"I am an American": Communicating Refugee Identity and Citizenship

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This study examines the messages in a citizenship preparation class being utilized by refugees and instructors. Through an ethnographic study of a citizenship class at an urban community center in a Midwestern city, an examination of these messages reveals assimilationist expectations and norms for refugees adjusting to American society. Responses from the refugees reveal how these messages are being either accepted or resisted as they negotiate new identities. A contradiction was found between what the citizenship class teaches and the perceptions of refugees regarding the meanings of American citizenship. In particular, refugees reported to often face a difficult situation in which their legal status upon becoming American citizens is not readily acknowledged by the perceptions of other Americans.

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As I turned onto the street of the community center where the citizenship preparation class is taught, I noticed a group of people gathered in front of the Catholic Church directly across the street. The church, though obviously an older building, had been maintained quite nicely. Taller than every other structure around, its dark red brick exterior with black trim actually looked quite majestic. There were several long black cars parked in front. I noticed the line of people entering the church as I made my way along the sidewalk toward the center. Congregating in front of the church were people dressed in black, formal wear for the funeral ranging in age from young children to senior citizens. I noticed a small crowd gathered in front of the entrance to the community center to watch the unfolding event across the street. The stark contrast between the two groups before me manifested itself, the street symbolizing the separation. Those in the funeral party were of European descent; those watching from the center were all African and

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Asian immigrants. I made my way through the crowd to go in through the front door, smiling and nodding along the way. I pondered the figurative segregation I had just witnessed, and I had to reflect on how my presence at the community center would be received as I suddenly felt out of place.

The community center, among many other services, offers a course to prepare applicants for the citizenship examination—to become naturalized citizens of the United States. Immigrants from various countries attend this course to learn the basics of the examination and practice their answers in English. I was particularly interested in refugees because they are eligible for citizenship much earlier than other classifications of immigrants. I wanted to learn more about how they negotiate a new identity as American citizens in a scene where national and cultural identities would be salient. I hoped I would be able to offer some insight into this identity negotiation process to the community center's workers and volunteers. A class in which a new national identity is communicated to a particular group of people was an ideal scene for attempting to answer questions of identity formation and meanings of citizenship.

In this study I examined how a group of refugees preparing to become U.S. citizens perform their identities as they receive messages about the expectations of American citizenship and negotiate these messages with their own experiences. A review of literature concerning refugee identity in general will be followed by past scholars' investigations of how discourses of American citizenship have been created for and by refugees. A description of the ethnographic methods used to observe the citizenship class and interact with participants is then given, followed by an analysis that examines emergent themes regarding messages and meanings of citizenship negotiated in the course between the instructor and this group of refugees. A discussion of the implications of this analysis of citizenship is then offered with the goal of contributing to the understanding of how refugee and American identities are constructed through communication regarding immigration and citizenship.

Because changes involving identity are "mainly cocreated through communication with others" (Chen, 2009, p. 397), this study examines the messages of American citizenship being transmitted by an instructor and interpreted by a particular group of refugees preparing for the citizenship examination. Furthermore, this study seeks to reveal the complexities of American citizenship for its newest members and how their reports of cultural adaptation and assimilation compare to the expectations outlined by the citizenship examination.

Constructing the Refugee

> … people who have been obliged to define themselves—because they are so defined by others—by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves. (Salman Rushdie, 1991)

Though the concept is certainly much older, the status of "refugee" became particularly relevant alongside the concept of the modern nation-state after the end of World War II. The concept of the modern nation-state assigned groups of people to particular territories, creating insiders and outsiders. Often these efforts of territorializing focus on a perceived notion of homogeneity among groups of people, thereby forcing some groups to be in between territories, "pushed into the gaps" (Haddad, 2003, p. 298). Using the label "refugee" allows a particular outsider to be defined as not belonging, thus allowing the idea of the insider to simultaneously be sustained. The self can be defined and maintained by the construction of the other.

Discursively the refugee is constructed as a victim, helplessly displaced from a homeland, having lost any sense of belonging. In the United States, the refugee is often constructed as needing to be accepted and assimilated into a new being, belonging to a new nation-state (Haddad, 2003). The classification of refugees as a unique group of migrants homogenizes an otherwise complex group of people who often have conflicted attitudes towards resettlement (Ager, 1999; Martin & Nakayama, 2000). The experiences of refugees and their attitudes regarding leaving their homelands vary, but they are often characterized as having to leave with no other choice as many are faced with dangerous circumstances in their home countries (Semlak, Pearson, Amundson, & Kudak, 2008). Their resettlement is considered to be necessary as their past is now deemed irreconcilable. The labeling of the refugee by the state then also serves to erase the refugee's belonging to a homeland, justifying the need to become something new.

The experience associated with forced displacement and resettlement can continually shape and reshape refugees' identity construction. Indeed, identities are generally considered to be malleable. They are not static or permanent but rather "plastic" and can be "molded and remolded to fit ongoing contingencies" (Camino, 1994, p. 1). Particularly relevant to refugees is the notion that identities simultaneously include both old and new environments and are "enacted at the intersections" (Hegde, 1998, p. 51).

