
REFLECTIONS ON EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PORTAL (STUDENT PORTAL)

Community Mapping with Resettled Refugees: Reflections on Embeddedness

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Place is at the center of forced displacement and migration. For community researchers and practitioners, this spatial marginality is a site for a response. Participatory, community-based mapping can be one such modality or tool. This study is such a project that sought to understand city-level factors that characterize resettlement geography of refugees in the United States, with the Bhutanese refugee community as a case study and community partner. Reflections center around ‘embeddedness’ as fundamental to the research process, not only procedurally—for connecting and engaging with communities to implement the study, but also substantively—for informing research questions and having a sense of what is possible to begin with.

Keywords: refugee; participatory mapping; resettlement; forced migration; Bhutanese refugees

Introduction

“Place” is at the center of forced *displacement*, whereby place denotes not only one’s physical, geographical location, but also the social, cultural, and political dimensions of that location (Turton, 2005). Furthermore, displacement is not only about forcibly leaving one’s place of home and home country, but also about place-making or finding and making a place elsewhere (Jean, 2015; Sampson & Gifford, 2010; Turton, 2005). For displaced people or refugees who eventually relocate via third-country resettlement, place too often also means marginalization. In the United States, the Reception and *Placement* Program of federal resettlement policy “receives and places” refugees mostly in low-income housing (Darrow, 2015), often with intensified racial and economic segregation, concentrated poverty and crime, and poor and/or unhealthy structural conditions. State-sponsored placement and spatial marginality of resettled refugees come with multiple challenges. Yet, refugees’ spatial marginality and place-making are understudied, as refugee studies has focused largely upon *displacement* rather than *emplacement*, and also upon refugees’ integration into the socio-cultural sphere while neglecting the physical environment (Jean, 2015).

For community researchers and practitioners, spatial marginality and emplacement are sites for action (Smith & Miller, 2013; Kemp, 2011). As refugee communities make claims to ‘place’, researchers and practitioners can provide assistance. Participatory mapping with refugees can be one such modality or tool (Franke, 2016; Goopy & Kassan, 2019; Harte et al., 2009, 2011; Lloyd & Wilkinson, 2016; Xu et al., 2015).

This article shares reflections from a community-based participatory mapping project that sought to understand city-level factors that characterize the resettlement geography of refugees across the United States. In this project, the Bhutanese refugee community served as a case study and community partner. I first provide background on participatory community-based mapping of displaced people. Then, the Bhutanese refugee community case study is then presented, along with a discussion of insights and challenges. Finally, drawing upon my own processes of conducting this case study, I make reflections to forward the notion of researchers’ “embeddedness” within refugee communities as the cornerstone for community-based participatory mapping.

Mapping with Marginalized Communities

Place is central to community practice (Smith & Miller, 2013; Kemp, 2011), and cartographic or mapping approaches—and particularly community-based participatory mapping (CPM)—thus present themselves as a promising modality of practice (Harte, 2013; Hillier, 2007; Teixeira, 2018), as posited in this paper. CPM,

including Participatory Geographic Information System (PGIS) mapping, involves community members in conducting mapping or visually representing their environment to understand and examine social problems and processes (Franke, 2016; Harte, 2013; Teixeira, 2018; Smith & Miller, 2013). CPM is unlike conventional modes of cartography or GIS, whereby experts apply top-down, deductive approaches to collect spatial data (Harte, 2013; Hillier, 2007). These conventional applications are descriptive in orientation and are too often driven by the questions and aims of policy and policymakers, which raises questions about power relations and the ethical use of spatial/mapping data in research with communities, particularly communities that are marginalized (Chambers et al., 2004; Harte, 2013; Hillier, 2007; Teixeira, 2018).

