

**“More of the people want to know English”:
Sudanese refugee adults’ participation in ESL programs**

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- K: So, when you write letters to [other Sudanese], do you write in Arabic or in English?*
I: English and Arabic, all.
K: Both of them?
I: We use English more.
K: Oh, really?
I: Because more of the people want to know English, yeah.

For five years, from the spring of 2002 through the summer of 2007, I worked closely with a large community of Sudanese refugees in Michigan. This community included both orphaned youth (the so-called “Lost Boys of Sudan”) as well as intact families. I spent several years studying the language and literacy practices of this community as a researcher, and I also helped the refugees navigate their new context, particularly educational aspects of that context, as a tutor and mentor. Through two separate ethnographic studies (Perry, in press, 2007a, 2007b), I documented these refugees’ struggles and achievements related to language, literacy, and learning. During my time with them, I found that Sudanese refugees not only increasingly took up English language and literacy practices, but they actively sought opportunities to improve their English abilities and to increase their levels of education. As one Sudanese community member, Isbon, noted in the interview excerpt at the beginning of this paper, “More of the people want to know English.” This commonly-expressed attitude among the Sudanese, along with the high levels of engagement I saw in ESL and other educational programs, led me to analyze patterns of educational participation among this community.

Theoretical Framework

I situate this study within a conceptual framework that views language, literacy, and education as practices that are shaped by social, cultural and political contexts. I view learning as a process that is similarly shaped by these contexts. My perspective is shaped by sociocultural stances on the cultural nature of learning and development (Rogoff, 2003, Vygotsky, 1978) and

participation in activities (Wertsch, 1991). Vygotsky, for example, emphasized the “sociocultural situatedness” (Wertsch, 1991, p. 19) of human learning and development. This perspective, then, suggests that a focus on history, culture, community, family and other layers of context is essential in understanding the ways in which people engage with and participate in various activities, such as educational opportunities. According to Wertsch (1991), “When action is given analytic priority, human beings are viewed as coming into contact with, and creating, their surroundings as well as themselves through the actions in which they engage.”

Recent research into adult participation in literacy, ESL, and other educational opportunities uses sociocultural frameworks to illustrate the various ways in which adult learners engage with (or reject) such educational programs. Various ethnographic studies have documented the many ways in which people use language(s) and literac(ies) in their lives, as well as the reasons they do and do not seek out educational opportunities (e.g., Barton, Ivanič, Appleby, Hodge & Tusting, 2007; Fingeret & Drennon, 1997; Purcell-Gates, Jacobson & Degener, 2004). From their work with adult learners, Fingeret and Drennon (1997) concluded that adults come to educational programs “as actors rather than as passive receivers of services” (p. 87). Studies in both the U.S. and Great Britain similarly have shown that adults’ decisions about participation and engagement in learning opportunities were shaped by their histories, their current situations, and the possibilities they saw for themselves (Barton, Ivanič, Appleby, Hodge & Tusting, 2007; Purcell-Gates, Jacobson & Degener, 2004). The British study, conducted by researchers at the Lancaster Literacy Research Centre (Barton et al, 2007), included many refugees as participants and found that refugees often differed greatly than other learners who sought basic adult education:

This group have, on the whole, higher levels of confidence in educational settings, having had, in many cases, positive experiences of education in their home countries. Compared

with other learners, people in this group are often experiencing downward mobility. Many are well qualified or have high academic potential, yet even ‘fast tracking’ will not lead to jobs of the financial and social status they had or could expect in the countries they came from.

These researchers also found that key moments of transition in life often sparked participants to seek new educational opportunities.

My own work with Sudanese refugees in Michigan has revealed similar themes. Their resettlement in the U.S. represented a major life transition. Living in a new land, immersed in a new culture, surrounded by a new language, these refugees sought opportunities to learn English (or improve already existing abilities), to increase their levels of education, and/or to obtain U.S. credentials in order to continue a prior profession. Yet, the same contextual factors that motivated them to seek these opportunities also offered constraints, sometimes significant ones, to educational participation. In this analysis, the following research questions guided my exploration of adult refugee participation in education in the U.S.:

- 1) How do Sudanese refugees’ patterns of participation in ESL and other educational programs reflect their beliefs about learning to speak, read, and write English?
- 2) What constraints and affordances shape their participation in these programs?

Methodology

Data for this analysis come from two separate studies of literacy practices among Sudanese refugees; I conducted the first study among a community of orphaned refugee youth, or “Lost Boys of Sudan.” I studied intact refugee families with young children in the second study. For both studies, I used an ethnographic research design, relying upon ethnographic methods to collect and analyze data.

Participants

To locate appropriate participants for both studies, I used representative sampling through reputational case selection (Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte, 1999). Criteria for participation in the first study included being an orphaned youth who attended an institution of higher education. Because I was interested in literacy practices and schooling for the refugees in the U.S., it was important for me to select participants who were currently experiencing formal schooling. By the time I began my research, few of the orphaned youth were still enrolled in high school; most had already graduated. I therefore limited participation to those who were enrolled in postsecondary schooling in order to study a community of youth who were bounded by similar characteristics and experiences (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

For the family study, I purposefully selected families that represented different levels of formal schooling completed, from primary school to professional degrees, in order to challenge stereotypes that African refugees are mostly uneducated. I also sought families with young children in kindergarten or first grade. Another criterion for participation was that at least one adult in each family should speak English well enough to be able to communicate with me to a reasonable degree. In actuality, all of the participants spoke English, although their levels of fluency varied. Table 1 presents a comparison of the participants in this study, the levels of education attained in Africa, their participation in ESL and other educational programs in the U.S., and the work they performed in Michigan.

Table 1: *Participants' levels of education attained in Africa, participation in educational programs in the U.S., and their occupations in Michigan.*

	PARTICIPANT	EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN AFRICA	EDUCATIONAL PARTICIPATION IN U.S.	U.S. JOB
os t B ov	Chol	Some high school	High school; local private university	Dishwasher at state university

	Ezra	High school diploma	State university	Full-time student
	Francis	High school diploma	Community college	Fast food
Ahlas' Family	Akhlis Kago	7th grade	ESL class offered at workplace	Seamstress
	Amin Abdelhrman	Some high school	ESL course through school district	Dishwasher at hotel
Falabia's Family	Falabia Edward	Nursing degree	Community college (ESL, general ed, & phlebotomy)	Hospital janitor
	Primo Lukuat	High school	Community college (ESL, nursing assistant)	Hospital janitor
Viola's Family	Viola Lupai	Law degree	Community college; applying to law school	Factory line
	Isbon Domoulouka	Some college	None	Hospital janitor

I begin by describing the three orphaned youth who participated in the first study and then describe the adults from the family study. The study of orphaned youth was conducted as part of the larger Cultural Practices of Literacy Study, which required that participants' identities be masked. Thus, names for these young men are pseudonyms. However, I strongly believe that participants must have the opportunity to decide how they will be represented in research publications. Thus, I allowed participants in the family study to choose whether to use their real names or to remain anonymous in written representations of this study. All family participants insisted that I use their real names. Due to the complexities of last names in Sudanese families, in which husbands, wives, and children all may have different last names, I refer to each family by the mother's first name.