Resettlement for refugees, like displacement, is inherently involuntary. Unlike other types of immigrants, refugees from a particular country are assigned by the state to various cities across the U.S., which often means they have little to no support system of people from their original homeland (Semlak et al., 2008). Haines (1996) observes that these involuntary subject positions can produce competing discourses in which refugees must negotiate conflicting norms and renegotiate their identities during resettlement. This identity negotiation takes place not only during resettlement but continuously throughout the refugee's experience (Krulfeld & Camino, 1994).

One way refugees deal with changes in environment and identity is through creating narratives that resolve the conflicted past and make sense of the new present. Semlak et al. (2008) have found that mixed reports of longing, prejudice, security, and increased opportunity are common among

refugee populations. Producing a new identity connects both to a homeland that is often now inaccessible as well as that of belonging to a diasporic or displaced people, while making a space for themselves in a new homeland (Witteborn, 2008). Much is to be negotiated as refugees find themselves continually adapting to cultural and religious changes (Kim, 2001; Warriner, 2004).

In the U.S., most immigrants can apply for citizenship after having been a permanent resident for five years; however, refugees are given permanent resident status immediately upon their arrival. Therefore, the amount of time refugees have had to adapt in their new host country before they are able to become citizens is considerably less than other immigrants. Refugees' expectations of their new host country are met with new experiences of existing outside the system, belonging neither to their homeland nor their new host country. The expectation for refugees, held by the legal system and by American society in general, is to replace their former identity with a new one, quickly learn a new language and cultural norms, and demonstrate an active pursuance of assimilation and membership in the new system (Haines, 1996).

Communicating Citizenship and Negotiating Identities

Naturalization for refugees is significant because it marks a transition in official status from permanent resident to citizen (Alba & Nee, 2003; Haddad, 1996). Upon passing the exam, refugees cease to be recognized by the law as citizens of their homeland and become citizens of the United States; their nationality is officially recognized as "American" (Kunnan, 2009). Past scholarship identifies three ways in which an American citizen identity is negotiated. The first is through privileging certain cultural values such as economic self-sufficiency and individualism in order to promote assimilation. The second is by the transition in status from refugee to citizen through legal recognition. Third, identity is negotiated through the ways in which refugees embrace, avoid, or resist these societal forces in their everyday practices.

American Cultural Norms Signifying Citizenship

American cultural norms and values can be rooted in a combination of the liberal themes of individualism and universalism. The American cultural emphasis on individualism seeks to move beyond the traditionally territorial and collective grouping of peoples. Culturally, the American understanding of universalism then seeks to grant the individual equal rights and opportunities regardless of origins or societal ties (Kim, 2009).

A cultural emphasis on individualism influences a neoliberal force of entrepreneurship, private property, and self-sufficiency. By valuing individuals as having equal rights and opportunities, the responsibility for not only economic success but civic participation falls on the individual. In

the case of those adapting to the American cultural norms and values, the responsibility for integration and acculturation are placed on the individual. Previous research on adaptation has often upheld this value, holding the immigrant responsible for participation in the new society (Hegde, 1998). This assumption is linked to other expectations including individualism, particularly as it relates to notions of economic self-sufficiency.

Previous studies on refugees adapting to American culture and integrating into society have identified an emphasis placed on entrepreneurship and economic self-sufficiency. McKinnon (2008) found that refugees in Arizona felt that they were expected, as citizens, to become human capital so as not to be a burden on society—"in other words, to 'be an entrepreneur of her/himself'" (p. 3). Likewise, Ong's (2003) work with Cambodian refugees in California gives a similar perception of American citizenship—that it revolves around concepts of work, consumption, and productivity. Refugees are expected to be "autonomous, responsible, choice-making subjects who serve the nation best by becoming 'entrepreneurs of the self'" (p. 9). The premise is that through hard work and independence, one can eventually climb the social ladder and achieve economic security, no longer being dependent on state services.

The label "refugee," however, connotes a sense of dependency, where people in this category need to be taken care of and provided with services. Refugees are constructed through discourses of displacement and helplessness. It is important, however, to also recognize the function of "refugee" as a legal status. It is a particular label for qualifying people in an immigration process, as is the legal status of citizen. Citizenship as both the legal and social status set up as the ultimate goal for refugees should therefore be examined.

American Citizenship as a Legal Status

A significant milestone in the immigration and resettlement process for refugees is the legal recognition of becoming an American citizen because it signifies changes in nationality as well as eligibility for benefits and services provided by the state and other non-governmental organizations. It also potentially signifies a change in the perception of the refugee as held by other American citizens.

Messages transmitted by the U.S. government of what is expected of refugees in conforming to U.S. culture and society shed light on how American norms and values are characterized (Alba & Nee, 2003; Demo, 2005). The values of American culture are in many ways explicitly identified as part of the citizenship examination. The government is to universally apply rules to its citizens despite differences in race or religion. Immigrants and refugees are to assimilate and integrate themselves into society (Kim, 2009). Successfully assimilating to these values is privileged as the ultimate goal in the relationship between the government and refugees.

The messages of cultural assimilation as an essential part of citizenship are identified in the current version of the citizenship examination. The United States Citizenship and Immigration Services announced in a news release that the new examination would "help strengthen assimilation efforts by emphasizing fundamental concepts of American democracy, basic U.S. history, and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship" (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2007, p. 1). Furthermore, the examination was designed to "promote patriotism among prospective citizens" (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2007, p. 1).

