expect our findings will also help library practitioners in other geographical areas help immigrants and refugees overcome barriers to information access. Our findings will also be of interest to researchers, as they will contribute to the theoretical understanding of the information practices of refugees.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this mixed-methods qualitative study is to explore the barriers to learning about and using SPL and KCLS programs and services faced by refugees from Burma living in the Seattle area.

Research Questions

1. What do Seattle-area Burmese refugees recall about their library use, or general knowledge about libraries, pre-migration?

2. What do these refugees currently know about SPL and KCLS programs and services? What sources did they use to find out this information?

3. How do these refugees currently use SPL and KCLS?

Literature Review

Burmese Refugees: Background on their Information Environment

A report by Wagstaff (2010) shows that refugees from Burma come from an information environment that is very different from the U.S., and where information access is limited. Not only are most households in Burma without television sets, networks are under tight government controls and heavy censorship. There are only five daily newspapers in Burma, and printing is limited to government agencies. Foreign news is also heavily censored before reaching the Burmese households. Furthermore, the internet is tightly controlled and one must have government approval in order to own a networked computer severely limiting internet access. In fact, it is estimated that Burma has less than a one-percent internet penetration. Another source of information has also been significantly reduced in the last few decades, as all primary and

higher educational schools have been closed since 1988, due to military action (Forced Migration Online, 2010).

The effects of this can be seen on Burmese refugees living in camps in Thailand, Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, and China. In surveys conducted in refugee camps of over 6,000 Burmese refugees who had applied for resettlement in the United States, about one third of respondents had received no formal education, while the other two thirds had received either primary, middle or secondary education (Barron et al., 2007). Additionally, few Burmese refugees arrive to the U.S. with English skills (Barron et al., 2007). While statistics indicate many speak either the Sgaw Karen or Burmese languages (Refugee Processing Center, 2013), there are over 100 different dialects and languages spoken by the numerous ethnic groups of Burma (Forced Migration Online, 2010).

Information Practices of Immigrants and Refugees: Barriers and Overcoming Barriers

Existing literature does provide general background on information practices of immigrant and refugee populations which may shed light on barriers faced by refugees from Burma. In a nationwide survey of public library staff, "reading and library habits," "lack of knowledge about services of the public library," and low literacy in the native language were the most frequently cited barriers to accessing library services for non-English speaking immigrants (Davis, 2009). Naficy (2009) cites low native literacy, low English literacy, and an inability to navigate online resources as significant barriers to information seeking amongst immigrant and refugee populations. Allen, Matthew, and Boland (2004) discuss the limited educational backgrounds, difficulty in translating cultural nuances, and limited internet access as significant barriers for a Hmong population, which we suspect are similar to the issues the Burmese population face.

Two qualitative studies of Latino immigrants living in California revealed that library use in the home country is a possible predictor for use in the U.S. The first, conducted by Padilla in 1990, found that that among a focus group, very few had used the public library in their home country, and none had used the public library in California. The second, conducted by Luevano-Molina in 1996, revealed that 48% of the fifty participants had used a library in their home country, and that 50% used the library in the United States (as cited in Burke, 2007). While the discrepancy in overall library use among Latino immigrants in the two studies may be due to the tendency of researchers to overlook "distinctions within ethno-cultural groups...resulting in the homogenization of diverse communities (Caidi et al., 2010, p. 505)," the correlation between library use in the home country and in the U.S. suggests that cultural unfamiliarity with libraries can be a significant barrier.

Audunson, Essmat, and Aabo (2011) point out that public libraries can serve a variety of purposes for immigrants. Libraries can provide access to a new culture as well as connect users with their culture of origin. They point out that refugees in particular need to rebuild relationships and social capital as they adjust to entirely new circumstances. Libraries have the capacity to assist with these efforts as newcomers seek help with personal and emotional needs and later as they seek help with more logistical needs. Mason (1999) further bolsters the case that libraries can serve an important role for this population by being one of the first points of contact for refugees and providing a variety of materials in their native language. Stampino (2007) attempts to address some of the specific information barriers immigrants face by heavily promoting the production and distribution of multilingual resources to immigrant and refugee populations in Canada. Finally, Allen, Matthew, and Boland (2004) point out that many

immigrants want to learn English, so providing library services that facilitate that need is important.