Chol. At the time of the study, Chol was approximately 19 years old. He is a member of the Dinka tribe, the largest African tribe in the Sudan. Chol graduated from a Michigan high school in 2002 and then attended a local private university, where he majored in business administration. Although still a young man, Chol gained a great deal of respect in the Sudanese refugee community. He was often asked to organize community events, and the community elected him to serve as a representative on the Sudanese refugees' local governing board. This committee represented the community, mediated disputes, and organized community events.

Ezra. Approximately 26 during this study, and also from the Dinka tribe, Ezra attended a state university, where he majored in linguistics and public policy. At the same time, he took courses at the local community college. Ezra was deeply religious, and he sometimes served as a pastor in a local Christian church, occasionally performing services in the Dinka language. In the Kakuma Refugee Camp, Ezra had trained as a Bible translator, and he worked with a team to translate parts of the Old Testament into Dinka. He also taught in the primary schools in the camp, where he was part of a team that wrote the first primary school textbooks in Dinka. Ezra also successfully wrote a grant proposal to fund a library at his church in Kakuma.

Francis. Francis, 19 or 20 at the time of the study, was from the Madi tribe, the smallest tribe in the Sudan, unlike most of the Lost Boys in Michigan, who are Dinka. He attended the local community college, where he majored in pharmacy. Francis explained that he really enjoyed his science classes, but that he also took auto mechanics courses because he wanted to keep his job options open. Like many of the Sudanese refugees, Francis worked at a variety of jobs in order to pay for college and for his car. He worked at McDonald's and at an auto dealership.

Akhlis. Akhlis Kago and her family came from the Nuba Mountains region of central Sudan. However, Akhlis grew up mainly in Khartoum, where her parents were employed. Her father had gone to school and worked as a tailor in Khartoum. Her mother had no formal schooling. Akhlis attended school through the seventh grade, where she consistently performed at the top of her class. Unfortunately, she was unable to continue because her parents could not afford the school fees. In Michigan, Akhlis worked as a seamstress at a local company that employed many refugees. Her company, Peckham Industries, was a non-profit organization that provided job training and employment for refugees, developmentally delayed adults, and ex-convicts (Peckham, 2007). Peckham also offered other educational opportunities, such as the ESL classes that Akhlis gave up

her lunch time in order to attend. By the end of the study, Akhlas' ESL teacher asked her to be a peer tutor for others learning English, since her abilities were so advanced.

Amin. Akhlas' husband, Amin Abdelhrman, grew up in the Nuba Mountains, where he cared for his family's cattle as a herder. He attended school through one or two years of high school. Amin worked as a part-time dishwasher at a local hotel. Like many refugees, Amin's work schedule made attending ESL classes challenging. Nevertheless, he enrolled in ESL courses through a local adult education program during the study, with the intent of ultimately obtaining a GED diploma. Akhlas and Amin had two young children during the time of the study; a girl, Remaz, a 5-year-old kindergartner, and a three-year-old boy, Remon, a preschooler who attended Head Start.

Falabia. Falabia Edward came from the Equatoria region of Southern Sudan, but she spent most of her childhood in Khartoum, where her father was an officer in the Sudanese military. Her mother had not been to school at all. Following high school, Falabia earned a nursing degree. She worked for a time in a hospital in Khartoum and was hired by an international aid organization to work as a nurse at a feeding center for malnourished children. Falabia also worked in housekeeping at the hospital. She earned a scholarship to attend Davenport University, and she also took classes at the community college, hoping to earn U.S. nursing credentials. Falabia completed certification as a nurse's assistant, and, as part of her quest to practice nursing in the U.S., she also became certified as a phlebotomist.

Primo. Primo Lukuat, Falabia's husband, completed high school in Sudan, but did not have the opportunity to go further. He managed a shop in Khartoum for an Egyptian company. In Michigan, Primo worked as a janitor in a local hospital, and he enrolled in courses at the local community college. Both Falabia and Primo had completed the sequence of ESL courses at the local community college. This permitted them to take other coursework, which they pursued. Like Falabia,

Primo completed the nurse's assistant training. Falabia and Primo had five children of their own, and they also cared for Falabia's teenaged niece and nephew, whose parents had died in Sudan. These children ranged in age from 4 to 16 years old.

Viola. Viola Lupai grew up in a highly-educated southern Sudanese family. Her father served as the Minister of Justice in the Sudan, and her mother worked as a legal secretary in her father's law practice. Viola attended private schools in Khartoum, Sudan's capital, and she eventually earned a full scholarship to attend university in Egypt, where she studied law. For most of the study, Viola was a homemaker who cared for her four boys: Boni, six years old during the majority of the study; Samuel, five; Medo, three; and Anthony, an infant. She planned to apply to law school in Michigan, so that she could continue to practice her profession in this country.

Isbon. Viola's husband, Isbon Domoulouka, also came from a professional family. His father had studied forestry and worked as a guide with tourists who came to the Sudan on safari. His mother worked as a nurse-midwife and also taught nursing students. Isbon completed high school, as well as some business school. However, he put his own education on hold to help Viola complete her university education, after her scholarship was withdrawn as a result of political tensions between Egypt and the Sudan. Isbon worked in janitorial services at one of the local hospitals. Unlike other adults in the study, Isbon had studied some English at school in Sudan. However, he admitted that English was not his best subject and that he frequently skipped the class, as he did not see the point in learning English: "I go outside [skip class], because it's hard. When I come back, my father say, 'Why you didn't know English?' I said, 'If I know English, I'm gonna speak to who?'" Isbon had not been able to enroll in ESL courses in Michigan, due to the long work hours that were necessary to support the family, but he hoped to take them in the future so that he could earn a college degree from a U.S. institution.

Data Collection

Data collection for both studies relied upon participant observation, interviews, and collection of artifacts. Data collection for the Lost Boys study occurred over approximately seven months, from April to October 2003. Data collection for the family study occurred over 18 months, from February 2005 to July 2006. Observations and participation occurred in a variety of settings, including homes and community contexts. I wrote field notes in each setting, which documented participants' lives and the contexts in which they lived. Field notes included observations as well as word-for-word and paraphrased transcriptions of conversations that occurred.

