

Summer 2018

Segmented Assimilation Concern Among Refugee Families

Tessa Samuels
tsamuels@pugetsound.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/summer_research



Part of the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Samuels, Tessa, "Segmented Assimilation Concern Among Refugee Families" (2018). *Summer Research*. 326.
https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/summer_research/326

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Sound Ideas. It has been accepted for inclusion in Summer Research by an authorized administrator of Sound Ideas. For more information, please contact soundideas@pugetsound.edu.

School and Childcare Actions to Aid the Transition and Socialization of Newly
Arrived Refugee Families

Tessa Samuels

AHSS Research Grant
Faculty Advisor Monica DeHart

University of Puget Sound

09/21/2018

Introduction

“Getting to two childcare locations is too much for me. I can’t keep doing this.” (Zalika: personal communication 06/28/2018)

Zalika studied me for a long moment, before pulling a woven shawl around her shoulders. “I am sorry it is so cold in here. It is always cold in here.” Zalika is a 29 - year - old single mom from the Republic of the Congo but has spent the last four years in a refugee camp in Rwanda. She lives in a small apartment located in the basement of a complex. Zalika has two young boys: a three year old son named Hami and a five year old son named Jabali. Due to lack of spots in childcares Hami and Jabali attend different childcare’s. Zalika leaves her house at 6am every week day to take the bus to both locations and make it to work by 8am, she gets off work at 4pm and takes the bus to pick up Hami and then Jabali, they all arrive back home around 6 pm. Zalika says that the hardest part of childcare is the transportation and that this schedule is straining and exhausting.

While there is much support around refugee resettlement, refugees still face many challenges once resettled. My ethnographic research focused on what public schools, day-camps, and childcare facilities can do to help with the socialization and transition process for newly arrived refugee families. I worked with families, schools, childcare facilities, and day-camps to attempt to bridge any gaps in communication and discover where the most prominent mis-communications and frustrations lie.

Throughout the three months that I spent conducting the research, I spent many hours with Zalika and six other families. One day I road the bus from Walmart, Zalika’s work, to the two childcare facilities and back to her house. It was a long journey and I was tired when we arrived back to the small, cold apartment. Zalika barely paused to set her stuff down and went straight to making dinner for Hami, Jabali, and myself. The kids showed me funny youtube videos that were in Swahili while Zalika cooked. Zalika turned down my offer to help saying that it was nice to have company. “American’s eat alone too often. I like sharing my food. It gets lonely living by myself with just Hami and Jabali.” (Zalika: personal communication 06/28/2018). By the time the Fufu and Pili Pili, a sticky bread and chili like dish, were done it was past 7:30 pm. We sat on the floor and ate, Zalika talked to me late into the night. Telling me about what she missed about Africa, how tired she was with her schedule, and how she missed community. One thing that stood out to me was that Zalika said that she was not at all worried about how Hami and Jabali were transitioning or making friends in their perspective childcare facilities, she simply was exhausted by her schedule.

Statement of Problem/Question

The ethnographic research that I conducted from the beginning of May 2018 to mid August 2018 explored the socialization process and transition for newly arrived refugee families to the United States, and what childcare facilities, schools, and day-camps can do to aid with these challenges. Based off of my previous work with the International Rescue Committee, times that I have provided free childcare for refugee families, and, predominately, based off of archival and literary research, I hypothesized that children were struggling to transition yet were assimilating faster than parents are causing tension at home (Adedoyin et al. 2016, Baker 2006,

Fadiman 1998, George 2010). This concept is called segmented assimilation. The goal of this project was to aid in the socialization and transition process for newly arrived refugee children, aid teachers in limiting segmented assimilation, and bridge the communication gap between teachers/childcare providers and families.

Methods

All names have been changed and the location of the study is exempt in this report in order to protect all subjects involved in this research and to mitigate any possibility of identification. Due to the possibly dangerous nature of some of the subjects backgrounds it is of the utmost importance for identity to remain anonymous, both for the safety of the subjects that I worked with and for the safety of any of their connections back in Africa.