Deficiencies in the Research Addressed by the Current Study

In a review of the research on information practices of immigrants, Caidi, Allard, and Quirke (2010) identified the need for more research that explores refugees and their information needs as distinct from immigrants, as well as longitudinal studies that look at how immigrants' information practices change as they spend more time in the new country. The same review identified the need for more research that studies information seeking, including information sources used by immigrants. Our longitudinal study on refugees from Burma touches on information seeking as it proposes to examine the information sources refugees from Burma used if they learned about the library.

While several studies have dealt with many of the issues we are investigating, our research is distinct in important ways. While previous studies have shown that connecting immigrants and refugees to libraries could potentially bring them many benefits (Audunson, et al., 2011; Fisher, Durrance, et al., 2004; Pender & Garcia, 2013), they do not provide information on how non-library users perceive the library. As they do not interview individuals that do not make at least some use of library services, insight into potentially significant barriers is missed. A recent study does a great deal to explain how refugees develop information literacy practices upon arrival in Australia, but does not study information practices as they relate to library use in depth (Lloyd et al., 2013). Also, despite this study's focus on information practices as culturally constituted, their sampling of participants' from a variety of countries precluded discussion of the specific information practices of refugees in their own culture.

Research Design & Methods

A mixed methods qualitative study will provide a rich understanding of the Burmese library experience, both pre- and post-immigration. In order to address our research questions it is important to investigate and observe how Burmese culture and experiences have shaped immigrants' use and perceptions of public library services and programming, and how those perceptions may have changed since arriving to the U.S. as refugees.

In-depth interviews with Burmese refugees living in Seattle will be conducted over a year-long period. Interviews will be comprised of open-ended questions allowing for an exploration of *how* the Burmese perceive libraries and *why* those perceptions exist. If they have learned of or used library programs, we will ask about the information sources they used to discover this information. This could reveal whether library outreach is impacting their behavior, or if other information sources identified as important to immigrants, such as informal social networks (Fisher, Marcoux, et al., 2004), ethnic media and television (Su & Conaway, 1995) or refugee service providers (Lloyd et al., 2013) have a greater impact. We will also ask them questions regarding their direct or indirect experiences with libraries. Using sense-making methodology, we will ask them to recreate the steps they took in the library, focusing on the strategies they developed to overcome discontinuities encountered as they sought and used information. It is important to reach refugees that have recently arrived as well as those who arrived less recently in order to measure how local culture, library marketing, and other factors have impacted their perceptions and practices. Similarly, we will make attempts to have repeat interviews with recent refugees throughout this longitudinal study to determine how perceptions may change over time.

Through this methodology, we will look for patterns as well as anomalous data in order to make sense of our refugee population's understanding and usage of local public libraries. Sense-making will be especially important as we navigate through similarities and variances in responses and perceptions of libraries in our studies' lives.

We expect this study will be iterative and emergent. As we progress with our research we may find additional resources that may be of service in understanding our population, and some of the data we collect may lead us to seek additional or different avenues into the information worlds of Burmese refugees in the Seattle area.

We plan to triangulate the evidence we receive through in-depth interviews with refugees (the primary focus of our research) with additional interviews with SPL and KCLS employees, observation at libraries and other community centers that serve refugees, and examination of artifacts including the SPL and KCLS web sites. This triangulation will shed light on workers' successes and challenges while providing services with this population, helping contextualize their experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Over the course of our research we will take several measures to address ethical concerns and validity while working with this vulnerable population:

- We begin our work networking with trusted organizations that adult refugees have existing relationships with, which will benefit both us and those that we seek to interview by building a sense of trust and transparency from the beginning stages. Focusing on adults will diminish ethical concerns as we know this population may be sensitive when approached about their native land and/or issues related to adjusting to life in the United States, as pointed out by Koo, Cho, and Gross (2011).

- We will provide participants with a clear understanding of our research goals, intentions, and outcomes.

- We hope to have extended contact with some individuals, building mutually trusting relationships.

- We will allow review of transcripts and our interpretations of the data, and welcome feedback from participants.

