



Financial Self-Sufficiency for Refugees: An Overview of Employment of Refugees in Austin, TX

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Introduction

A small glass door covered with papers and flyers in Burmese, Arabic and Spanish opens to a small waiting room with about 15 chairs around the room. In one corner, there is a small table and a couple of small chairs. This is “children’s area,” but rarely do any children leave their parents to go and play with the few toys and books on the table. There are a few framed posters on the walls with pictures of women and children refugees. On the other side of the wall there is “the office.” The only way to communicate with the people on the other side of the wall is through a small glass window. Visitors have to sign in and wait for their caseworkers to meet them in the waiting area. Unlike the quiet and motionless waiting room, the other side is a loud, active environment where the staff is always busy performing various tasks associated with resettlement of refugees. In Fall 2013, I worked on this busy and chaotic side of the room of Refugee Services of Texas (RST) as an employment specialist intern.

Before applying for an internship, I was a volunteer at RST for a year. I mostly worked there as an interpreter of Persian language for Iranian and Afghani refugees. During this time, I became familiar with the nature of the work at RST. Employees at this agency are culturally diverse and all speak different languages. I was fascinated by this diverse, exciting and fast-paced work environment, and by

the way that everyday work was about cultural diversity and tolerance. As a cultural anthropology graduate student, I was seeking to work with people who have different cultural backgrounds and speak different languages; therefore, this work environment was a place where I belonged. Working in the employment department at RST provided an opportunity to develop and improve skills that will be useful in my future academic and professional career. These skills include strong verbal and communication skills, professional resume-writing, and the ability to not only understand cultural differences but also to transfer the right message through cultures and deal with language barriers.

RST offers services and support for refugee resettlement, employment, case management and disaster relief. In 2003, RST opened an office in Austin. Since then, 2,100 refugees from Burma, Iraq, Somalia, Cuba, Bhutan, Eritrea, Congo and Iran have been resettled in the Austin area. One of the departments at RST in which I completed my internship is “Employment Services” which functions as a referral and staffing service. This paper acquaints readers with an overview of the role that RST plays in the process of helping refugees achieve economic self-sufficiency by gaining employment in Austin, TX. It also educates the audience about how anthropological education helps with facilitating the process of incorporating refugees in a new society.

Employment Services

Every year, thousands of refugees arrive in Austin, TX, who have authorization to work in the United States and bring various useful skills to the job market. Employment specialists at RST help with matching refugees’ education, employment experience and skills with possible positions available in the job market. As one of the major departments at RST, Employment Services’ main goal is to provide attainment of employment in as short a period of time as possible. Employment Services, under the Refugee Social Services Grant, provides assistance for refugees seeking employment and career enhancement. There are 6 employment specialists who work with 44 clients in a contract year. Employment specialists conduct intake interviews and counsel clients on the employment process in

the United States. In addition to helping refugees learning about the process of employment in the US, employment specialists are responsible for using outreach strategies to inform and educate employers about hiring refugees.

In order to receive cash assistance from government agencies, refugees must register with a staffing agency such as Employment Services at RST to receive education on how to apply for and obtain employment. RST employment specialists prepare refugees for employment by offering pre-employment orientations, Job Readiness classes, resume writing assistance, providing referrals, assistance with employment applications and forms and interviews. Prior to providing any of these services, however, employment specialists meet with individual refugees in order to assess their strengths and barriers and help them setting reasonable goals and developing plans to achieve such goals. These assessments take place during intake interviews. An intake interview, which is similar to a job interview, is an interview with a refugee client where an employment specialist collects information about refugees' language proficiency, job experience, skills, education, and availability of degrees and certificates to prove level of education. Based on this information, employment specialists help refugee clients set realistic goals for themselves in order to achieve economic self-sufficiency. Many refugee clients who arrive in the United States with higher education and employment experience prefer to work in the fields in which they used to work in their home countries. However, they may require additional education and certifications to work in their desired fields in the US. Providing such qualifications takes time. The priority for these clients is to become financially self-sufficient as soon as possible and to meet the government requirements to be able to receive cash assistance. One of these requirements is to find immediate employment. Finding immediate employment, however, conflicts with the idea of obtaining required training for gaining jobs in the refugee clients' desired fields. Therefore, while employment specialists work on finding the right information for employment in clients' desired fields, they must help clients find any possible jobs. This means that refugees may find

themselves with only entry-level jobs that are much lower-status and lower-paying than what they left behind in their home countries. The most difficult task of employment specialists is to help refugees understand and accept this situation and be cooperative in setting and achieving short-term goals in order to achieve long-term goals, later. Short term goals are goals that will help clients with finding their first jobs. Attending ESL classes, obtaining a driver's license and finding an entry level job are usually short term goals for refugees. Long-term goals are goals which individual clients set for themselves that benefit their professional lives in the long term, such as attending school and pursuing a degree or certificate that will help them work in their desired fields.