Ong (2003) argues one role of the state is to instill American values and habits in its "citizen-subjects." Ong's critical approach describes refugees in this process as being "constituted as particular kinds of unworthy subjects who must be taught to become self-reliant, to be accountable for their situation" (p. 124). The immigrant or refugee who is not assimilated should not achieve the legal status of citizen. As Ong (2003) puts it, the national body is to be controlled and maintained. Such maintenance requires clear boundaries, frontiers that distinguish "us" and "them" (Haddad, 2003).

The boundaries of citizenship require a defined outsider. As Haddad (2003) states, such boundaries are "necessary for citizenship to have any significance. The image of the 'other' or the 'outsider' contrasts with who we imagine to be the 'same', to be part of our 'nation'" (p. 305). The fact that someone legally classified as an other (such as a refugee) can move to be classified as an insider (a citizen) makes the citizenship examination a significant step in the process of defining a national body. Nevertheless, America as an imagined nation or community may have more stringent boundaries in determining group membership than the legal system (Anderson, 2006).

Obtaining citizenship can therefore be seen as a process of defining and redefining rather than simply an achievement in legal status. The United States is one of the few nations in the world where the nationality of "American" is given to naturalized citizens regardless of where they come from originally. Years ago I attended a naturalization ceremony where my wife became an American citizen, along with many others from countries all over the world. The judge officiating the ceremony had several of them tell their stories. After they swore the oath, he pronounced them to be Americans. It was in many ways the perfect example of inclusive acceptance regardless of previous nationalities. However, adaptation and perceptions of citizenship go beyond exhibited individualism, and refugees can be caught in a paradoxical position of otherness despite changes in their official nationality.

Refugees that obtain citizenship are often still "viewed as strangers and guests in this country" (McKinnon, 2008, p. 7). Thus, while a refugee may achieve the legal status of citizen and come to see him or herself as an American, embodying the individualism and entrepreneurial spirit so described, the categorizations within American society may be less malleable. The valuing of the individual as becoming American presents a contrast to

the social identity imposed by societal categorizations and stereotypes and marked by ethnicity, race, language, and immigration status within this new society that refugees inhabit.

Though the values of individualism promote equality and civic participation, America has, in recent decades, faced increasing challenges to its notion of individualism. Inequalities and grievances in history and in its institutions have often pitted ethnic group identities against the claims of individualism, and the path to equal status for all groups is disputed (Kim, 2009). Refugees find themselves at the crossroads of individual and social identities, and the messages surrounding their resettlement can be contradictory.

Negotiating the Forces of an American Identity

Various forces in society, including the media, the government, and even the voluntary organizations (VOLAGs) that provide services to the refugees "function to form refugees as certain kinds of subjects in the possibility that they might one day become subjects of the state" (McKinnon, 2008, p. 3). In this way, those labeled refugees may have a difficult time escaping this category despite the process of cultural adaptation and even citizenship. For this reason McKinnon (2008) argues that refugees are in a subjected position, one in which they do not speak for themselves but rather are spoken for by political officials and service agencies.

However, it is important not to restrict refugees to this powerless position that McKinnon (2008) so describes. Refugees are also agents in this process, despite being limited and challenged by society and the government. As Camino (1994) has argued, refugees are not simply passive recipients of labels and categories that others place on them. Many innovatively negotiate new identities and positions for themselves in American society by using their own experience and incorporating elements of their new home. Warriner (2004) gives a good example of this negotiation as demonstrated by female refugees balancing motherhood and employment in their new homelands. Her study demonstrates refugees' resilience and integration despite difficulties placed on them by societal forces and institutions.

The challenges of assimilation and adaptation can be substantial. In terms of professional employment, the expectancy of economic self-sufficiency can be problematic for refugees because many experience a frustrating change in occupation from their home country. The change in employment is one where there is a "general shift away from 'white-collar' to 'blue-collar' work" (Haines, 1996, p. 43). Haines (1996) further notes that "in terms of occupational satisfaction, most refugees must accept that they are unlikely to achieve an occupational status in the United States that matches their experience in their country of origin" (p. 45).

In addition to changes in profession as an obstacle to employment and self-reliance, most refugees face the challenge of becoming proficient

in a new language: English. As is the case with many immigrant groups, English-language competence is particularly important in gaining successful employment. As mentioned earlier, because refugees often are not placed in support systems with others from their own homeland, the ability to learn English enough to be employable is difficult (Haines, 1996). Additionally, learning English is a means of gaining social as well as economic capital. Refugees have reported that learning English not only helps them get jobs, it also earns them respect in their communities and facilitates accessing knowledge and resources (Nawyn, Gjoka, Agbenyiga, & Grace, 2012).

Previous research on refugee identity construction focuses on refugees as cultural others, minorities in a new homeland. Though studies such as Langellier's (2010) and McKinnon's (2008) examine the identities refugees are negotiating for themselves *as refugees* (e.g., as displaced peoples that maintain or reinvent cultural traditions, forge ethnic and community ties, and practice their religion), I crafted the present study to examine how identities are specifically negotiated during a significant step in the process of naturalization. The negotiation between expectations of American individualism and independence and the societal labeling and categorizing of ethnic otherness provides an opportunity to learn how refugees as well as current American citizens create and perform their identities. Additionally, it provides the critical distance by which current American citizens can interrogate the power-laden act of labeling who is "us" and who is "them," and how those definitions affect those applying for group membership.