For a year previous to conducting this research I had volunteered and interned for the International Rescue Committee. My internship title was Childcare Coordinator, and I worked with families from Syria, the Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, and Ethiopia to register their children in childcare facilities, school, after-school programs, and summer camps. I became familiar with the families and the childcare locations. I also provided some free times to watch refugee children, furthering my knowledge and comfort levels with many of the families. During the academic year, I wrote my thesis on the preponderant stressors that refugee families face. A common theme in the literature was segmented assimilation, which is a common and destructive pressure on many recently resettled families (Gong-Guy et al. 1991, Rosenfeld 2002: 519). Through my work with one specific refugee community, I wondered how segmented assimilation had impacted their lives. I worked closely with Monica DeHart to apply for an AHSS Research Grant and Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Upon obtaining the AHSS Research Grant and IRB, I began conducting a literature review and archival research for the three weeks prior to traveling to the refugee community that I had worked with in the past. I read through the leading literature on segmented assimilation and other stressors of the transition and socialization process, leading me to develop a hypothesis that many families in the refugee community that I worked with in the past — let's call the city Tiltedtowers — were struggling with internal family tension due to the different levels of socialization that a job provides versus that that a school provides as well as different levels of attachment to language, culture, and traditions of origin.

When I arrived in Tiltedtowers in mid May, I contacted the Swahili translator that I had worked with in the past. Leo — who had learned Swahili from doing Peace Corp in Tanzania — translated the IRB consent forms for me and helped me to contact the families. The International Rescue Committee had just hired on a new Swahili translator as well who is a refugee from the Congo: Elewisa. Leo also put me in contact with the Tigrinya translator Mebratu.

I reached out to the childcare facilities, day-camp's, and teachers that I had worked with in the past to tell them about the research that I would be conducting during the following ten weeks (but what turned into nearly three months worth of intensive work) and ask them if they would be willing to meet with me and tell me about their experience and what they would be willing to change to aid with the socialization and transition process of the refugee families that have been in their class or childcare facility.

I conducted ten, three-hour-long semi-structured interviews — three with school teachers, three with day-camp staff, and four with childcare providers. I also conducted seven hour-long semi-structured interviews with refugee families. Due to the language barriers, I always had Leo, Elewisa or Mebratu with me during the interviews with families. I recorded all of the interviews,

after obtaining permission from each subject, and transcribed the interviews (not including the Tigrinya or Swahili conversations that took place during the interviews). I used a coding system that I learned in *Ethnographic Methods* SOAN 299, I assigned a number and color to themes that were present — even if they only occurred once they were numbered —, then I evaluated the frequency of how much each theme occurred throughout the seventeen interviews.

Participant observation was another crucial component of the research. I only conducted participant research with the newly arrived refugee families due to the possible liability of being present at a childcare or day-camp simply to “observe.” During the participant observation component of the research I accompanied families on their bus route to and from school/childcare/camp, work, and home in each direction and I completed each route twice. This often meant arriving at one of my subjects house at 5:30 am to complete the route and not getting home until 7:30 pm. On occasion I would accompany families on shopping trips or for dinner in order to gain an understanding of possible tensions as a result of segmented assimilation that was not discussed during interviews.

Argument and Explanation of Significance

The global attention to the refugee crisis and the role of American communities in receiving and welcoming new families escaping trauma has become one of the most contested and glorified topics in the recent years. Within the past two years Tiltedtowers¹ has resettled one hundred individual refugees per year, making refugee populations a very small and conspicuous minority within Tiltedtowers. Tiltedtowers brought International Rescue Committee (IRC) leaders in from Salt Lake City, Utah to establish an IRC locally. As a result, activists in Tiltedtowers founded a non-profit organization called Oaks creek² to help with the transition for the refugees.

In 2017 alone, 53,716 refugees were resettled in the United States (UN Refugee Agency). Refugees — and immigrants — comprise a significant portion of the population in the United States. Refugee numbers are expected to rise as climate change and conflict continue to leave millions homeless (Bloemraad 2006, UN Refugee Agency). Although the Trump administration has cut refugee resettlement into the United States by half, there is still a significant number of people who are impacted by the pressures and stressors of resettlement into the United States (UN Refugee Agency, Adedoyin et al. 2016, Baker 2006 Miriam 2010).