An example of enrolling university educated clients in entry-level, low-paying jobs was a client who came to our office seeking help for employment with an engineering degree and some basic English language skills. However, he did not have a copy of his degree or transcript. In this situation, as an intern employment specialist, I had to help him with finding a way to evaluate his academic and employment credentials in order for him to be able to use his education and degrees in the United States. Since this client's education and experience were from a foreign country, he had to go through an expensive and time consuming process of credential evaluation. Since his engineering degree was from a four-year undergraduate program, upon providing a transcript he would not have to go back to school and receive another degree in the US. However, he did have to provide his degree or an official transcript in order to prove his academic credentials. Providing copies of diplomas and transcripts is something that employment specialists have no control over and it all depends on whether clients can communicate with their universities through relatives or friends they have in their home countries. Upon providing such information, this client would have to have a certified translator to translate his documents, a certified credential evaluation organization to evaluate his credentials and then register to study and take exams in order to be able to become a practicing engineer. His other option would be to go back to school and receive another engineering degree or a graduate degree in the US. Through the

research that I conducted for his case, I realized that in the engineering field, he may be able to obtain an entry-level-engineering job if he can communicate his knowledge and skills to his potential employers. The latter would require strong reading and writing skills which he had to improve. Since seeking jobs in the engineering field is time consuming and conflicts with government regulations regarding the relationship between immediate employment and refugee cash assistance, this client agreed to work any job that employment services would find him. His education and employment experience in engineering would make him look overqualified for entry-level jobs that are easier to find. Therefore, as his employment specialist, I had to simplify his resume and eliminate engineering jargon. This meant that I had to use his employment experience to show that he is a fast-learning, hard-working individual but remove most of his professional experience for which he spent years of training. This client had to start working as a dishwasher in a restaurant. Employment services specialists are currently working with him to prepare the required documents to continue his education and start seeking engineering jobs in future.

Other than engineering, education and medicine are two fields in which refugees desire to use their existing education. Educators who have a four year degree from a country outside of the United States must have their academic and professional credentials evaluated. They must mail in their credentials and pay a non-refundable fee online. If eligible, they will receive a one year certificate, which allows them to work for a year. In the meanwhile, they are required to prepare and take a few exams. When results of the exams are available and requirements are met, they may apply for a standard certificate. Re-licensing in the medical field is the most difficult, and in most cases, applicants must go through medical school training in the United States. However, in some cases, after evaluating their credentials, they may be eligible for a provisional license. In those cases, after providing required documents, they must pass the Texas Medical Jurisprudence Exam before their application can move from pre-licensure to licensing. The average time spent waiting in the pre-licensure step is 136 days.

All foreign applicants in these fields must have TOEFL scores, degree evaluations, and translated documents. Employment staff at RST inform clients about these requirements and help them with preparing the required documents. RST works closely with credential evaluation services and translation and interpretation agencies in Austin to prepare documents for clients.

Most clients see no other alternative for this situation and despite their resentment at first, they agree to choose entry-level jobs. However, some clients have a much more difficult time accepting the requirements and insist on waiting until they find the jobs they want. These clients become what are called “non-compliant clients” at RST. Being non-compliant, they receive warning notices first and later their cash assistance will stop. During my internship, I never had to file any of my clients as non-compliant but I had heard about and seen cases with which other employment specialists had to deal.

Preparation for Employment

RST refugee clients and employment specialists meet several times in order to go over the initial explanation of employment regulations and cultural aspects of work environments in the United States. Many basic aspects of work environments that Americans take for granted are in fact not part of the typical environments of refugees’ countries of origin. For instance, some refugees come from countries in which relatives can substitute for each other at work. In some cultures, if a worker is sick and cannot work on a particular day, he/she can send a sibling, a cousin or a friend to work instead. Doing something of this nature is against employment policies in the US. Employees must inform their managers and supervisors if they cannot be present at work and in most cases they need to provide additional information such as doctor’s note or court note for their employers. Explaining several of these cultural aspects is the task of Employment Services. Refugees meet with their employment specialists within a week of their arrivals and individual meetings and employment workshops continue until the first job is obtained.