Method

In order to observe and gather data relevant to understanding meanings of citizenship for refugees preparing to become citizens of the U.S., I attended a citizenship preparation class throughout 2009 in a Midwestern city. Using participant observation (Angrosino, 2008; Hammersly & Atkins, 1983; Spradley, 1980) and informal interviews (Agar, 1996; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), I gathered data regarding the messages used to construct American citizenship between the dominant culture and the refugees themselves.

Men and women of various adult ages attended the class. Each class consisted of approximately 10 people. Their countries of origin included Somalia, Sudan, Eritrea, Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Cuba, Haiti, Mexico, Panama, and China. Each student was usually the only one from his/her former nationality and language group. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of all class members and the instructor. The class was conducted in English, and English was used in all of my interactions with the members of the class.

The class was led by an instructor—a white, female, retired school teacher. She would explain concepts in multiple ways in an attempt to ensure understanding from her students who spoke little English. As such, there was little exchange outside of this question and answer framework. Still, I

was able to observe expressions of how citizenship was interpreted and its meaning negotiated through this interaction as well as have conversations with different members of the class.

The primary method of data collection was the use of field notes I took of my observations and ethnographic interviews with the instructor and members of the class (Agar, 1996; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Spradley, 1980). It is important to note that the instructor was not an employee of the state, but she worked for a non-profit group whose goal is to aid all those desiring to attain citizenship. The class instructor also served as a member check for accuracy of interpretation.

I was restricted for the most part to being a passive observer during class time because the class was led as a type of question and answer session between the instructor and the class members. My interactions with class members took place either before or after class. Though I did not actively participate during class time, my privileged presence was certainly part of the research scene.

I am a tall, white, male American citizen whose first language is English. My presence in this research scene is important because it is a scene in which cultural and national identities are extremely salient. It is also a scene in which all in attendance are in relatively close proximity. In such a small room with only a dozen or so people, my presence never went unnoticed. As class members were learning and being instructed on assimilating to American culture, I embodied the very image of the privileged American. I represented both what they were taught to aspire to as well as what stood in their way. I both looked like and spoke like the prototypical American. It is important to acknowledge that my presence greatly changed the scene, and that interactions between the class members, myself, and the instructor, were heavily influenced by perceptions of visible markers of ethnic and national self and other, in-group and out-group.

I began this research with the goal of putting intercultural communication research and knowledge to practical and helpful use. People who come to this country as refugees encounter significant changes, and their cultural adjustment is one of the most challenging obstacles they face. The goal of this research was to examine ways in which understanding cultural adaptation and preparation for citizenship, from the perspective of a group of refugees, could inform the practices of volunteers assisting these refugees. As the results and interpretation show, however, understanding the obstacles refugees face has less to do with these refugees passing the citizenship exam and much more to do with Americans belonging to the dominant group maintaining an imagined sense of an exclusive American citizen identity.

Emergent Themes and Interpretations

I walked down the hallway of the center, looking for someone who might be able to point me in the right direction. Several people lined the hallway

with various manuals and workbooks for the different classes for immigrants taught there. I became increasingly self-conscious as I noticed pair after pair of eyes suspiciously following me as I passed through. Dressed in a gray dress shirt and black slacks, being six feet four inches tall and a white male, I was not just a stranger to this scene—I represented something more.

I should not have been surprised by the fact that I felt out of place at the community center, but I naively was. At the time I reflected on my appearance and understood it might attract attention in that space due to sheer difference. I knew I was out of place, but at the time I did not interrogate my own presence. I was focused on the people I was there to learn about. I didn't yet understand my relationship to their situation. Later, after attending the citizenship class, I came to understand more about the relevance of my appearance among these immigrants—immigrants that did not look or sound like me but were expected to. Just like the visual example of separation I witnessed on the street outside of the community center, inside the center it was clear who was an American citizen and who was not—not because of an explicit individualism or self-sufficient behavior but because of an appearance that symbolized all of the things that the refugees were taught to privilege and desire.

I was finally asked by a middle-aged white man sitting at a desk at the end of the hallway, "Can I help you?" I asked if he knew where I might find Jane, the instructor of the citizenship class. He proceeded to take me around the corner and up the stairway. While we were walking he asked as an afterthought, "You're not here to kill her, are you?" I assured him I wasn't. His tone made me think he was half-kidding, asking out of obligation but not truly concerned. I wondered about his motivation for asking me such a question and what his experience must have been like working at the center. Was he asking because he is supposed to? Or was he trying to send me a message about the place I was in? It made me somewhat self-conscious at the time. It wasn't so much that he asked a security question—it was that he could ask it with such a cavalier attitude because of who I appeared to him to be.

The classroom where the citizenship class was held reminded me of my eighth-grade U.S. History class. An old chalkboard filled the width of the wall at the head of the room, with bookshelves lining the other three walls. The books filling these shelves were in various languages and ranged from children's picture books to philosophy and literature. On the chalkboard hung a poster of all the presidents of the United States, including President Barack Obama. A large road map of the U.S. was on the left wall, posters of the Declaration of Independence, Washington, DC, and an American flag hung in the front.