In participatory mapping, cartography can be more democratized (Teixeira, 2018), although ethical dilemmas arise and issues of power persist (Smith & Miller, 2013). Bottom-up perspectives on socio-spatiality can reveal new insights to help inform policymaking, social services provision, and urban planning (Chambers et al., 2004). Community-based mapping can also challenge taken-for-granted knowledge, and is thus useful in tackling issues of representation and ontology (Chambers et al., 2004). Further, community-based mapping that uses technology broadens access to computer tools and digital data forms and gaining new insights from community members (Chambers et al., 2004; Teixeira, 2018; Xu et al., 2015). Moreover, because visual representations like maps can be effective for conveying ideas to stakeholders and the public and persuading them, it thus follows that outfitting communities with the means and the tools for such visual representation can help them generate their own powers of persuasion and meaning-making (Xu et al., 2015).

Community-based mapping can be particularly useful for accessing the perspectives of those who are marginalized and for reaching communities considered hard to reach (Chambers et al., 2004). For example, scholars of community practice have used GIS and community-based mapping to gain the perspectives of residents to inform community change initiatives (Coulton et al., 2011); of Latinx in non-traditional destination areas to learn about their healthcare experiences (Jacquez et al., 2015); and of indigenous communities to support their ancestral claims to land by using mapping of boundaries and features of geographical territory and also to help recognize environmental degradation (Chambers et al., 2004). PGIS is particularly valuable for contexts about which there is lack of data, especially when the perspectives of community members and resource users are crucial in informing policy or provision of services and assistance.

Participatory Mapping with Refugees

Specifically, in practice and research with refugees and other forcibly displaced migrants, community-based participatory mapping yield relevance. In a research study of African refugee communities in Australia, Harte and colleagues compared official census data with community-based census data to illustrate an undercount of African refugees in official city-level data (Harte, 2013; Harte et al., 2009, 2011). Harte's study is used as a methodological starting point for the present study and is discussed in detail below.

In another research project in in Calgary, Canada, mapping was combined with photovoice and arts-based methods to document refugees' 'healthscapes,' the landscape or geographic layout of factors related to health and wellbeing, (Goopy & Kassan, 2019). The researchers used a visually compelling presentation to illustrate the city of Calgary and its points of access to health with a level clarity that would otherwise be inaccessible. Similarly, Lloyd and Wilkinson (2016) used photovoice and interviews to map "everyday spaces" of refugee youth in Sweden, specifying their landscape of learning and access to information and support. PGIS has also seen application in refugee camps, specifically in building more sustainable living environments (Xu et al., 2015). Particularly in crisis or transition situations, such as camps in Syria and Jordan (Xu et al., 2015), PGIS can not only yield information for camp managers and organizations handling logistical coordination, but can also increase refugees' awareness and familiarity of the camp and their place in it, thus facilitating negotiations and communication with service providers.

Finally, with aims of politically empowering forcibly displaced persons, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has also turned to PGIS in humanitarian work, to involve displaced persons in producing knowledge about territorial conditions (Franke, 2016). In Franke's (2016) analysis regarding global efforts to address displacement of the United Nations, PGIS presents a forward-looking tool for humanitarianism that, with critical and thoughtful application, can address the geopolitical aspects of forcible displacement and empower people who have been forcibly displaced.

Case Study

To examine processes of community-based mapping with resettled refugees, this study looks at a case study of Bhutanese refugees resettled across the United States. Upon arrival, all resettled refugees, including Bhu-

tanese refugees, are placed into cities of “primary placement” as a process of the Reception and Placement Program (R&P Program) of the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement (Ott, 2011). To avoid overconcentration in certain cities, the R&P Program uses a strategy of dispersion, whereby refugees are resettled in hundreds of cities across the country; however, this process lacks a systematic way of accounting for family and community ties, personal and family characteristics and preferences, or local context of reception (U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2012). What determines refugee placement is the capacity of local resettlement agencies to receive and assist refugees (U.S. GAO, 2012). Case managers in the R&P Program are tasked with assisting refugees upon arrival and in the earliest transitions, helping them meet basic needs, secure housing (Darrow, 2015), and find jobs (Gonzalez Benson & Taccolini, 2019). Refugees have no say in placement; federal placement officers decide the state and city of the refugees’ placement, and case workers decide the apartment in which each refugee family or individual will reside (Bansak et al., 2018).