After the individual meetings to set short-term and long-term goals, employment specialists help clients with writing resumes. Refugees who have received higher education in their home countries sometimes have resumes with them or at least are familiar with the idea of submitting resumes for work. Others need more training on what function resumes and cover letters have in the employment process. All of this is what is explained in Job Readiness classes.

In Job Readiness Training classes, clients receive basic information about the employment process and work etiquette in American culture. This information covers anything they may need to know in order to be reliable employees. These classes are usually five days long and each session is about two hours. Refugee clients are required to attend all these classes as enrollment and attendance are requirements for their eligibility for receiving cash assistance. Sessions are usually held in English and interpretations in Nepali, Burmese, Arabic, Persian, Spanish and French are provided. Clients usually sit in a conference room and interpreters sit near each group for which they interpret. Specialists usually start the session with examples of “work culture” in some of the clients’ countries. For instance, the speaker explains that in Nepal, it is usual and normal for someone in customer service to tell a customer to come back the next day for a service for no specific reason! However, this rarely happens in the United States and if it does, it may have consequences for customer service employees.

As part of Job Readiness training, specialists explain some of laws and policies in the work place for refugee clients. Employment specialists explain to refugees that in Texas people are frank, honest and act according to the employment system. Although this is not true in every case, it certainly is the norm, and, in many instances, the law is a novel concept for individuals coming from developing nations where following laws is not as strict or that bribery is often taken as a normal cost of business. Refugees must also know that sometimes taking advantage of their legal rights is not exactly beneficial for them. For instance, they must know that Texas is an at-will state meaning that employers may dismiss their employees for no specific reason and employees may quit their jobs at any time for no

specific reasons. However, they also need to know that in this situation, employers have the power. Although by law, they can leave their job, if they do not provide a two-week notice in advance, this will be a negative mark on their employment record and they will not have positive feedback from their previous employers when they use them as references.

In Job Readiness classes, clients also learn about the organization system in the work place, which helps with communicating in the workplace. CEO, area manager, general manager, supervisor and workers (as well as interns) constitute the usual system in the work place. Sometimes interpreters have a hard time explaining these titles in other languages as a CEO or general manager may not have an equivalent term in work places in different cultures. However, clients must understand these positions well because their knowledge of the general work system is necessary for communication in the work place. Once these positions are introduced to clients, they learn about the “open door policy” and how they can talk about their problems and concerns at work. Then, policies regarding sickness, tardiness, absence, and work injuries are explained to them.

The emphasis of training is to make sure clients know that they are the ones responsible for speaking up for themselves. Most refugee clients are victims of discrimination and abuse and may not be aware that such issues are against the law in the US. They may also not be familiar with the American definition of such concepts. For instance, sexual harassment is “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature” (US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission). It is clear and understood for majority of Americans what that means. In some cultures, hugging, touching and physical contact are normal forms of greeting, showing appreciation or just a form of communication. It is easy for refugees and people around them to misunderstand such physical contacts and for refugees to become victims of their lack of knowledge. Refugees must know that in the US, discrimination is against the law and there is zero tolerance policy

for sexual harassment in workplace. They also must know that they are responsible to report problems of such nature and how and to whom to report their concerns.

Taxation is another important topic introduced at Job Readiness classes. Rules surrounding how people pay taxes are very different in many of the countries from which refugees come. Employment specialists show samples of paycheck stubs to refugee clients. They first explain to them that their salary at most legal jobs is paid in the form of a check and explain to them where they can find federal tax deductions on their paychecks. Such information is usually provided by employers as well at job orientations. Therefore, employment specialists do not provide much detail at the workshop. Usually when clients find jobs they bring all their forms, including those explaining payment methods and taxes to their individual meetings and their employment specialist helps them with filing out the forms and explain terms and conditions of employment to them in individual meetings.

After the Job Readiness orientation, clients are ready to search for jobs and start interviews. Once interviews are scheduled, staff members help clients with application processes and accompany them to interviews if requested. Staff members also make sure clients have interpreters and transportation for their interviews if necessary. The process of referral and recruitment along with consultation for clients continues on a weekly basis until clients are employed. After employment, employment specialists conduct post-employment follow up with both employers and clients in order to ensure communication is smooth and effective between employers and RST client employees.