I also conducted a variety of interviews with participants. All interviews occurred in English. I tape recorded and transcribed all interviews. Some interviews were open-ended, recording general oral histories of participants' lives in Africa, their experiences as refugees, and aspects of Sudanese culture. Other interviews were semi-structured, eliciting specific information regarding literacy and educational practices.

Finally, I collected and/or made copies of textual artifacts that were available to the refugees in a variety of contexts. Many of these artifacts contextualized participants' educational experiences. I also collected examples of texts created by participants, such as essays or application documents.

Data Analysis

For this particular analysis, I relied upon data from both field notes and interviews. In both sets of data, I located passages in field notes or sections of transcripts that dealt with participants' educational experiences, both in the U.S. and in Sudan. I looked for patterns related to who participated in various types of educational programs. I then read through these excerpts several times in order to identify themes, including *motivations*, *prior experiences*, *constraints*, and *affordances*. I was able to further divide these themes into sub-themes. For example, the theme of

motivations could be divided into sub-themes of *English as a lingua franca*, *obtaining U.S. citizenship*, *furthering education/career*, and *duty to those left behind*. In finding that similar sub-themes appeared in both categories of *affordances* and *constraints*, I was able to rearrange these themes as tensions within various life domains, such as *work* and *family*. Finally, writing always represents one level of ethnographic analysis (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). As I began to write this paper, I continued to revisit the data and refine the findings.

Researcher's Role in the Community and the Studies

Acknowledging the researcher's role in the community is essential in any ethnographic study. My interest in Lansing's Sudanese community began after I returned from living in Lesotho, Africa for two years, where I served in the U.S. Peace Corps. When I came to Michigan following this experience, I sought ways to stay connected with African communities. I began volunteering as a tutor with local orphaned Sudanese refugee youth. This work led to research study with these youth, and it also helped me become involved with the Sudanese community in other ways. I held a variety of roles within Lansing's Sudanese community for over five years, including: tutor, mentor/culture broker, unofficial social worker, community board member, babysitter, bail bondswoman and researcher. As a result of my initial tutoring work, I was invited to join the board of the Southern Sudan Rescue and Relief Association (SSRRA), a small non-profit organization comprised of both Sudanese and U.S. members. After two and a half years of work with this community, I began my study of the families. During both studies, I acted as a cultural broker and community mentor for many refugees, who often called upon me to help them with transportation to appointments, filling out job applications, or financial advice. I also provided homework help and supplemental tutoring for all participants in these studies, as well as for their children. In return, participants often invited me to participate in community events, such as graduation parties,

weddings and funerals, and Sudanese holiday celebrations. These multiple roles, therefore, provided me with legitimate access to both in-school and out-of-school literacy practices in the Sudanese community.

Findings

Results from this analysis indicate interesting patterns of participation in ESL and other educational opportunities among the Sudanese refugees in Michigan. These patterns of participation were influenced by participants' beliefs, values and attitudes as well as their prior experiences with formal schooling in Africa.¹ Participants' motivations for pursuing ESL and other educational programs included 1) a sense of duty to their families and to those left behind in Sudan, 2) a desire to attain U.S. citizenship, 3) the possibility of participating in higher education and/or better job opportunities, and 4) being able to communicate with others through a *lingua franca*. Various areas of tension, including work, family, community, and material resources, also shaped educational participation among the Sudanese. These areas of tension included both affordances and constraints to participation in ESL and other educational programs.

ESL and Other Educational Participation

Participants across both studies displayed high levels of participation in ESL classes and other types of educational programs. Among the orphaned youth, all three young men had completed high school degrees and were pursuing higher education. Chol was pursuing a degree in business at Davenport University, a local private university; Francis was enrolled in a program at Lansing Community College, and Ezra had taken coursework at the community college and was enrolled in a program at the state university. In addition, he planned to immediately pursue a

¹ Typically, I bristle when people use the term *Africa* in generic ways to refer to a country with a rich diversity of countries, ethnicities, cultures, etc. However, because participants' lives prior to coming to the U.S. included sojourns in a variety of African countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya and Egypt, along with time in their native country of Sudan, I use the general term *Africa* to refer to these collective experiences.

graduate degree once his undergraduate degree was completed. These young men, however, represented a subset of the orphaned youth in Lansing; not all of the youth were as engaged in higher education. Ezra, Chol, Francis, and many of their friends believed strongly in obtaining a good education, as I will describe in later sections, but other young men in the community believed it was important to be employed so that they could send money back to Africa.

The intact families exhibited similar levels of engagement with educational opportunities. One interesting finding was that the mothers in these families were more consistently and more deeply involved with education than were the fathers. All of the parents had participated in ESL or other educational programs at some point, although not necessarily during the time of the study. Isbon, for example, had taken ESL courses at the community college before my study began, but he was not enrolled during my fieldwork. Amin enrolled in an ESL program toward the end of my fieldwork for that study, but was not enrolled during the majority of data collection. Of the fathers, only Primo was consistently enrolled in coursework; he was pursuing a degree at the community college. In contrast, all of the mothers were involved with educational programs. Akhlas regularly gave up her lunch hour to take part in an ESL class offered at her workplace; Viola took various courses, including ESL, at the community college; and Falabia was working toward degrees in the field of health care.

These patterns of participation reflected participants' previous experiences with formal education; their beliefs, values, and attitudes about education; their personal and professional goals; and various affordances and constraints in their lives. Thus, participation appeared to be shaped by a variety of levels of context.

Motivations for Participating in Educational Opportunities

Findings from this analysis indicate that participants were motivated by a variety of beliefs, values and personal goals. These motivations included a strong sense of duty to family and to those left behind in Sudan, dreams for a better career and/or the opportunity to pursue higher levels of education, the desire to obtain U.S. citizenship, and wanting to be able to better communicate with others.

Duty to family and community. Throughout my observations and interviews across both studies, it was clear to me that the Sudanese community highly valued education and believed that it was important to them as individuals, as families, and as a Sudanese community. They viewed learning English and obtaining a good education as both a pathway to individual/family success as well as a patriotic community obligation toward building a “new Sudan.” These feelings existed across the Sudanese community, and I frequently heard community leaders, both among the youth and among the wider Sudanese community, extol the virtues of education. At Ezra’s graduation ceremony, Isbon urged the U.S. to bring more Sudanese to this country so that they could get a good education. According to Isbon, “being here is another part of the war [against the oppressive Sudanese government],” because it is hard to fight a war without education. He added that Sudanese people must earn a U.S. education so that they can go back to the Sudan and help to rebuild their country.