After initial placement, refugees often relocate. Studies show that refugees relocate to be closer to a co-ethnic community, for better work and education opportunities, and to be reunited with family (U.S. GAO, 2012). Relocation from a primary placement city to a secondary state or city is termed “secondary migration” and is something that refugees have historically done (Brick et al., 2010; Ott, 2011). However, secondary migration disarrays the dispersion strategy of federal policy, causes fiscal and administrative problems between federal governments and subnational governments, and raises issues about access to services in cities of secondary migration (Ott, 2011).

Despite the problematizing of refugees’ secondary migration in the policy and practice domains, not a lot is known about it (Ott, 2011; U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2010). Migration and movement are dynamic and difficult to anticipate, track, and measure, particularly for small populations of refugees. Nevertheless, for all the policy and practice “problems” and challenges generated, refugees’ movement evokes rights of self-determination and place-making. Foregoing federally mandated “placement,” refugees move as they search for community and meaning in *place*.

Bhutanese Refugees

Bhutanese refugees are Hindu refugees who were victims of ethno-religious persecution in their home country of Bhutan, a majority Buddhist nation (Rizal, 2004). More than 100,000 people fled violence perpetrated by the Bhutanese government, which revoked citizenship; enforced a ban on Hindu language, education, and culture; and threatened, raided, and tortured Hindu people (Rizal, 2004). The exiled Hindu Bhutanese population resided in seven refugee camps for 20 years. Resettlement to host countries globally started in 2008, and came to a close around 2016.

Upon resettlement, Bhutanese refugees have encountered numerous challenges. Bhutanese refugees experience racism, discrimination, lack of intercultural contact upon resettlement (Dandy & Pe-Pua, 2015), and difficulties integrating within the sociocultural domain (Benson et al, 2012) and into job markets in the United States (Gonzalez Benson & Taccolini, 2019). A highly studied issue is the exceptionally high rate of suicide among Bhutanese refugees in the United States: 20 for every 100,000 people, which is almost double the suicide rate of the U.S. population (Hagaman et al., 2016). Studies attribute suicidality and other mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, to several factors, including disappointment with current employment, unemployment and being unable to provide for the family, lack of resettlement services, and frustrations with separation from family (Hagaman et al., 2016).

Bhutanese refugee communities are an appropriate case of study for several reasons. First, they have strong social networks. Bhutanese refugees lived in refugee camps for over two decades, during which time the community developed strong connections as a result of camp management, which included administering food and other resources, operating schools, and maintaining other forms of administration (Muggah, 2005). These social links were retained upon resettlement. In fact, Bhutanese refugees have started organizations, termed Refugee Community Organizations (RCOs), in cities around the country, illustrating a high degree of organizational capacity and network strength (Gonzalez Benson, 2020). These RCOs are organized and run by several key volunteers and leaders, many of whom have higher education, English language skills, and work experience in their home country and during exile; these volunteers and leaders are the same individuals who helped with refugee camp management (Gonzalez Benson & Yoshihama, 2019).

Second, the temporal aspect of Bhutanese refugees’ resettlement is salient. Forced migration is commonly a continual and prolonged process, as migrants are pushed out over several years. In the case of Bhutanese refugees, however, forced migration was relatively short in duration (around three years for Bhutanese refugees compared to decades for other refugee groups), and there was a limited population

count. Consequently, the Bhutanese case provides a rare example when complete resettlement occurred within a relatively specific timeframe: Bhutanese refugees resettlement was completed in about eight years, compared to decades-long resettlement for most other refugee groups.

Process

Data collection for this case study drew from the “community knowledge mapping” methodology developed by Australian geographer Wendy Harte (Harte, 2013; Harte et al., 2009, 2011). Harte conducted a community-based census to understand the settlement patterns of African refugees in Queensland, Australia. To collect the community-based census data, Harte conducted focus groups with leaders and key members of various African communities (Somali, Ugandan, etc.) in Queensland. Based on extensive community engagement and deliberations, focus group participants developed a “community knowledge map” that delineated the boundaries of specific African refugees. Harte then compared this map to a map created from the official census, revealing an undercount.