Language and Cultural Differences: Difficulties with Incorporating Refugees into a New Society

Language barriers and cultural differences are daily obstacles to face at RST. Speaking on the phone with clients who have limited or no English language skills makes simple tasks, such as setting appointments, a hassle. Two issues must be considered here: one is the language barrier issue, which is the main problem for clients because they do not understand who is calling them and when and where

the appointment will be held. The other problem is the cultural standards for showing up on time for appointments, cancelling appointments and rescheduling. Sometimes, I would have a difficult time finding a client's number to set up an appointment. Since clients do not have cell phones when they arrive in the US, sometimes, they give their friends' and relatives' numbers in the US to RST specialists. Therefore, talking to a client means making several phone calls and speaking with several people before reaching the client.

After finally finding the clients and making sure they understand they have an appointment, many of them still do not show up for appointments. Missing appointments is not an issue always associated with language barriers. During the period of time I was at RST, even clients with whom I would communicate in their native language, Persian, would miss their appointments. This is either due to the cultural differences in understanding the importance of punctuality in the US or due to lack of trust and faith in RST services on behalf of clients. The former is apparent in many Middle Eastern cultures. Having strong communications with Middle Eastern communities in the Austin area, and being originally from the Middle East, I know that in many Middle Eastern countries, there are no serious consequences for missing appointments. Although RST specialists allow some flexibility in their schedules in order to accommodate their clients, it is important for clients to learn the importance of punctuality in order to avoid consequences of showing up late for their job interviews and medical appointments. They may lose their job opportunities if they are not on-time for their interviews. Also, there are additional fees for most missed or late medical appointments in the US. Specifically at refugee medical clinics, tardiness can result in losing appointments and not being able to make additional appointments for months since these clinics are overcrowded with patients.

Lack of trust and faith in RST services delays productivity in helping refugees and may another reason for which clients do not take their appointments at RST seriously. Before arriving at a refugee institution such as RST, refugees have experienced betrayal and rejection in their home countries,

which leads to loss of trust. This loss of trust is what causes resistance to learn and apply what is taught at refugee centers like RST. It is the job of the RST staff to recognize and address these obstacles. In the next few pages, I explain how with the help of my anthropological readings, I was able to connect the issue of trust with the clients at RST.

Anthropologists have become involved in ethnographic studies of refugees over the past two decades. The anthropological study of refugees started as a scholarly response to the refugee movements after World War I but it reached its peak in the 1980s with the founding of the Refugee Studies Program at Oxford University. The primary research method in these studies is participant-observation. Participant-observation is an anthropological method in which researchers take part in daily activities of their informants, experiencing their point of view by “participation”. However, participant-observation in the resettlement process is time consuming and costly and due to issues of violence and warfare, this method is sometimes impossible to carry out. Therefore, many anthropologists explore how host populations and refugees affect one another’s lives (Skran and Daughtry 2007). Refugee centers provide a great opportunity for studies of displacement and diaspora since they are the first point of contact for refugees in the US. Through observations at RST and interactions with both clients and employees, I learned that in order to reach full productivity in the process of resettling refugees, RST staff must recognize the problems with trust issues first.

Most displaced people use their personal networks in order to accommodate their primary needs such as housing and access to jobs (Colson 2003). However, most refugees arrive in the United States, a country in which they do not have personal networks and they have to rely on RST services. They have to trust RST employees whom they do not know very well and to whom they have absolutely no connections. Trust is based on reciprocity, which (according to some anthropologists) comes in the process of “expectation of some shared future” (Colson 2003). In personal social networks, refugees create relationships with each other and with others from their native countries in which they

interchange information, such as how to find jobs or spend their money, and services, such as transportation, language interpretation and even babysitting. The expectation of continuity of such cooperative interchange in addition to the information and services coming from people who have a shared experience create trust. Since refugees do not share such expectations with their case workers and employment specialist at RST, trust is not built in a reciprocity system and must be achieved through other attempts.

All people who work with refugees have good intentions but that by itself does not “earn trust” (Colson 2003). Sometimes, RST clients leave town without informing the agency. They leave in search of jobs and housing in other cities or states where they think they have a better chance of survival. This, for the most part, does not happen because they intentionally want to be uncooperative with RST employees. The “office work process” is required and helpful in achieving self-sufficiency for clients. However, when this process is done for the clients by people whom they do not know, it dehumanizes refugees, who have already lost hope and trust in their home countries and that leads to bitterness and anger.