This sense of education as patriotic appeared to be particularly strong among the orphaned youth. Chol, for example, frequently expressed his desire to return to southern Sudan to help develop the region. His close friend, Ajak, confided to me that he wanted to become a math teacher so that he could go back to the Sudan to teach at a high school or university there. Sudanese community leaders also frequently exhorted the youth to remember their duty to country. At a

Sudanese symposium held at Michigan State University, for example, young man pressed for educational support for the orphaned youth:

We have been struggling, because we don't want to be known as Lost Boys later on. We want to do school, so that we can't be called Lost. Every time we talk on the phone, we are always talking about the difficulties of going to school. We need to consider the Lost Boys, so they can go back and help. We need education first in America, so we can go back and help our brothers.

This sentiment also existed among the families in the Sudanese community. Isbon, who was recognized as a leader in the community, spoke with me about his beliefs. Like the orphaned youth, he connected education with a duty to community and country:

You can help the society with the right things. When you're not educated, you don't know writing and reading, you cannot help the society with the good ideas...When there is not educated [people], no somebody can take care about other people...because educated [people] want to cooperate [with] the people in one society.

Like many of the orphaned youth, Akhlas, too, dreamed of returning to the Sudan to rebuild her region. In an interview, she told me:

You know, I wish my thing, the thing that I keep it in my mind, the thing I want to do when I'm learning very good, I want to be a nurse. I will go to Nuba Mountains just to help the people...I say, "When God help me, I will go." One day I will.

While the Sudanese participants in both studies clearly connected education with the opportunity to create a better Sudan, they also valued education for what it offered themselves and their children. In fact, educational opportunities were part of what motivated these refugees to resettle in the U.S., as the orphaned youth's testimony suggests. Falabia similarly explained, "We

came out [of Sudan] because we need a good future for our kids, to have a better education, because with the war, they can't...study, cannot learn anything, because they gonna be afraid." Viola echoed this desire for a better education for her children, and she emphasized the importance of learning English:

It's not easy for new refugees here to be like American people. They struggle in many ways...We want [our kids] to be like American kids in everything. We don't want them to be like us, to take English as a second language.

Desire to obtain U.S. citizenship. All of the Sudanese participants in both studies hoped to eventually obtain U.S. citizenship. Participants understood that being able to speak, read and write English was an essential requirement for citizenship in this country. Francis, for example, mentioned citizenship as a motivation for some of his literacy practices: "I guess maybe citizenship may require one to read some of the stuff, and they require you to be at least literate." In addition to participants' stated beliefs during interviews, I observed many conversations in the Sudanese community that turned to the topic of citizenship and English. "I'm happy because most of the Sudanese get citizenship," Viola commented one day. She also noted, however, that obtaining citizenship was going to be much harder in the future, as the government was in the process of changing the process and the test that applicants had to pass; Viola believed that these changes were being put in place to ensure that applicants spoke English well enough to be citizens.

The first time I met Falabia, she informed me that she and her family planned to apply for citizenship as soon as they could. That same day, she and Viola discussed the citizenship process and the types of questions asked during the interview. Both women clearly thought the purpose of the interview was to assess English; they felt that the interviewer was more interested in whether applicants could read and write English than whether they knew the answers to the questions. In

fact, Falabia did apply for U.S. citizenship, and she was sworn in as a citizen in June, 2006. Her children also received citizenship at the same time, although her husband, Primo, had to wait additional time because of something on his record. Falabia also hoped that her elderly mother, who lived in Lansing but who could not speak English, could become a citizen, although she worried that this would be impossible, due to the language requirement. Sudanese community members clearly felt that enrolling in ESL courses, and taking advantage of other opportunities to learn English, was a wise investment on the path to citizenship.

Ability to advance career or qualify for higher education. Another important motivation, also related to the prospects of a better life, was the Sudanese participants' belief that participating in ESL classes and other educational programs provided them with the possibility of finding a better job or being able to enroll in higher educational programs. Economic considerations were a clear motivation, as one speaker at Ezra's graduation ceremony noted: "If we go to school, we won't have to work for \$7 an hour." However, participants also held the belief that education and English proficiency would improve their lives. For example, although Isbon was not currently enrolled in any programs, he hoped to eventually take some English courses: "I want to change my life," he explained. As stated above, many of the orphaned youths' beliefs also echoed this hope for a better future.

Often, the goals of attaining higher levels of education and getting a better job were entwined. Falabia and Viola, for example, hoped to earn professional degrees in the U.S., which would allow them to practice the professions they had trained for in Africa. Viola explained that her goals were to earn a U.S. degree and to have competence in English, to be able to speak it as well as she spoke Arabic. Completing ESL courses typically was a first step in any educational process for refugees in Michigan, as the GED center, the community college, and the state university required

proof of English ability to enroll in their programs. Amin, for example, hoped to earn a GED so that he could get a better-paying job than the one he had washing dishes at a local hotel. Before he could enter the GED program, however, he needed to improve his English.

Being able to resume professional careers that had been left behind in Africa also motivated some of the Sudanese adults to seek English courses and higher educational opportunities. Viola hoped eventually to enroll in the state university's law program; she had earned a law degree in Egypt and hoped to be able to enter that profession in this country. Her academic English was not strong enough for this program, however, and she sought opportunities to improve it. In a similar vein, Falabia had earned a nursing degree in Sudan and had practiced as a nurse there, but her qualifications did not transfer to the U.S. Her completion of the required ESL sequence at the community college allowed her to enroll in nursing and phlebotomy courses, with the ultimate goal of earning a licensed practical nursing (LPN) degree. "That was my dream," she said, "to study for LPN." Thus, enrolling in ESL courses generally was a first step in pursuing more advanced educational opportunities.

Connecting with others through English. When they arrived in the U.S., the Sudanese refugees found themselves immersed in a world that used English. A certain facility with English was clearly necessary for day-to-day survival, but participants also expressed a desire to connect with Americans in their new context. These refugees developed strong relationships with many Americans (see Perry, in press, for further details). Refugees were sponsored by local churches that provided both individuals and families with mentors, tutors, and other sponsors. While some refugees chose to attend churches that had large refugee congregations, others, like Akhlas and Amin's family, chose to attend the churches that had sponsored them. Many of the orphaned youth

had been taken into foster homes when they first arrived, and they also developed close relationships with social workers, tutors, and others who supported their adjustment to the U.S.

In part, this new English-majority context motivated participants to learn English. In addition to needing English for daily needs, Sudanese community members worked in English-speaking workplaces, they attended churches in which services were conducted entirely or partially in English, and their children attended schools in which English was the medium of instruction. Simply put, life in the U.S. and any hope of connection with the wider community required these refugees to use English. Isbon, for example, owned an Arabic-English dual-language Bible, but he indicated a preference for the English section because it facilitated interaction with Americans. “We need to practice,” he explained, “English is good, because...you can talk with the people about the Bible in English. For here in America, that will be easier.” Akhlas mentioned that English was essential at her job, where she worked alongside people from Mexico, Somali, Sudan, Iraq and many other countries—English, thus, was the common language.