One commonly experienced pressure for refugee and migrant families is segment assimilation (Miriam 2010, Gong-Guy et al 1991, Hein 2005). Segmented assimilation is when a child assimilates faster than a parent. There is often times a negative connotation associated with segmented assimilation. Children are not as attached to their culture of origin and crave acceptance by peers in school or in the community, this leads to dismissing language and traditions from the country of origin. Whereas, parents — who were forced out of their country of origin, leaving behind all that they knew and their identity — will crave the security and identity of the language, traditions, and customs of their culture of origin. These two conflicting desires for how to interact with the host countries community causes tension within the home

¹ To acquire information for research purposes on the location contact researcher at tsamuels@pugetsound.edu. Due to the safety of subjects, the location will be left out of this report.

² To acquire the real name of the non-profit organization established in this community for research purposes contact tsamuels@pugetsound.edu, however to mitigate any variables of potential identification the organization will not be named in a report that will be put online.

and family (George 2010, Karanja 2010, Lazarevic et al. 2006). While segmented assimilation is common, it is not the only stressor that families face when they resettle in the United States.

Evidence and Analysis

Families

During this study, I spent the large majority of week days with the refugee families for the better part of three months. I planned to only spend ten weeks conducting research but became so engrossed in the research and results that I ended up working an extra two weeks on the project.

I hypothesized that the refugee families in Tiltedtowers were experiencing segmented assimilation. My goal was to determine whether these families were experiencing segmented assimilation and then design and implement a plan of communication between refugee families and the school system to mitigate this specific pressure.

During the interviews with families and translators, families did not express concern or any experience with segmented assimilation. The most common stressor that was faced by a parent was how to transport their child to and from school, day-camps, or childcare. Two Congolese parents, Mosi and Zuberi, expressed to me “we have no concerns of our interactions with our children. They are ok. It is how to get them places. We had to pull [Johari and Kichaka] out of [Starlight] summer camp to watch [Nalah] because it is too much to get all the children to where they are supposed to go. They are sad to not go to [Starlight] anymore (Mosi and Zuberi: personal communication 06/12/18).”

Mosi and Zuberi were not alone in struggling with transporting children. Every family that I talked to reported transportation as their primary issue and concern regarding their children. Two other families had to pull older children out of summer camp to watch younger children to minimize their transportation needs regarding childcare pickup. Due to the small population of Tiltedtowers, the transportation system lacks efficiency and direct lines. It takes Zalika an extra two hours to drop off her children at their two different childcare locations due to the bus schedule.

The only thing that came up in interviews that resembled an issue of assimilation was from two different families who had lived in a refugee camp in Israel. The families were concerned that their children were not making friends because they spoke neither Swahili nor English so their children could not make friends easily with the other Congolese refugees nor with their American peers.

The other major issues that were present in the interviews and in participant observation were that some families — those especially who had lived in refugee camps in Rwanda due to the unstructured nature of childcare in Rwandan refugee camps — felt confused and frustrated even by the prospect of having to pay for childcare. In communities in Eritrea and the Republic of Congo, as well as in many of the refugee camps, family members or elders in the community would watch the children. The concept of paying for childcare and for going through the system of qualifying for a state scholarship, such as Best Beginnings, is complicated and to many refugees that I worked with, felt unfair. A single mother named Faven from Eritrea told me when I was taking the bus route to childcare with her one day: “ I just don’t get why we have to pay. In Eritrea my family would watch my children. In America people are not good at being in a

community. You all eat on separate plates and don't care about paying for childcare (Faven: personal communication 07/20/2018)." Faven later went on to explain to me that in Eritrea everyone eats off of the same plate for meals and that this act fosters a closer sense of community. That evening I was invited into her home and ate Injera — a teff flour flatbread that is a common meal for people from Eritrea and Ethiopia — with out hands. Faven, who works at Goodwill with three other women from Eritrea, said that she asked her boss if they could all have the same lunch break so that they could all eat injera together. For the remainder of the research project I was often invited into families homes to share a meal, I quickly learned that it was impolite for me to reject the offer. Many of the families, including Faven, feel confused and concerned about the bureaucracy behind childcare in the United States. Although many families have admitted to me that they are concerned about messing up with paperwork and having to pay a fine, often times they hide this fear by explaining that having to pay for childcare shows how Tiltedtowers is not community based.