These artifacts also served to support the expressed purpose of the citizenship exam itself. Following in the spirit of *E Pluribus Unum*, out of the different individuals the state would ensure that difference was made

same. The American identity the examination claimed to promote was made visible through the symbols of patriotism and founding principles, the classroom itself the place where information could be disseminated and allegiance be encouraged.

Jane, the instructor of the class, walked in and saw me sitting down. "You must be Brett," she said. Another reminder of how my body was so visibly marked and readily privileged. She had light brown hair, wore glasses, was nearing retirement age, and has spent most of her adult life teaching school. Her experience in the classroom showed as she skillfully explained concepts in multiple ways to ensure that her students, who spoke little English, understood her instruction. Those attending the class were focused on direct memorization of "correct" answers to the possible questions on American history, government, and current laws. Jane was kind enough to give me a few minutes at the beginning of class to introduce myself and get to know the class members. Jane assured everyone that I was not from immigration services but was there to "help"—an interesting juxtaposition of words. Warm smiles replaced skepticism, and I temporarily forgot my concerns of power and positionality as I interpreted the change in ambience as a sign of welcoming.

As Jane introduced me as a graduate student at the nearby university, she attempted to equalize the playing field. She pointed out to everyone that they all speak at least two languages now, some even more than that. This means, she said, that they too have already learned a lot. I interpreted this as her attempt to reduce the refugees' self-consciousness with my educational level and language ability while at the same time warn me indirectly to not be critical of their presumed intelligence level based on their English language skills. I got the cue because it reminded me of how frustrating it was when I first lived abroad and had a hard time with the language. I felt "talked down to" all the time, as if I was stupid because of how I sounded. It definitely marked me as an outsider, something I tried hard to overcome, to blend in as a native speaker. But I always knew I would return home where my native tongue would be my primary means of communication and a ticket to education and employment. I knew that not only is appearance a factor in marking the other, so too is language.

During my attendance of the citizenship class, reminders that my presence evoked notions of privilege and not belonging were frequent. Though I was greeted with smiles and waves by regular class members, I saw suspicious and uneasy looks from new class members often. Even those I got to know well would remind me of my privilege by their questions and glances during humorous moments in the class. "Why do *you* want to learn about citizenship?" they would frequently ask. Three themes emerged from the communication surrounding the preparation for these refugees to take the examination for U.S. citizenship. The first theme addressed the defining of citizenship as freedom by both the class instruction and the refugees

themselves, albeit in different ways. The second theme was the salience of self-sufficiency as evidenced by the talk regarding entrepreneurship and job security. The third theme was that cultural assimilation was most explicitly referenced as language proficiency though differences in ethnicity were engaged by class members and not the preparation materials.

Citizenship as Freedom

Though freedom as a concept was not a central focus of Jane's instruction, specific *freedoms* as rights to act were identified regularly. However, for these refugees what is most salient about freedom in America has more to do with peace and security. For example, Nyanath, a refugee from Sudan, told me that she is grateful the U.S. brought her here, away from her war-torn country. Nyanath said, "America is number one." When I asked her why, she said, "Sudan, a lot of trouble. America, take me here away from the trouble."

Senay, a refugee from Eritrea, likewise commented that America is good because it has freedom Africa (his broad reference to his country of origin) does not. "Africa, no freedom. President, no four years then change," he told me. He explained to me that his country was "OK." But then after four years they had elections and voted for a new president. The current President then said "no" to being replaced and continued to rule for 25 more years. This was not a meaning of freedom for Senay:

> America has a very good government. The President in America lets you talk. In my country, you talk bad about the President and you killed. There is no freedom in my country. I like America. America, you want something, you vote. You get what you want. In Africa, you talk and they kill you. America everyone is American—it is a nice country.

This is freedom for Senay. He talked about free speech and the right to vote. He compared these freedoms with the violent experiences of his home country. To emphasize his point he went on to tell me about his children's achievements since coming to America. "My son finished bachelor's degree from university. My daughter now started at university too." He told me this with great pride.

Milan, from Cuba, liked to share his experience when talking about the freedoms Americans enjoy. He spoke often of Cuba's troubles stemming from its longtime leader. "Cuba has Fidel Castro forty years," he said. "Castro is communist. This not work. Nobody have power, have freedom." Jane's instruction emphasizes those freedoms in class most Americans are familiar with: religion, speech, and voting. Those familiar freedoms began to have new meanings for me as I listened to the experiences shared by the class members. They compared their recent experiences with the freedoms being explained to them.

Jane asked frequently the exam question, “What is the most important right that US citizens have?” The correct answer, as Jane instructed them, is the right to vote. This implies not only the value of freedom as a U.S. citizen, but that participation in the democratic process is at the core of this freedom. The concept of the individual being an active participant in society and the democratic process was repeatedly promoted as a value of American culture.

When Jane asked Ezal if he had ever been detained by the police or military, he went off on a tangent in Bosnian, animatedly using gestures to describe something that seemed significant and unpleasant to him. The rest of the class waited for him to conclude. Finally he turned to me and said with a smile, “In Bosnia, military police no good.” Jane then turned to Samuel sitting next to Ezal and asked, “Have you ever been a member of the communist party?” Samuel quickly replied, “I was a Hitler,” and laughed. No one else in the class laughed. It didn’t seem like they heard him or understood what he said. Jane smiled but quickly corrected him and told him that he cannot make jokes like that during the real examination.