One surprising finding within this theme was that many Sudanese refugees, particularly among the orphaned youth, felt that English was an important *lingua franca* among the Sudanese community itself. The Sudanese community in Lansing, and indeed the global Sudanese community, is comprised of individuals from a variety of ethnic, tribal, and linguistic backgrounds. A variety of local languages, including Dinka, Madi, Latuka, Zandi, and Nuba, were spoken by participants in these studies; no doubt other languages also were represented in Lansing. While many of the adults in the families spoke Arabic, few of the orphaned youth knew this language. As a result, English—not Arabic—was the *lingua franca* among members of the Sudanese community, and it was increasingly used by participants. Francis, for example, indicated that the letters he wrote all were in English because “that is the easiest way of communication nowadays. [Only] some people can write

in my mother tongue [Madi].” Chol, too, indicated that learning English as a *lingua franca* was important, particularly for communicating with other Africans. He listed a variety of eastern African nations which used English as an official language and concluded, “It is better to speak English so that you can communicate with other African people.”

Prior Educational Experiences

Participants’ prior experiences with education before coming to the U.S. also likely helped to shape their patterns of participation in ESL and other educational opportunities. During one conversation, Viola described her perception of the educational differences experienced by refugees who had sojourned in various countries. “Those who come from Egypt,” she explained, “they educated well.” However, she commented that they experienced difficulties when they came to the U.S., and she noted that many people who sojourned in Egypt did not receive the same kind or quality of education as those who had been in Kakuma, which she believed was excellent. Most refugees in Egypt, she explained, were put into adult education classes, where they did not get “enough knowledge.” “That knowledge they had before in Sudan, it’s all gone,” she lamented, and those “who came from Kakuma, they are better than those who came from Egypt.”

Among the families studied, the mothers all participated in education to a greater extent than the fathers, a pattern that reflects their prior educational experiences. In both Viola’s and Falabia’s families, for example, the mothers had achieved higher levels of education than the fathers in Africa, as they had completed post-secondary degrees, while their husbands had not (see Table 1). Women in the community frequently commented that women in Sudan had limited educational opportunities and often were actively discouraged from education. However, all of the mothers in this study, along with many other Sudanese women I knew in the community, had been educated—and some had even earned post-secondary degrees. Viola’s father, for example, had encouraged her to finish

school before getting married. “Your certificate is your husband,” he had said, explaining that having a diploma was better than having a man.

Among the families, Amin was the only husband to achieve a higher level of education than his wife. However, Akhlas reported loving school and being a high achiever:

A: You know, when I am in school, always I *love* school.

K: Oh, really?

A: Yeah! My mom, she’s so happy! She say—uh, my other sister and brother, later on they go to high school—she says, “Always I tell them story about you. I tell them, ‘You must be like Akhlas!’” Yes, because my mom, she said, “You are so smart, girl!” She love me a lot because when I bring homework, every—just hundred. Hundred for hundred [*makes motion of marking a paper*]. I don’t know what you call. Yeah, hundred for hundred.

Thus, Akhlas’ love of school and her prior academic achievement, coupled with the fact that she could not continue due to family financial constraints, likely compelled her to continue her education in the U.S.

All of the orphaned youth in my study similarly had educational experiences that shaped their U.S. educational participation. Most, although not all, of the youth had the opportunity to attend school, depending upon the age at which they entered the Kakuma camp. Schools in the camp were run by the U.N. High Commission for Refugees in order to support the large orphan population, according to Ezra:

Given the fact that these children who are there in Kakuma—especially the Sudanese kids, including myself—lack their parents, and they have lived under the care of the UNHCR for fifteen, fourteen years, and they are by themselves. So, the UN was concerned to educate

these children so that they can become self-sufficient, self-reliant, so that they can take their lives into their own hands.

Ezra, like Akhlas, had excelled in school in refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya, and he attributed his success in the U.S. to that experience:

I was learning rapidly in the Ethiopian camp, so most of the time I was ahead of my classmates, and I remember in Ethiopia, my teacher nicknamed me *kawaja asuoth*....*Kawaja*, I mean, is the White person. It is an Arabic word for “black,” *asuoth*. I was Black, but we consider that Western education is advanced, so when you see a White person, you associate him or her with highly education. So, I was considered to be a “Black Educated”...That’s what I was nicknamed by my English teacher, because I was able to read well, write well, compared to some of my classmates.

Ezra not only completed high school in the Kakuma camp, but he eventually became a teacher himself and also worked with a team to translate the Bible into Dinka, his native language. When he arrived in the U.S., Ezra tested out of the ESL sequence and was able to enter directly into higher education. Other orphaned youth, according to Ezra, had not fared as well:

There are some of my colleagues who graduated with me together, who were my classmates, but now they are still, some of them are still taking remedial classes. Though we came together, and some of them came ahead to America, but they have not yet graduated from college. They have not yet finished their (two year) program.

Many of the orphaned youth, although certainly not all, continued to pursue educational opportunities after they resettled in the U.S. Their studies were not easy, however, and they faced a number of constraints, as I will describe in the next section. However, other adults in the Sudanese community admired these youth for their educational perseverance and often held them up as a

model for non-orphaned Sudanese youth. Viola, for example, often lamented the fact that many Sudanese families did not push their children in education. As we drove in the car together one day, she expressed her belief that the Lost Boys were better off than most of the families in terms of education; they go to college, while most of the children from the families did not.

Affordances and Constraints: Tensions in ESL and Educational Participation

As I have demonstrated in the previous sections, Sudanese adults were highly motivated to participate in ESL courses and to pursue higher education in the U.S. Their participation also appeared to be shaped by their prior experiences with education in Africa: Those who had extensive experience with education continued to seek these opportunities, while those who had limited experiences wanted more. While participants clearly were motivated, their participation also was shaped by outside forces. Family, work, and community situations offered different affordances and constraints, as did access to financial, digital and tutoring resources. These affordances and constraints were visible as tensions in the life domains of these participants, and they helped determine, in large part, how successful participants were at pursuing their educational goals.

Of course, participants also held their own theories related to their participation and achievement. Falabia and Viola, for example, both believed that their ages (36 and 39, respectively) contributed to the challenges of learning English. According to Falabia, “English is hard, though. For me, the first time was challenging. But the kids learn faster. Kids have nothing to do but go to school, eat, and sleep.” Her oldest daughter, Julia, disagreed, however, Julia said that the reason it was easier for the children to learn English was “because older people have too many things on their brains.” Viola, too, attributed some of her difficulties to age, comparing her educational experiences in Egypt with those in the U.S. In Egypt, she had studied alone in a quiet place, often for six to seven hours at a time. In the U.S., she felt like she needed someone to help her study:

I told Isbon, really if someone—if I didn't find someone talk with me about this stuff, I cannot pass. I cannot do anything. He said, "Do you know why? Because you are old."