- All participants will be assured of the confidential nature of our research and findings.

Sampling Procedures

There are many Seattle-area organizations that serve refugees and it is through these organizations that we will gain access to Burmese refugees.   We will use purposive sampling in collaboration with the organizations listed below to access Burmese refugees over the age of 18, currently residing in King County, served by both SPL and KCLS (see Appendix 3 for draft emails to refugee services providers). Adults will be targeted because their memories of life in Burma are longer and richer, and present less of an ethical risk. Existing Seattle organizations that we will work with to gain access to the Burmese refugee community include:

- Refugee Women's Alliance (ReWA): a non-profit community organization providing a variety of cultural and linguistic services in King and Snohomish counties. ReWa is one of the biggest service providers to refugee and immigrant communities in the Puget Sound Area (ReWa, 2013).

- Refugee Resettlement Office: affiliated with the Episcopal Migration Ministries and founded in 1978, the Resettlement Office serves Seattle (and surrounding area) resident refugees and others seeking asylum, with a specific focus on gaining economic self-sufficiency (Refugee Resettlement Office, 2011).

Interviews with an interpreter will occur in the spaces these organizations allow, easing potential logistical and psychological difficulties for participants by meeting them where they are already seeking helpful and trusted services.

Creswell (2005) suggests offering services to give back to those that help with research, and we will offer assistance to participants and interpreters regarding overcoming barriers to accessing necessary information in the U.S. Participants and interpreters will also be informed that if they agree to participate in this research our findings will be shared with local libraries and the broader community with the intent of improving service and communication to their community.

We will also collaborate with SPL and KCLS to identify individual staff members who are directly involved with programming for immigrants and/or English language instruction. Snowball sampling may help us locate key staff, as some of the refugees we speak to may have had interactions with SPL and KCLS employees. The questions posed to library staff will seek to uncover ways they taught refugees to use the library, as well as their perceptions of refugees' knowledge of libraries and their evolving information practices. Any interviews with SPL or KCLS employees will occur in library spaces. SPL and KCLS are motivated to participate in this research because we will share our findings with leadership, allowing them to review and implement change or improvements if warranted.

Similarly, if any of our participants report that they are currently using the library, we will conduct observations of all of their typical activities at the library. We will take descriptive and reflective notes during the observation, and consider taking the role of participant observer in order to better understand how they are engaging in sense-making. See Appendix 2 for a draft observation protocol based on the example from Creswell, J.W. (2007).

Documentation produced by SPL and KCLS that targets immigrants, refugees, and other new arrivals to the area/country will be examined to determine which groups the organizations are trying to reach and how.

Specific Procedures and Protocols

We will work with the previously identified refugee service organizations to locate a member of the refugee community that speaks English and the native language of the respondents, and who is willing to offer interpreting services. We expect respondents to be more comfortable giving honest opinions to a member of their own community who understands their culture, reducing the observer effect.

We will explain and ask the interpreter to sign an agreement of confidentiality. For our interviews and observations, respondents will be asked to sign an informed consent form. We will also submit our proposal to the campus institutional review board for approval.

The interviews will be tape recorded and transcribed. The interviewers will use an interview protocol to guide questioning and for taking additional notes. See appendix 1 for draft interview protocols based on the sample provided by Elisabeth Jones. We will further develop these protocols with input from refugee service providers, English speaking refugees from Burma, and librarians.

Data Analysis

We will use inductive and constant comparative data analysis as we collect data in order to inform our next steps in sampling and research direction. Although we are particularly interested in how refugees utilize library services to make sense of their new lives in the United States, after transcribing and anonymizing the interviews, observations, and artifacts, we will be

analyzing data and placing data in identified sense-making theory categories as well as emerging categories.

Multiple researchers will be conducting interviews, reviews, observations, and analysis which will reduce individual researcher bias as the study progresses. We do recognize that this method challenges the reliability of our findings in two different ways. In order to mitigate the potential that researchers' methods will be problematically different, researchers will observe each other during the first three to four interviews and discuss methodology afterwards. Additionally, during the coding process we will work together to clearly define each category. At least two coders will work on the same content and will meet to compare their perceptions, until 80% agreement is reached.