Zalika confided in me one day when I was taking the bus route with her that her youngest son Hami would come home crying everyday because everyone else would go swimming at the YMCA camp he was attending. The state scholarship that she qualified for, nonTANF Best Beginnings, paid for Hami to attend camp but did not cover the extra forty dollars it cost to swim. Being a single mom of two young children and working at Walmart, she could not swing paying for the extra forty dollars per week. During my interview with the YMCA day-camp staff they said that there were scholarships that she could apply for to pay for swimming. Though this seemed like a simple and easy solution when I looked into it, the reality was that this was near impossible to accomplish. Zalika's English is not good enough to fill out a complicated form, and the refugee resettlement agencies do not have the resources to help with issues that are not crucial. The refugee resettlement agencies will get the children into childcare, school, and after school care in order for the parents to work but due to the limited resources they do not have the staffing or time to fill out extra forms. This example falls under the categories of payment being a source of stress as well as feeling confused by the system.

The third major stressor that families faced in regards to their children was feeling like they did not understand the rules or regulations. The refugee resettlement agencies in Tiltedtowers always send a translator with the families to tour the facility and fill out paperwork, but even with that many families do not understand small rules and regulations.

Jean, the provider at a childcare facility called Child's World, has parents sign their children in and out because that is what her liability insurance requires. Although this had been briefly explained to Pianga, a young single mother from the Republic of Congo, Pianga was still afraid of signing her children in or out because she did not understand what it meant. Jean ended up kicking Pianga and her two children out of Child's World for liability reasons.

One provider named Bobbi, who runs a small childcare facility named Blue Bells, and who repeatedly went out of her way to insure the comfort and ease of the transition for the refugee families who attended her childcare. Bobbi has never kicked a refugee family out of Blue Bells, no matter the safety or liability issues. Bobbi will continually call Oaks creek or the IRC to try to help the families understand certain safety issues. One family never shut the front gate or door and children would wander out, Bobbi repeatedly told Senait and her nineteen year old daughter Sophia that it was crucial to shut the gate. Bobbi had translators come to explain this issue and repeatedly talked to the family and the childcare coordinators at Oaks creek and the IRC. Her persistence to see the success of refugee families is unmatched by any other childcare facility in Tiltedtowers.

Well providers and teachers often times feel like they have to go out of their way to continually explain rules and regulations, families also feel like they are not getting the support for understanding the rules and regulations.

In conclusion, recently arrived refugee families are under too much duress and not having enough of their needs met for segmented assimilation to be a concern for families. Families are still trying to get by day-to-day, understand the culture, and make ends meet. Many parents do not even spend enough time with their children for tension over cultural beliefs to occur.

Providers

Throughout the course of the research project, I conducted semi-structured interviews with three teachers, three day-camp staff, and four childcare providers who have all worked with refugee families. I did not conduct participant observation with the providers.

All ten providers asserted that they were dedicated to aiding with preserving culture — including history lessons or traditions from the country of origin — and with helping aid the transition and socialization process as much as possible. Alex Grace, a spunky young third grade teacher, commented with enthusiasm “oh yes, I have not though about that but would love to add some Congolese history into my curriculum. I couldn’t imagine what it would be like to leave your country and your history. I would love to give that to the families (Alex Grace: personal communication 05/29/2018).” Many other providers and teachers responded similarly, and asked for suggestions on what to do to make the transition easier.

While every provider and teacher stated that they were interested in aiding with the transition and with preventing segmented assimilation, some providers and teachers discussed the behavioral and safety issues they had experienced. Especially those who run childcare programs said that many of the children did not listen and acted out violently. Childcare providers such as Jean from Child’s World and Sam from Little Monkey’s were willing to help with the transition and socialization as long as it did not place extra work on their staff members and as long as the children were “well behaved (Jean: personal communication 08/01/2018)” and the parents followed the rules.