[*Viola laughed*] I get MAD! "Before you were young, and you can know anything—you smart. But now, you are like—if the teacher said anything in the class, you will forget."

Other refugees attributed their difficulties to English. Many recognized that learning in a second language was difficult. When Falabia showed me her transcript one day, she explained, "The grades are low, but I don't care—I just need my diploma. It's not my language!" Chol, however, felt that English was inherently difficult: "English is very heavy. When you speak it, your mouth becomes very heavy. Arabic is very light...[and] English is a mix of many languages...So, English is very difficult to understand."

Tensions within family. Family could be a source of great support for adults who sought ESL and educational opportunities, yet the need to care for children and to provide financially for the family often placed significant constraints upon these refugees. This tension also was felt by many of the Lost Boys, despite the fact that they were orphaned without family in the U.S. Many, like Chol, had managed to reconnect with family in the Sudan or in Kakuma, and they felt obliged or were under significant pressure to send money back to support family members. This often created a tension between the youths' desire to pursue education (which might ultimately allow them to help family, community, and the new Sudan) and the understandable urge to meet more day-to-day pressing financial needs by working at one job—or several.

Family responsibilities often were a significant constraint to participation in educational opportunities. Akhlas, for example, desperately wanted to do more than just attend ESL classes at work, but she was the primary breadwinner in her family. Not only did Amin work part-time in contrast to Akhlas' full-time job, but Amin also lost his job after being on medical leave for several

weeks, due to serious complications following surgery to treat a gunshot wound he had received in Sudan. In an interview, Akhlas explained that her ESL teacher had said that she was ready to start attending the community college. When I asked if she planned to do that, Akhlas replied, “I want to, but you know, right now, because Amin is not working...when he find a job, I will go.”

The need to care for children also constrained some participants, particularly the mothers. Viola was a homemaker during much of the study, but the need to care for four boys under the age of seven prevented her from engaging more than she would have liked. Falabia, who worked full time and who had five children of her own and a niece and nephew to care for, similarly found that balancing work, family and school could be a challenge. Nevertheless, she had persevered and was taking courses at both the community college and at a local private university. During an interview, she explained that she had recently registered for nursing courses at the community college and also had registered for one course at the local private university she had been attending. However, she faced a dilemma because she would lose her financial aid at the university if she did not take enough credits, but she worried that all of these courses would be too much:

I register [for] three classes, but I'm sure I'm going to drop one. If they allow me at [the private university] to take like one class, I can take it, but they don't [allow that], the financial aid cannot cover. And I don't want to take like two classes. Then, I'm going to fail, because the kids are at home.

Despite these significant challenges, family could provide some affordances for participation in ESL and other educational opportunities. When Viola lost her government scholarship to Ain Shams University in Egypt as the result of political tensions between the Sudan and Egypt, Isbon quit school and found a job at a resort to help pay her tuition so that she could complete her law degree. In the U.S., Isbon continued to work hard to support the family, often working two or more

jobs. He explained, however, that once Viola was able to get a part-time job, he could take some time off work and go back to school himself. Thus, while these parents often found that the need to provide for their families limited their opportunities to pursue an education, it was also true that spouses often supported each others' educational aspirations by working extra jobs or longer shifts. Even when family members could not provide financial or practical support, they offered encouragement. Akhlah reported that her mother had urged her to return to school: "She say, 'My daughter, I am not learning, but you are *so* smart! You must go back to school!' My mom, she *always* tell me that."

Children in these families also supported their parents' educational pursuits. In many African cultures, children are expected to take on great responsibility at a young age (Rogoff, 2003). Even young children are expected to help with cooking, housecleaning, and care of younger siblings. I frequently observed the children in these families taking on such roles. This was particularly common in Falabia's family, as she had teenagers in the family. Falabia's niece, Golda, cooked many of the family meals, while Julia took great pride in cleaning and tidying the home. Falabia's nephew, Chris, was particularly good with the younger children, and it was to Chris that Falabia frequently turned for support with child care. Thus, while Falabia's seven children certainly presented challenges to her educational aspirations, the responsibilities undertaken by the oldest children without a doubt helped to free her time for attending class and studying. Children also supported their parents in another important way, by brokering their English language and literacy development (see Perry, 2007 for a fuller discussion). Akhlah's young daughter, Remaz, often helped her mother with her homework. For example, when Akhlah was unsure of what a picture illustrated, Remaz identified it as a tire. She also helped her mother with reading and spelling English words: When Akhlah needed to spell the word *newspaper* on her ESL homework, Remaz called out, "N! N!

Make an N, mommy!” While the help that these children were able to provide may seem small, it nevertheless contributed to a supportive environment for the parents.

Tensions within work. Work, like family, constrained adults’ participation in ESL classes and other educational opportunities, and it also supported it in other ways. As described in the previous section, parents in the families often worked more than one job in order to support their families. The orphaned youth, who had no families to rely upon, had no option except to work; they could not count on a spouse’s financial support. Refugees also typically worked in difficult job situations (Palladino, 2007), despite the fact that they may have been highly educated or trained for a certain career in their native countries. Falabia, for example, had worked as a nurse in the Sudan. In Michigan, she still worked in a hospital setting, but in housekeeping and janitorial services. Viola had earned a law degree, but her various U.S. jobs included cooking at a fast-food establishment and cleaning hotel rooms. The orphaned youth in the study also tended to work in the same types of jobs; Francis worked at McDonalds, while Chol worked in the dishroom of a dormitory cafeteria at the state university.

Because they tended to work in low-wage, low-prestige jobs, members of the Sudanese community often worked long hours, particularly when they worked more than one job. They also tended to work the undesirable shifts. Amin, for example, worked the night shift doing dishes at a local hotel, and Akhlas had to be at her seamstress job by 6:00 am. Isbon frequently was scheduled for evening and weekend shifts in his janitorial job at the hospital. In addition to these challenging work hours, participants’ work schedules often fluctuated; they could not predict in advance what days or times they might be working. Only Akhlas worked on the same days and at the same times each week. Thus, these fluctuating work times made enrolling in ESL or other academic programs problematic, as participants had little control over their schedules.

Akhlas lamented the many challenges that prevented her from pursuing the education that she dreamed of: “Money is not good,” she said, “and I want to go to school—real school.” She wished she could work part-time so that she could go to school, particularly because most classes here were only “in the PM.” Viola, too, felt that part-time work was the best scenario for being able to attend ESL classes: “If I work, I will work part time, then I will do anything to improve my English.”