The method discussed in this paper is an application of Harte’s community-based approach, extending it to a nationwide scale. Conducting the community mapping nationally entailed working at various scales or geographical levels. The first step was to break down the national scope: I used my connections to identify six Bhutanese refugee leaders and designated them as “regional collaborators” at the regional level. The six collaborators were assigned to a region, West, Midwest, South, and Northeast, with two collaborators to the latter two regions due to size of regions. Having worked with Bhutanese refugee communities for over a decade, I was able to establish trust and gain support and partnerships from these collaborators.

In the second step to break down each region to state levels, each regional collaborator was tasked with identifying one “state-level informant” for each state in his region. Each state-level informant was provided a list of “primary cities of arrival” between 2008 and 2015, retrieved from the U.S. Department of State. For the third step, each state-level informant was then instructed to spend two weeks communicating, by phone or in person, with community members in those cities and towns within their respective states to gain a better sense of the number of people in each city. Collaborators then collected from each informant an estimated number of Bhutanese refugees in each city. The community collaborators then compiled the estimated population counts for all cities in every state in their assigned region.

The fourth step entailed triangulation, or drawing from multiple sources, and respondent validation, in order to enhance reliability (Maxwell, 2005). For each city that had a population estimate greater than 2,000 people, a second or third estimate was gained from a different informant; these variable estimates were then averaged. Also, four focus groups were conducted to gain qualitative information and consensus, particularly about cities with greater concentrations of Bhutanese refugees. Data were then analyzed for relevant characteristics of Bhutanese refugees’ cities of in-migration.

Challenges and Limitations

Community-based mapping at a national scale revealed challenges and limitations, particularly in terms of data collection. Some informants knew exactly how many families were in each city. What was more challenging, however, was gaining estimates for larger populations. Due to the difficulty of estimating large populations, several informants expressed being unsure about their estimates, particularly about big cities.

Another challenge was the tendency, in community-based mapping, for refugee informants to over-estimate population counts (Harte et al., 2009, 2011), and such was the case for this project. Some informants, who are also community leaders, may have been motivated to overestimate because resources and funding are informed by the level of need in specific areas. That is, where there are more people, there is more need for resources, and so if more people were reported, there may be more funding for informants’ organizations. However, over-estimation may be relative to actual population size. Furthermore, this possibility was mitigated using strategies of triangulation to facilitate reliability.

Reflections: Community Embeddedness

In this reflection, the notion of “community embeddedness” is introduced as a concept that is integral to participatory mapping with refugees. Becoming embedded in the community was a necessary part to conducting my research. I first use my case study to reflect on *applying* embeddedness; I then draw from those reflections to initiate *theorizing* embeddedness. Next, I describe how embeddedness then gave way to innovation with two other elements—technologies and modalities of communication, and social networks— that are necessary for advancing the research.

Embedding in Community

Applying community embeddedness. In this case study, my 'embeddedness' was not sought out; rather, community embeddedness was emergent. The engagement started with me working with the Bhutanese community for about a year as an intern for a resettlement agency over a decade ago. My work went beyond casework with the agency and was more along the lines of community practice, as I learned about the community's organizations that were run by and for refugees. I got to know several leaders and community members through a research project and a refugee leadership training program that I helped to initiate and organize together with the community. Those projects constituted not work, but involvement. I shared many cups of chai with refugee leaders as they talked about and organized the programs, and conversations that ranged from philosophy and Walmart to U.S. politics and Bhutanese exile. I continued to work and engage with the community for the next five years, attending events, consulting with their organizations, and having long walks and conversations with leaders. In these conversations, I exchanged and discussed ideas with leaders, instead of just receiving or gaining ideas. I was not there to become embedded in order to do research; one day, I just realized that I felt embedded.

Participatory mapping with refugee communities—a population that is considered hard to reach—came forth and then developed out of discussions and interactions with community members going back five years prior to beginning this study. Over the subsequent five years, it continued to be suggested by various people in different cities and states, confirming relevance as well as scale. Furthermore, when it came time to recruit participants, most of those who were approached agreed because the issue resonated with them.