Bobbi from Blue Bells stated that she is “always willing to give refugee families some slack. They have been through quite the ordeal and I would assume the increased behavioral issues are a symptom of trauma. Perhaps not blatant trauma, but a move like that causes trauma for any child. These families have been through enough. Of course I am willing to go the extra mile to help (Bobbi: personal communication 07/13/2018).” Bobbi often losses money because refugee families forget to pay or do not understand the payment system, she patiently works with children with tricky behavioral issues, and constantly asks parents what they need from her.

Similarly to the results I got from interviews and participant observation with families, I was surprised at how quickly the interview discussions moved away from the subject I had thought I was going to be researching. Providers were enthusiastic about helping families prevent segmented assimilation, but many were more interested in expressing the behavioral issues and communication barriers that they faced when working with refugee families.

Conclusions and Implications

In conclusion, my research took an unexpected turn. The recently arrived refugee families are not experiencing segmented assimilation. This is due to a lack of resources and a still present

duress and daily stress on making it through. While families are now physically safe, in terms of not being in a war zone or a crowded refugee camp, their lives are still extremely strained.

Due to governmental cuts in support of refugee resettlement, many resettlement organizations are shutting down across the country and many more are struggling to stay open. There are minimal resources being placed into refugee resettlement which has dire consequences. The people who work for resettlement agencies such as Oaks Creek and the IRC are overworked and underpaid, they give their all to making refugee resettlement a smooth process yet refugees are still struggling on a daily basis.

On the broader scale, this research showcases that there needs to be more resources from a higher up agency being given to on-the-ground resettlement agencies. On a local level, this research explores how refugees are still attempting to make it through the first stages of resettlement where their basic needs are just barely being met. Families are less worried about keeping their culture and more concerned about their financial situations, timing, strain from transportation, and finding community.

Childcare providers and teachers care about refugee resettlement and want to help with the socialization and transition process that refugees face when resettling in the United States. However, there is also a shortage of resources for childcare providers and teachers to dedicate extra to refugee families and students.

The overall take-home message of my research is that there needs to be a different distribution of resources when it comes to aiding with refugee resettlement.

References

- Adedoyin, Christson A. and Caroline Bobbie and Megan Griffin and Oreoluwa O. Adedoyin and Maudia Ahmad and Chandler Nobles and Kaitlin Neeland. 2016. "Religious Coping Strategies Among Traumatized African Refugees in the United States: A Systematic Review." *Journal of the North American Association of Christians in Social Work* 43 (1): 95-107.
- Baker, Barbara Ann. 2006. "Art Speaks in Healing Survivors of War: The Use of Art Therapy in Treating Trauma Survivors." *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*. 12 (1/2): 183-198.
- Bloemraad, Irene. 2006. *Becoming a Citizen: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United States and Canada*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.
- Dodson, Dan W. .1960. "Camping in Relation to Child Growth and Development" *The Journal of Educational Sociology*. November 34 (3): 109-116.
- Fadiman, Anne. 1998. *The spirit catches you and you fall down: a Hmong child, her American doctors, and the collision of two cultures* New York : Noonday Press.
- George, Miriam. 2010. "A Theoretical Understanding of Refugee Trauma." *Clinical Social Work Journal*. 38: 379-387.
- Gong-Guy, Elizabeth & Richard B. Cravens & Terence E. Patterson. 1991. "Clinical Issues in Mental Health Service Delivery to Refugees." *American Psychologist* 46(6): 642-648.
- Hein, Jeremy. 2005. "Ethnic Boundaries and Intermediaries in the Resettlement of Indochinese Refugees." *Research in Race and Ethnic Relations* 12(1): 173-189.
- International Rescue Committee Website
https://help.rescue.org/donate?ms=gs_brand_best_charity_es_fy18&initialms=gs_brand_best_charity_es_fy18&gclid=CjwKCAjwlcXXBRBhEiwApfHGTdpWz68PKLpcIcXV7MwsYIAVMIP-ijRxdjyac2PuCb3e2KxN8E1axoCA8wQAvD_BwE
- Karanja, Lucy W. 2010. *An Investigation Into the Educational Experiences and Support for Urban Sudanese Refugee Children in Kenya: An Ethnographic Case Study*. Ontario, Canada : Heritage Branch.
- Lazarevic, Vanja, Angela Wiley, and Joseph H. Pleck. 2006. "Associations of Acculturation with Family and Individual Well-being in Serbian Refugee Young Adults in the United States." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*. 217-236.
- Lewis, Denise Clark. 2010. "Cambodian Refugee Families in the United States: "Bending the Tree" to Fit the Environment." *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*. 8 (1) : 5-20.