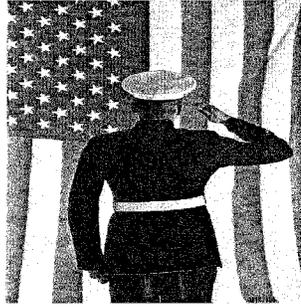
On the other hand, work could provide affordances for ESL and other educational programs. Most obviously, jobs provided the money necessary to pay for tuition, textbooks, and other school expenses. In this sense, the need to work offered a Catch-22 for many of the refugees: Work often got in the way of their studies, but without work, they could not afford most of the available programs. Work also offered support in other ways. As described above, Akhlas’ workplace provided her with the motivation to speak English, so that she could communicate with co-workers from around the world. Falabia also noted that her job had helped her with English. Although she had completed an ESL sequence at the community college, “I did not learn how to talk fast. I can read, I can write, but I can’t talk. After I get my job, I learn how to talk better.”

Akhlas’ job provides a special example of how work could provide affordances for ESL and other education. Her employer, Peckham, was a non-profit organization with the mission to provide training and job opportunities for people with barriers to employment, such as refugees, the developmentally disabled, and those who had been in prison. As part of this mission, they offered a variety of courses at the workplace, including ESL classes, which Akhlas took full advantage of. She frequently reported that both her supervisor and her ESL teacher at work offered a great deal of support and encouragement, particularly for Akhlas to start coursework at the community college: “Even the school where I am learning in work,” Akhlas explained, “Teacher, she say I must go to

LCC. She say, ‘You doing good job right now’... You know, even my supervisor, she’s so happy. She say, ‘I cannot believe that only three years—you learn more than people, they having like seven and six years!’”

Akhlas had learned English very quickly, and her teacher tapped her to become a peer tutor for other ESL students, particularly those who hoped to achieve citizenship. Akhlas invited me to a training session for peer tutors; Figure 1 shows a flyer for the session. At the training session, the teacher emphasized the importance of mastering English for citizenship, and she explained that Peckham offered \$400, the full cost of an application, for those who applied for citizenship. The company provided many ESL and citizenship preparation courses, and they also organized the peer-tutoring program.

Figure 1. *Flyer for Akhlas’ ESL peer tutor training session.*



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Tensions within community. Like family and work, community also presented a tension between educational constraints and affordances. Community was very important among the Sudanese refugees in Michigan (cites), and many of the participants in both studies were recognized for strong leadership skills within the community. Isbon and Viola frequently were called upon to act in leadership positions for the entire community, Akhlas was elected as the secretary of a multi-

state group of people from the Nuba Mountains region, and Chol was a well-respected leader among the Lost Boys across Michigan. These refugees worked hard to build and maintain a sense of Sudanese community, one that attempted to unite the various ethnic, tribal, linguistic and religious sub-groups of the community and that sought to advocate for Sudanese issues across the Sudanese diaspora.

Because community was so important to these refugees, they actively engaged with community issues and took responsibility for organizing the community. These responsibilities, however, could take significant amounts of time. Isbon had served as an elected community leader prior to my study among the families. When the current leader died in a tragic auto accident during the study, many community members, particularly the orphaned youth, wanted Isbon to once again lead the community. He resisted, however, in part because this would limit his opportunities for education. Isbon wanted to return to school to improve his English, and he also had to work, which made a community leadership role impractical. Viola added that “they call you at night,” and she noted that it was “a volunteer job” which took a great deal of time.

Like family and work, however, the community could also provide support for educational opportunities. For example, Falabia’s and Viola’s families had arrived in the U.S. at about the same time. Falabia had found out about ESL classes at the community college; she told Isbon and Viola about those classes, and they enrolled themselves the following week. “Me and Isbon in the same class,” Falabia recalled. Other refugees shared expensive textbooks or handed them down to others when they were finished with them. Similar supports existed among the Lost Boys, and perhaps to an even greater degree, as they had developed intensely supportive relationships over the years. I frequently observed these youth studying together, helping each other with homework, and sharing academic computer skills.

The wider, non-Sudanese community also provided significant support, as I have described elsewhere (Perry, in press). Volunteers from church groups, refugee organizations, and social service agencies all were sources of significant educational support for these refugees. Indeed, my own volunteer work as an academic tutor first led me to this community. Organizations from the wider community provided tutoring and other academic support. One day, I observed a number of literacy workbooks on Akhlas and Amin's couch that I had not seen before. Akhlas explained that the pastor at her church had bought them for her and Amin "when I am new from Egypt" so that they could learn English. The books had helped her a great deal, she said. Thus, while community responsibilities could represent a significant drain on the little free time refugees had, community connections also could provide important resources and support for educational pursuits.

Access to resources. Tensions also existed in terms of access to various resources, such as money, computers, and tutors. Not having enough money could be a serious barrier to educational participation. Yet, participants also had access to scholarships and other sources of funding, some of which were only available to refugees. Computers were increasingly required for educational programs, yet only some refugees had regular access to them. Access to tutors also supported refugees' ESL and academic development, yet the availability and quality of these tutors was uneven.

The cost of tuition, textbooks and other school fees often presented a great obstacle to the refugees' participation in educational programs. Viola faced a dilemma in her desire to attend law school; the fact that she had a green card meant that she did not have to prove financial support the way other international students did, but this same green card also meant that she was no longer eligible for funding through some of the social service agencies that worked with refugees. Thus, while her green card made admission to the law program easier, it also made it less likely that she

could afford to attend. Many refugees, including orphaned youth, were accepted into good programs, but the cost of those programs often barred them from attending. Like their native-born American counterparts, Sudanese refugees often chose programs based solely on financial concerns. Falabia thought the programs at the community college were very good, but she chose a local private university instead. “They [the community college] have so many requirements,” and more requirements meant more money. Later, however, she decided that the university was too expensive, and she decided to return to the community college for summer courses.

Many Sudanese refugees received financial aid or scholarships from both the schools they attended and from outside organizations. Lutheran Social Services, the agency responsible for resettling the orphaned youth, had grant money available to support the youths’ educational aspirations. Each youth had money available that could be used for tuition, textbooks, and other academic supplies, including computers. SSRRA, the community organization I was part of, also offered very modest scholarships for any Sudanese refugee that could help mitigate the high cost of textbooks. The schools also offered financial aid and scholarships. The local private university that Falabia, Chol, and many others from the Sudanese community attended provided a great deal of support to these refugees; they appeared to have made a commitment to support local refugees. Financial aid thus helped many adult refugees attend school, and its availability factored into many of their decisions. “I’m not in such a hurry to graduate,” Falabia explained, “I’m going to continue my study little by little, because I have a lot of responsibility. I don’t want to fail and lose my financial aid.”