We also recognize that the validity of our research depends on how many participants we can engage and how willing they are to share open and honest opinions with us. In order to address the first concern we are working with several organizations in an attempt to widen our pool, hoping to gain access to at least ten refugees. In order to address the second concern we are taking measures outlined in the "Ethical Considerations" portion of this research proposal.

<u>**Conclusions**</u>

 The proposed study will claim to show how it is that refugees from Burma either become, or do not become, library users after immigrating to the Seattle area. As we move forward with the research, we will look to existing literature on sense-making methodology (Dervin, 1994) to understand and place our respondents' words and actions in context. We will also rely on the previous research on the information practices of immigrants and refugees. By comparing our findings to previous research in this area, we hope to get a more detailed picture of the extent to which information practices are shaped specifically by culture, or by more

generalizable features of individuals and their social contexts – such as being an immigrant, a

non-English speaker, a low-literacy adult, or a survivor of trauma. This would shed light on the

generalizability of the research findings not only of our study, but of studies that look at specific

cultural groups.

      The research will contribute to a theoretical understanding how immersion in a culturally

foreign information environment changes individuals' information practices over time. It will

also add to researcher's understanding of the information sources used by refugees, and add to

the body of literature on sense-making research.

      Future studies could build on this research in several ways that would enhance its

practical applications. We have stated that we hope the results of the present study help library

staff develop more effective outreach and education programs for immigrants and refugees in

Seattle as well as other geographical areas. Follow-up studies could look at the efficacy and

generalizability (to various immigrant groups) of these outreach and educational programs.

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Appendix 1: Interview Protocols

Interview Protocol (Refugee Respondent)

Opening
- Personal introductions/small talk.
- Explain the **purpose of the study:** To understand what refugees know about the library and how it can help them do things that they want to do. To discover how they learned these things.

(Use plain English, and be willing to familiarize participant with the concept of research and its applications to practice if they lack appropriate schema.)
- Explain the **interview structure**: Three parts:
  - o We'll start off by getting some information about you and your education in Burma, and what you are studying now.
  - o In the next part, we will ask you about libraries in Burma and in the refugee camp.
  - o Then we'll talk about libraries in the U.S.
- **Check whether audio is OK** (even if they already said OK when the interview was arranged)
  - o If ok, turn on recorder and double-check that it's working
    SAY THE PARTICIPANT NUMBER AND DATE INTO THE TAPE
  - o If not ok to record, explain that you will take notes
- Explain **process**:
  - o The interview is confidential; I won't reveal individual interview details; all interview records will be assigned a code and any other identifiers will be removed.
  - o If I ask any questions that you either cannot or would prefer not to answer, just tell me so, and we'll move on.
  - o After the interview, I'll transcribe the tape (notes) and send a copy to you for confirmation (at which point you can request changes or deletions); after transcription, the tape will be erased.
- **ASK: Do you have any questions before we get started?**

Respondent Info/family composition:
·Age group: 18-29 30-39 40-49 50-59 over 60
·Gender: Male Female Other

·Tell me about the people that live with you. (Ask indirectly about family members to avoid bringing up painful feelings of separation or loss.)

·What country are you from? What language(s) do you speak? What is your ethnicity?

·Could you describe your educational background? Can you describe the types of things you are able to read in your native language and the types of things which are difficult for you? (Elicit detailed, descriptive examples.)

·Can you describe your English level. What types of things are easy for you to do in English? What types of things can you read, and what types of things can't you read?
(Elicit detailed, descriptive examples.)

Libraries:
How do people use libraries in Burma? Did you know about libraries when you lived in Burma? How did you find out about the library?
      Information source (e.g. friend, family, sign, website, personal observation, agency staff):

      Prompt for examples of when they used the library (if ever), the information need, the benefits realized, and their perceptions of the library.

      If a particular instance demonstrates a "gap," ask them to reconstruct the situation in detail. Look for information needs, help received, and perceptions of the library from their perspective.

How do people use libraries in Seattle? How did you learn about that?
      Information source (e.g. friend, family, sign, website, personal observation, agency staff):

      Prompt for examples of where and how they heard about the library and their perceptions of it.