Jane asked the class, “Why did the Pilgrims come to America?” The correct answer, she instructed them, is “freedom.” She explained that the test now asks why “people,” not “pilgrims” have come to America. Heads nod, and no one contradicts or offers a different reason. Many sessions later, Jane asks the same question again only this time she offers some other reasons for coming to America. These include freedom, opportunity to earn more money, education, and safety. She then drew a timeline on the chalkboard, beginning with 1492 for Columbus and ending with the current year. On the timeline she wrote the year 1620 for the arrival of the pilgrims and then 1776 for the Declaration of Independence. She explained that many different people have come to America during history, for different reasons. She didn’t write any more about this topic.

Although general impressions of freedom were that of security and stability within the U.S. compared to their countries of origin, occasional displays of resistance were still present. Jane lectured about the Constitution frequently as the source document of the rights and freedoms discussed in class. It is the “law of the land” and was often used as the default answer when class members didn’t know how to answer a practice question. While Jane was lecturing about the Constitution, Ezal blew his nose on a tissue and then jokingly said to Samuel that it was the Constitution as he put it in his pants pocket. Much of the class instruction focused on the importance of the U.S. Constitution as establishing the rights and freedoms central to American life. I wondered if the Constitution as a representative image may make it a target of easy ridicule or simply irreverent, light-hearted behavior, because of its close association with the identity of the nation as a whole.

Self-sufficiency

That the individualist messages regarding the expectations of self-sufficiency have reached many of the refugees is evident in their communication about their respective experiences. Milan, from Cuba, has an injured arm that prohibits him from working. He was concerned about his employment status. Senay, in speaking about his own experience with employment, said he knows that his inability to work doesn't look good for him in this regard. About five years ago he got "sick," he told me, and had to have surgery on his back. His doctor told him it was too dangerous for him to work after the operation. He has since interviewed for several different jobs, but his condition does not permit him to work at any of them. He told me that he likes to work, but that he simply cannot. His wife, he told me, has worked for twelve years and that she is "no lazy." "In Africa," he said, "everybody works hard—no lazy."

Nyanath told me she went to visit her family in her country. When she came back she didn't have her job anymore:

> I love my job. I go November to Sudan. I come back two months and now no job. Why? I try three times for same job but the woman she says no. Why I can't have it back? I like work, I want to work. What can I do?

I asked her how she got the job originally, and she gave the name of a person that neither Jane nor I recognized. Jane recommended she go back to the resettlement center and speak to the employment coordinator.

Nyanath struggled to find employment again despite her expressed desire to work. Jane would reinforce the importance of self-sufficiency through her instruction and practice questions with class members. During one practice exam with David, also from Sudan, Jane asked him about his employment. David said he now works for a software company. Jane said he was lucky to have such a good job. Then she turned to Nyanath and said, "Right Nyanath?" Nyanath smiled and said yes as she lowered her head and nodded firmly.

In addition to employment, self-sufficiency was demonstrated as not needing services from the state. One question on the exam has to do with the applicant's state and history of mental health. Jane asked, "Do you have a history of mental health issues or instability?" She then instructed the class the correct answer was clearly "no." Jane's instruction specifically addressed the desired appearance of not needing any services rather than an actual history of mental health. This can be contrasted with the language of the resettlement center's director, Christine, who informed me that mental health was a major issue in helping refugees due to their recent traumatic experiences and displacement.

Employment and sound mental health were valued, but a demonstration of an independent spirit, that of entrepreneurship, was valued even more.

Jiang, a man from China, on one particular class day was preparing to take the citizenship exam on the following Monday. Jane took extra time to give him a full practice exam that day. She asked about his employment status as part of the practice exam. She frequently stressed in class the importance of having employment and what it would show the officer of the exam. "Where do you work?" she asked. Jiang says, "The Great Wall—it's a Chinese restaurant." Jane then stepped out of character to confirm with him, "Don't you own it?" Jiang replied that he does. Jane then said, "You should say that. Tell them that you *own* the restaurant."

The importance given to not only employment but entrepreneurship demonstrates the concept of self-sufficiency as described by Ong (2003). Jane's encouragement of Jiang to identify his self-sufficiency may be considered supporting current structures by creating subjects of the refugees, as Ong (2003) and McKinnon (2008) have argued. Indeed, the more one can exemplify the meaning of American citizenship—in this case self-sufficiency—to the officer in the exam, the better chance one has at being granted that status, Jane instructed. In this context, however, would it really be responsible for Jane not to encourage Jiang's demonstration of entrepreneurship? Is a demonstration of being independent from the state somehow further creating a subject of the state? Though Jiang's entrepreneurial status will benefit him in taking the exam, it is not the exam or even the government that encouraged him to start his own business per se. In fact, some studies show immigrants in the U.S. are more likely to start their own businesses than native-born citizens (Fairlie, 2008). Though the motivations for being entrepreneurs may vary significantly among immigrants, according to the measures of the citizenship exam this is an area where immigrants are more "American" than their counterparts.