Lincoln, Alisa K., Vanja Lazarevic, Matthew T. White, and B. Heidi Ellis. 2016. "The Impact of Acculturation Style and Acculturative Hassles on the Mental Health of Somali Adolescent Refugees." *Immigrant Minority Health*. June 6 (18): 771-778.

Macduff, Sabrina and Michael A. Grodin and Paula Gardiner. 2010. "The Use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine Among Refugees: A Systematic Review." *Journal of Immigrant Minority Health* 13: 585 - 599.

Mancuso, Lorraine. 2011. "Overcoming Health Literacy Barriers: A Model For Action." *Journal of Cultural Diversity* 18 (2): 60-67.

Macmillan Dictionary

McBrien, J. Lynn. 2005. "Educational Needs and Barriers for Refugee Students in the United States: A Review of the Literature." *Review of Educational Research: American Educational Research Association*. 75 (3): 329-364.

Moosa, Afsal, Jaseem Koorankot and Nigesh K.. 2017. "Solution focused art therapy among refugee children." *Health, Research and Welfare*. 8 (8): 811-816.

Pavlish, Carol Lynn & Sahra Noor & Joan Brandt. 2011. "Somali Immigrant Women and the American Health Care System: Discordant Beliefs, Divergent Expectations, and Silent Worries." *US National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health* 71 (2): 353-361.

Portes, Alejandro and Rubén G. Rumbaut. 2001. *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California USA: University of California Press.

Random House Dictionary

Rosenfeld, Maya. 2002. "Power Structure, Agency, and Family in a Palestinian Refugee Camp." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32 (3): 519-551.

Saechao, Fay and Sally Sharrock and Daryn Reicherter and James D. Livingston and Alexandra Alyward and Jill Whisnant and Cheryl Koopman and Sarita Kohli. 2012. "Stressors and Barriers to Using Mental Health Services Among Diverse Groups of First- Generation Immigrants to the United States." *Community Mental health Journal* 48: 98-106.

Sarre, Rick. 1996. "Refugees: Is It Time for a New International Definition?" *Humanity and Society* 20: 63-70.

Sowa, Michelle. 2012. "Effects of Physical Exercise on Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Meta-Analysis." *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*. March 6 (1): 46-57.

Starr, Paul & Alden E. Roberts. 1982. "Community Structure and Vietnamese Refugee Adaptation: The Significance of Context." *The International Migration Review* 16 (3): 595-618.

Stepick, Alex. 2006. "There is More to Life than a Glass of Water: Immigration in Contemporary United States." *American Anthropologist*. June 108 (2): 392-396.

UN Refugee Agency <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/us-refugee-resettlement-facts.html>

Walker, Gordon J., Jinyang Deng and Rodney B. Dieser. 2001. "Ethnicity, Acculturation, Self-Constual, and Motivations for Outdoor Recreation." *American Anthropologist*. Oct 23 (1) : 263-283.

Weber, Max. 1922, 1978. *Economy and Society*. California, USA: University of California Press.

Weine, Stevan Merrill. 2011. "Developing Preventive Mental Health Interventions for Refugee Families in Resettlement." *Family Process Journal* 50 (3) :410 -430.

Wood, Jennifer & K. Bruce Newbold. 2011. "Provider Perspectives on Barriers and Strategies for Achieving Culturally Sensitive Mental Health Services for Immigrants: A Hamilton, Ontario Case Study." *Migration & Integration* 13 (1): 383-397.