How do you use the library in Seattle? How did you learn to do that?
      How they learned:
      someone showed them_____, through practice, through observation, website, other:

      Prompt for examples of when they used the library (if ever), who helped them (if applicable), what they used it for, if it benefited them, and how they perceived the library.

      If a particular instance demonstrates a "gap," ask them to reconstruct the situation in detail. Look for information needs, help received, and perceptions of the library from their perspective.

Interview Protocol (Library Staff Respondent)

Opening
- Personal introductions/small talk.
- Explain the **purpose of the study:** To explore Burmese refugees' perceptions and use of the library upon arrival to Seattle and how it changes over time. To discover the various ways refugees learn about programs and services, and whether these services ultimately benefit them.
- Explain the **interview structure**:
  - o We'll start off with some basic demographics and information about your work and work history;
  - o Then we will ask you about how you see refugees using the library, the types of difficulties they have, how you help them overcome those difficulties, and how they benefit.
- **Check whether audio is OK** (even if they've already said OK when the interview was arranged)
  - o If ok, turn on recorder and double-check that it's working
    SAY THE PARTICIPANT NUMBER AND DATE INTO THE TAPE
  - o If not ok to record, explain that you will take notes
- Explain **process**:
  - o The interview is confidential; I won't reveal individual interview details; all interview records will be assigned a code and any other identifiers will be removed.
  - o If I ask any questions that you either cannot or would prefer not to answer, just tell me so, and we'll move on.
  - o After the interview, I'll transcribe the tape (notes) and send a copy to you for confirmation (at which point you can request changes or deletions); after   transcription, the tape will be erased.
- **ASK: Do you have any questions before we get started?**

Demographics/professional history:
· Gender: Male Female Other
· Could you briefly describe your educational background?

· Where do you work now?

· What is your occupation?

· Could you briefly describe your role at the library?

· How long in that role?

Libraries:

What do refugees from Burma know about the library when they first begin to visit?

How do refugees from Burma find out about library programs and services?

What do you perceive as barriers to their learning about programs and services?

How do refugees from Burma use the library? Do you have any information from personal experience or observation? Do you know of any information collected and compiled by the library?
     (Prompt by asking about programs, services, collections, computers, classes, citizenship help, etc.)

Can you describe the strategies used by refugees from Burma when they don't understand, or can't find, the information they need.
     Prompt for how the respondent teaches and explains in these situations.

Can you describe the benefits refugees receive from the library from your perspective?

Appendix 2: Observation Protocol

Observational Field Notes

Date:

Setting:

Observer:

Role of Observer:

Time	Description	Reflection

<u>Appendix 3: Emails to Contact Refugee Service Providers and Library Staff</u>

Email to refugee service provider:

Dear (name of service provider):

We are two graduate students from the library program at the University of Washington. We are conducting research on library usage among refugees from Burma living in the Seattle area. We hope to meet refugees from Burma who would be willing to talk with us to share their opinions and ideas about libraries. Perhaps you might be able to introduce us to a few individuals?

Our research aims to help librarians conduct better outreach and programming to meet the needs of these immigrants to our community. As a show of our gratitude, we would also like to help the study volunteers learn more about local resources they need or are interested in.

We understand that you may have questions and concerns. Please let us know a convenient time to call you to discuss the project, or feel free to contact Sarah at swhite5@uw.edu or (607)216-5701.

Thank you for your time,

Sarah White & Tami Garrard

MLIS Program, University of Washington

Email to librarian:

Dear (name of librarian):

We are two graduate students from the MLIS program at the University of Washington. We are conducting research on library usage among refugees from Burma living in the Seattle area.

We hope to meet with you at your convenience to discuss your opinions and perspectives about the challenges faced by Burmese library users, as well as how they benefit from the wonderful programs offered by your library. We won't take up more than an hour of your time.

We will share all of the findings of our research with you. It is our sincerest hope that it helps librarians understand and create services to meet the needs of these immigrants to our community.

Please let us know if you are available to meet by contacting Sarah at swhite5@uw.edu or (607)216-5701.

Thank you for your time,

Sarah White & Tami Garrard

MLIS Program, University of Washington