The research cited above in addition to my observations at RST showed that lack of trust in the Refugee-Specialist relationship is one of the issues leading to a non-productive relationship at RST. Understanding and addressing problems such as loss of identity and trust among refugees can help with involving them in a productive and cooperative relationship with those who want to help them at refugee centers. Most of the employees at RST are first generation immigrants or refugees. Sharing personal experiences with their clients can be helpful in creating trust. Although there is no promise of a shared future, when refugees know about personal experiences of their specialists, they find it easier to accept their current situation as a promise for a brighter future. I personally experienced that with Iranian clients. Speaking their language not only helped them with understanding the content of their forms and agreements, it immediately suggested that I was like them; an immigrant from their country

with possibly the same problems in diaspora who has survived the obstacles they face (or at least to them, it looks like I did!) They immediately would ask questions about my past to ensure I had the same troubles as they did when I first moved to the US. Although I have no connection with my clients outside of the RST office and I did not come to this country as a refugee, sharing my past experiences as an immigrant changes my role as an office employee to a member of their social network. Exposing personal experiences helps with establishing rapport and overcomes the purely bureaucratic relationship at refugee centers.

Refugees also tend to want to make small changes in their lives that they can reverse later. This is especially true with refugees who are displaced with their families and young children. Rappaport calls these changes the “short-term reversible changes” that maintain most aspects of the refugees’ lives unchanged (Rappaport 1999). When they cannot predict the outcomes of a change made in their lives, it is difficult to convince refugees to make such changes. This is another issue that RST employees must keep in mind when working with refugees. In the first week of arrival, refugees are bombarded with information about changes that they have to make in their housing, transportation, employment and medical routine. This information delivered to refugees by people who are strangers compounds their preexistent trust issues. For instance, some of the clients with whom I worked would reject RST’s housing options because they had heard apartments that RST recommends are in unsafe neighborhoods. Their knowledge was purely based on what they had heard from their social networks which they tended to trust more. Since a one year leasing contract was a long commitment to something of which they were too uncertain, they tended to ask RST caseworkers to find them apartments in other neighborhoods; something that RST is not capable of arranging since refugees do not have enough budget to secure a six month rent in order to make up for not having any financial credit. It is important for caseworkers to realize that all the changes they ask refugees to make in their lives immediately after

arriving in a new country are major changes and some of them are not reversible. This leaves refugees feeling insecure and unable to become involved in the process of decision making.

According to the UNHCR 1951 convention relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is defined to be one who:

owing to a 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 nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.

Anthropology offers an addition to this definition and that is “unless or until [refugees] are incorporated as citizens into their host state, they find themselves in transition or in a state of liminality” (Harrel-Bond and Voutira 1992). The anthropological conception of refugees is important, because it adds to the responsibilities of those who work at refugee centers. Providing a host society is something that is offered through political and social work. However, in order to help refugees to reestablish their homes in a new society, they must feel part of the new society. That is an important job in which organizations such as RST can take part. Those who are in charge must make sure the changes made in the lives of refugees maintain refugees’ original identity as much as possible. At the same time, these changes must lead refugees towards obtaining a spot in the new society that makes them feel wanted and part of the host society.

Academic research, as much as it can be valuable, if separated from participating in everyday lives of refugees and employees at institutions such as RST, only offers a “lip service to the need of inter- or multi- disciplinary understanding of human societies” (Harrel-ond and Voutira 1992). It does not help with offering solutions for making the displacement experience more productive for refugees. Although solutions to problems that refugees face must be carried out by those who are trained in various fields such as law, international relations, psychology and education, it takes participant-observation to recognize problems and solutions among those in diaspora.

Academic research in refugee studies offers some important theoretical knowledge. However, identifying how this knowledge can be applicable to the refugees' lives in order to assist them with their transition requires familiarity with their day-to-day challenges.

Conclusion

Documenting and interpreting the variety of human cultural and social phenomenon is what anthropology facilitates (Harrel-Bond and Voutira 1992). It was through such anthropological work that I learned that effective education that pushes refugees in the right directions but still leaves them feeling in charge of their lives is extremely important in helping refugees. During three months of my internship and after recognizing issues of trust and change, I started applying what I thought was the solution to cases with which I worked directly. When working with Iranian clients, I explained to them how I had to face the same issues they faced and told them how I overcame challenges of living in a new society. This "shared" experience" in many cases built rapport and trust with clients. It was easier to apply this strategy specifically to cases of Iranian refugees, however, even with non-Iranian clients, shared experiences led to a more trusting relationship.

RST is a successful organization with employees that go above and beyond to help their clients. I was fortunate enough to work with supervisors who were receptive of my new ideas. However, my time at RST was limited. I hope my suggestion that the bureaucratic process of working with refugees does not build the trust that RST employees need from their clients to finish their work will be used and be helpful in the future at this agency.

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