One way that refugees negotiated the tension between expectations of self-sufficiency and their experiences as refugees was to engage in a large amount of cooperative work. Self-sufficiency was clearly understood, but a competitive spirit was not among this group of refugees. Jane's instruction style encouraged cooperation, and the members of the class were quick to help one another and give advice. For example, in one instance Jane asked Ezal if he had taken any trips outside the U.S. in the last five years. He did not understand the question so Jane reworded it, trying to distinguish between the amount of time a single trip lasted and the total number of trips taken. Ezal could not make the distinction and lowered his head in frustration. Nyanath from across the room tried to help by giving her example of recent travel. Milan also tried to help, affirming that this is an important question because "They already know the answer. You must say it right." The more vocal members of the class were quick to correct other members when they were wrong or unsure, but they were equally as quick to praise each other when they correctly answered.

Cultural Assimilation

Although many of the characteristics of the refugee experience are often shared, creating an understanding of cultural adaptation is made difficult by the cultural and linguistic divergences between different refugee populations and between refugees and American society (Haines, 1996). Cultural adaptation is difficult and different for each individual. What can make it even more difficult is the cultural labeling and assumptions made about individuals by the host society, even before they arrive. Christine, the center's director, explained to me her perspective of the different groups of refugees they assist. "More recently we have been getting large numbers of Iraqis and Afghans which are more demanding and dissatisfied with their living conditions." Christine thinks this resentment comes from our involvement in the wars in both these countries. "The Burmese, however, have been so humble and really very sweet," she said. Those refugees who had to spend time in camps before arriving in the U.S. are "easier to deal with," Christine says, because their expectancy level is much lower.

Assimilationist messages that influence the cultural adaptation of refugees aim to make the refugees more "American" in terms of perceived behaviors such as embracing freedoms, civic engagement, and self-sufficiency. However, characteristics of an American identity that deal with other aspects of culture, such as race and ethnicity, are ignored. These characteristics refugees often share can lead to their categorization by society as others through discourses of ethnicity and immigration status. Jane discussed the issues of racial injustice in this country by highlighting only the past events that marked changes in legislation, from Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation to Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement. But Samuel, one member of the class, did not go along. He interrupted Jane, an uncommon move by any class member, and contrasted her use of the past tense in her description of problems of racism. He said that discrimination is still a problem in some places in the U.S., that discrimination "never goes away."

Samuel has been in this country longer than anyone in the class, nearly 30 years. He identifies himself as "American" but has learned from this citizenship course not to say he is an "American citizen." One of the questions on the exam asks if the applicant has ever self-identified as a citizen, and he needs to be able to respond appropriately. His adoption of an American label is evidence of the effects of some aspects of assimilation while still feeling the separation of discrimination. Jane's pronunciation of Samuel's name only added to the assimilationist message of conformity. While Samuel said his name with the emphasis on the *el*, as it is pronounced in Spanish, Jane pronounced it as it would be in English. Diana, another member of the class, said her name as it is said in Spanish but likewise was referenced by the English version.

Samuel was particularly vocal and challenged Jane's instruction more than others, usually in a humorous manner. He often would affirm his identity by claiming himself as the answer to the history questions. When Jane asked Ezal who the father of our country is, Samuel jumped in and said, "Me!" Jane later asked Samuel who lived in America before the Europeans came and he answered, "Me! Ha, no, the Indians."

Jane conducted class often by asking practice questions to the different class members. The exam question of whether the applicant wishes to change his/her name came up for Ezal, a refugee from Bosnia. Ezal's last name is Salihamidic. Jane asked him if he would want to become Ezal Jones to illustrate the meaning of the question. Everyone laughed, including Ezal, who shook his head "no" at the same time. Ezal looked at me, as he often did after he answered a question or made a joke. He was very aware of my presence, though I had a hard time knowing if he felt resentment or was performing for me. Maybe both. Jane then asked Senay, a refugee from Eritrea, if he was going to change his name because his wife changed hers when she took the test. Senay said he would because his full name is "too long." They both wanted their names to be shorter, to be more "American."

It was evident that different members of the class conceptualized the meaning of being an American citizen in different ways. Changing names to be more "American" apparently has nothing to do with civic engagement or economic self-reliance. It does, however, have significant meaning regarding ethnicity, and these refugees, whether they decide to change their names or not, have picked up on that. Some feel the need to assimilate in this manner while others want to resist this form of assimilation—either way, these refugees are receiving messages of assimilation regarding American citizenship as a particular ethnicity despite the communication of the course.

Scholars such as Chiswick and Miller (1995) as well as Bleakley and Chin (2004) argue that learning English is the most important thing refugees can do in acquiring stable employment. In addition to the practical nature of learning English is the connection between language and culture that many refugees face. Nawyn et al. (2012) have argued more recently that even more important than employment is the immigrant's social integration and access to resources, for which language proficiency is necessary. Language can be a significant tie to one's homeland, and many refugees are relocated around the U.S. without many others from the same country of origin. Nyanath told me that English for her is very difficult. "In Sudan my language is Dinka, also Arabic. I no learn English in Sudan, only here." I asked if she lived with other people from Sudan, but she said she did not. This lack of support presents a challenge in preserving that cultural connection.

Milan told me that speaking English is the hardest part about living in America. Senay said his language in Eritrea was Tengrinia. Senay was first displaced to Ethiopia and then Kenya before finally arriving in America.

"Everybody's language always different," he said. "No Tegrinia. We the only ones." I asked him if he learned any English in Eritrea before coming here but he replied he didn't:

> In Africa we have school, but not everybody can go. Some people go to college but then fighting starts. Long time no school. Me, I come to America, I don't go to school, a little bit, I get job, very good United States. I like America.