My embeddedness with communities was a primary element that emerged as important. This embeddedness helped determine not only the feasibility of project implementation, but it also opened up possibilities that may not otherwise have been available.

Theorizing community embeddedness. Embeddedness was central to the research process, not only *procedurally*, to connect with communities in order to implement the study, but also *substantively*, to inform research questions and gain a sense of what was possible. *Embeddedness* in a research context pertains to epistemology, or ways of knowing (Kesby, 2000). When applied to community research, embeddedness can be defined as similar to community engagement, but more holistic and more ethnographic. When researchers embed themselves in communities, their relationships with community members and leaders are deeper and longer-lasting, and the researchers' knowledge of the community is historical and systems-based rather than issue-specific.

Because the issues that refugees face are dynamic, complex, and often not well understood, it is necessary to get the research questions right. Embedding oneself as a researcher with the community is thus a critical early phase for initiating research issues. Communities, including those of refugees, become invested in research only to the extent that the research questions and aims are in line with their community priorities and needs. Trust and meaningful engagement with the community are key in this type of community-based, participatory, and action-oriented research, and these elements take on added salience with refugee communities who are often vulnerable, marginalized, and unfamiliar with research processes. Therefore, these trust-based meaning-centered relationships need to be established at the outset of the research, when the topics of focus are first being identified.

Furthermore, as detailed above through my case study, researchers may gain a different set of procedural options or possibilities for research from being embedded with and knowing the community. The feasibility of data collection methods and recruitment for research that is top-down or researcher-driven is typically assessed by talking with community members. However, as illustrated in my case study, it is embeddedness that can allow for meaningful, generative research questions and innovative research designs to be formulated in the first place and then take shape.

Considering Technology and Modalities of Communications

Embeddedness then led to knowing about technology and modalities of communication in data collection and the research processes. For this project, Facebook Messenger and texting were the primary technologies used to communicate and collect data. In the early stages, email was used to communicate with leaders more formally, but I oftentimes did not receive replies. I then tried Facebook Messenger and texting, and those media garnered responses more often and more quickly than emails. Participating in research requires time and effort from community members, and using tools and media that they already use daily makes participation easier.

Establishing Social Networks

A third element pertains to establishing social networks. Community mapping with refugees simply entails knowing the right people, and this happens only with embeddedness within the community. As researcher, I had done years of work with Bhutanese community leaders, starting with the very first cohorts in 2009. My long-established relationship with a very well-respected community leader translated into not only credibility for the research project but credibility for me personally as a researcher. Social network was crucial: starting with the first informant, state by state and city by city, every community contact was strengthened with each informant who participated.

Closing Discussion

Through community mapping, data were gained regarding secondary migration, about which no official data collection or census has been conducted. Findings reveal Bhutanese refugees' movement away from traditional immigrant gateways, such as Arizona and California, and toward emerging refugee destinations in the midwestern and southern regions of the United States, particularly Ohio and Texas, respectively. By illustrating geographic trends, this case study specifies in-migration locations that may lack services for refugees. English-language training in schools, mental health services, and affordable housing, for example, may be insufficient in some places where refugees have relocated. As such, these data were of interest to those involved in resettlement programming, thus warranting dissemination. The findings were presented three times: (a) to the Director of the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement; (b) in a conference of the State Refugee Resettlement Office of Ohio (where the greatest population of Bhutanese had in-migrated at the time of research), with an audience of about 50 policymakers and service providers; and (c) in a meeting with the Bhutanese community, attended by nearly 40 people representing four midwestern states.

Community-based participatory mapping can help yield "presence" for refugees, who are often marginalized in cities and towns. As researcher, my embeddedness with the community did not only facilitate knowledge about and access to needed communications and social networks that are key in implementing research and practice, but also allowed a perspective from the 'inside' that allows the generation of questions, modalities, and analyses in research that are close to the lived realities of communities on the ground. Community mapping serves to quantify their presence in a given location and pins them down to the "place," making them visible and serving as a "politics of presence" (Darling, 2017). In this way, refugees, migrants, and other displaced people, including undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers, lay claim to space and membership in a *place*.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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