Though the U.S. has no official language, the citizenship exam is only conducted in English. Furthermore, there is a portion which Jane calls the "English portion." It is the part of the exam that requires a demonstration of conversational abilities as well as reading and writing. The importance of learning English is stressed, and often the preservation of other languages is seen as resistance to assimilating into the American lifestyle which will only hurt their chances of being productive members of society. However, it is generally those who seek to preserve the use of their native language who *also* strive to learn English and assimilate into American society as needed (Hornberger, 1997).

This portion of the exam made class members nervous. Senay told the class that they want an older man to give them the exam: his wife had taken the exam and passed, but with some difficulty. "Sometimes young man no good. Talk fast. My wife, old," he said. Then Senay acted out what he meant by pretending to do the exam rapidly with gestures. Then he stood up quickly, raised his right hand, and then laughed as he sat back down.

Another assimilationist message came from Jane's inclusive language when talking about Americans and citizenship. "What are the first three words of the Constitution?" she asked regularly. "We the people" was the response of all class members. "That's right," she would say. "We the people, all of us" she declared as she made a circular motion with her hand around the room. "From whom did we gain our independence?" was another common question.

Jane does indeed have the objective of making "subjects" of the refugees by helping them become citizens. But isn't that the point? Aren't they better off as citizens and speaking English so that they can be employed and support themselves? At what cost is this citizenship accomplished? Though the citizenship test is supposed to be geared around principles of American society, an invitation to all people, the principles are not what these refugees are struggling with. They understand the importance and value of these freedoms and rights better than I do because of their experiences. And yet what seems to be in constant negotiation are their identities, their struggles with language and belonging. I wondered what they have had to go through to get to this point, what their relationships are with their own cultural and national identities, how much of their negotiation and these assimilationist messages are done consciously, and to what extent they inhibit or facilitate their adaptation to their new home. They certainly do not appear to be malicious or even self-serving when they are coming from people like Jane. But they do come wrapped up

together, sending the message to these refugees that citizenship is more than having rights and being self-sufficient. It is a particular way of looking and sounding like an American, an American like me.

Senay turned to me at the close of the class and began to talk about why I was at the center. He said that he was happy that I was coming, every time I wrote in my notebook it made him happy. He said that I was doing a "good job, nice." Anything I could say about them would be good. I took this to mean that he was glad I was bringing attention to their situation. He said that anything he could do to help, he would do. "United States, very good country," he said. I often forgot my position, how my appearance represented in many ways the ethnic and racial dimension of American citizenship ignored by the classroom instruction, until comments or looks from class members would bring it back to my attention. I had to recognize the salience of my own identity, as observed by these class members, in the context of a citizenship class. Their reports of what it means to be an American were, at least to some extent, directed at their conceptualization of who I was. Though their voices revealed much about the messages regarding citizenship they have received and their own meanings of it, I recognized the need for research that could probe these questions further without the assimilationist nature of the citizenship class.

Discussion

Though Americans as a national body are supposed to be defined by the common values of equality, economic opportunity, and civic participation, those preparing to belong to this body are receiving messages much more exclusive in nature. An American identity is imagined as an ethnically and linguistically defined identity, not just an identity that upholds universal principles. Social categorizations and assumptions about who an American is exist within society beyond mere legal status, or even strong demonstrations of independence and self-sufficiency that continue to keep immigrants and refugees from being considered full members of a national identity.

It is also important to note the researcher's identity in a situation where ethnicity and citizenship are salient and how this presence influences the responses solicited. Though participants were eager to share with me their experiences, I was not an in-group member. I represented the image of American citizenship they were being instructed to assimilate to, and they desired to become citizens. The scene for this study was one that focused heavily on the very basics of American citizenship in order for members of the class to pass the examination. As such the more complex issues of ethnicity and social categorization which often are considered to be a problem of the past were not addressed. However, the class members brought up these issues on their own. Therefore, while the class instruction treated the expectations of assimilation as attainable by any person, regardless of appearance or background, some members had experienced this was not the case. If they

are receiving messages that to be assimilated into American society is to be of a particular appearance and not just behavior, it is indeed problematic for both Americans and immigrants, and it prioritizes appearance over principle. If this contradiction in expectations of assimilation is to be explored further, the identity of the researcher must be carefully considered.

Post-Script

On my way out the door I stopped to wish Jiang my best with his exam on Monday, his big day. He smiled and said thank you as he shook my hand excitedly. He had had a rough day in class and struggled through a lot of the practice questions more than usual, I thought. Maybe it was just nerves. I hoped so. I just hoped he would get a good officer, one that was interested in his well-being and desire rather than caught up in technicalities of language proficiency.

I heard from Jane the following week that Jiang had passed the exam and would be sworn in sometime soon. I was very excited for him and his family. It would be a significant moment for them, one that he had worked hard for. He would now officially be an "American," though I wondered how much he would identify with that title—or if those who meet him will think of him in that way. He has legally been assimilated into American society. He has been naturalized and his status is now that of "American," though he may have more trouble escaping the contradiction many face in assimilating into American society. He is a complex human being, a multilingual world traveler, a living example of the American spirit of independence—and may still often be categorized only as a Chinese man that owns a Chinese restaurant.

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