Access to computers, the Internet, and other digital resources also presented similar affordances and constraints in terms of educational opportunities. While many of the orphaned youth had computers at home, as the result of grant funding from the social services or of

scrounging by mentors, few of the families had working computers at home. Among the families in my study, only Falabia's had a working computer that was hooked up to the Internet. As participants in both studies described, computers were an integral part of their studies, no matter what type of program they attended. Akhlas' workplace ESL program relied upon computers, for example, and all of the participants who attended institutions of higher learning reported that they had to do most of their work on computers. The lack of access to a computer could be a huge barrier for these refugees. Viola, for example, said that one of her ESL classes at the community college required a lot of writing, but because she did not have a computer at home, she wrote out the essays for that class by hand. Later, when she was enrolled in a nursing assistance course, she was required to take online tests. Viola had learned that she could use computers available at the public library, as well as those in labs at the college, but this was not very convenient, particularly when Viola forgot her password and had to make an extra trip to the college to get a new one.

Even when participants did have computers at home, this did not solve all of their problems. They often did not have the expensive software needed for their assignments: Falabia needed to do a PowerPoint presentation for one of her classes, but she did not have that program installed on her home computer. All of the participants in both studies said that they had not ever used computers before coming to the U.S., and their lack of familiarity with digital technologies also presented challenges. When it came to writing the many papers required for his courses, for example, Chol used an exhaustingly slow hunt-and-peck method of typing. Many of the computers that participants owned were very outdated, lacked virus protection, and were prone to problems. This, coupled with inexperience that often caused more problems (when they did not follow the proper procedure for ejecting data-saving devices, for example), often ensured that the computers were not functional, even when they were available.

The final tension related to access to resources was related to availability of tutors. As I have described elsewhere (Perry, in press), Sudanese refugees in Michigan received help from many tutors, counselors, and other mentors. These tutors and mentors supported refugees' ESL and academic development. They also attempted to provide computer technical support and to help refugees navigate U.S. educational systems. Access to such tutors could be an incredible boon to these refugees. When her ESL teacher complimented Akhlas on her language progress, Akhlas attributed her success to having a weekly tutor. "I have a teacher at home now," she had explained. Akhlas also planned to rely upon that tutor (me) to help her study for the U.S. citizenship exam: "For me, it's good now, because I have a teacher. Now I have it, I want you to sometimes explain to me." In addition to volunteers who tutored on a private basis at home, participants also had access to tutoring provided by the schools they attended. Chol often took advantage of the tutors at the university he attended, while Viola reported that she had not studied at the library because she preferred to study in a center at the community college where tutors were available.

While tutors could provide important levels of support for Sudanese refugees, this was not always the case. Tutors were available from several sources, including social service agencies, churches, and the educational institutions themselves. Tutors who volunteered through social service agencies and churches were clearly well-meaning, and they provided very real support to these refugees. The majority of them, however, had little, if any, training in effective teaching methods, and they appeared to know even less about teaching ESL. Other tutors I knew who worked with the orphaned youth confided to me that they really did not know what they were doing and simply did their best to muddle through with their students. Even tutors provided through educational institutions could be remarkably ineffective. Tutoring centers sometimes had limited hours, which proved difficult for refugees with challenging work schedules. Others appeared to be hardly

accessible at all: Chol reported that the math tutor available at this private university did not usually have office hours and instead offered help over the phone. This did not work well for Chol, however, because he had a hard time understanding the tutor's explanations over the phone, due in part to accent differences and Chol's level of facility with English. Chol said he needed the tutor to sit down next to him—a request that seemed very reasonable under these and, indeed, under any circumstances.

Discussion & Implications

The results of this analysis, based upon data gleaned from two ethnographic studies of subsets of the Sudanese refugee community in Michigan, illustrate the constraints and affordances that shape these adults' participation in ESL programs and other educational opportunities. Reflecting their prior experiences with formal schooling and beliefs about the value of education, participants were highly motivated to improve their English abilities and to further their educational levels. While the hope of finding a better job was one motivation, the participants in this study also sought education as a path toward higher goals: obtaining U.S. citizenship, being able to support their children's development, and simply the desire to know more. Papen (2005) similarly concludes that a social view of literacy must be about “about more than vocationally relevant skills and making one's contribution to the nation's economic productivity: it includes literacy for active citizenship, political participation, individual development and leisure” (p. 131). The goal of most refugee resettlement agencies is to provide ESL, basic literacy, and other “emergency” educational opportunities that will permit new arrivals to find employment and reach self-sufficiency as soon as possible. These are clearly necessary goals, but the results of this analysis suggest that refugees want more. Thus, one important implication of these findings is that we must find ways to support the full range of refugees' educational aspirations, and not only those that lead to immediate employment.

Countering participants' strong educational motivations, however, were constraints that presented serious challenges to refugees' ability to meet their goals. Responsibilities to family and community, long and difficult work hours, and limited material resources placed obstacles in these refugees' way. Despite these constraints, and illustrating various tensions in their lives, families, communities, and workplaces also provided many affordances that supported adults' educational efforts.

While the generalizability of these results is necessarily limited by the nature of ethnographic research, these findings nevertheless offer important insights and implications into adult education. Sudanese refugees are clearly not the only adults who desire to improve themselves through education, nor are they the only ones who struggle to do so. Numerous studies have illustrated the challenges faced by adults from a variety of marginalized communities (e.g., Barton et al, 2007; Papan, 2005; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Purcell-Gates, Jacobson & Degener, 2004), and the findings from my study add to that body of knowledge. One important implication of this study is that constraints are not one-sided and are instead more like a coin with two sides. That is, something that constrains in one way may offer affordances in another. Falabia's many children, for example, placed great demands on her time, yet they also supported her by taking over many of her household responsibilities. Educational affordances present a similar two-sided coin: Academic or ESL tutors, for example, could be a boon to adult refugee learners, but only if they were qualified to help and if students actually had access to them.

One implication of these findings is that we must find additional ways to support the material needs of refugees, immigrants, and other adult learners who encounter serious obstacles in meeting their English, literacy, and educational goals. While researchers, educators, and policy-makers cannot solve all of the problems presented by family, work, and community responsibilities, steps

can be taken to help marginalized adult learners gain access to financial assistance, computers and other digital resources, and highly-qualified tutors. Providing access to these resources of course requires funding, and this is where policy-makers may be able to make an impact.

Another implication of these findings is that we need to find ways to capitalize on the affordances within each tension in order to mitigate their corresponding constraints. Social service agencies and adult educational programs can work together to find solutions to certain constraints. For example, they may be able to find ways to help adult learners build upon already-strong family and community bonds in order to arrange for child care. Teenagers from within the community, or those who volunteer from outside, could care for children in a central location while parents attend classes.

Focusing on constraints can be paralyzing for adults who wish to attend school, but helping them to think about hidden affordances and find creative ways to approach challenges can open many doors. In my experiences, I have found refugees to be resilient and resourceful people who draw upon the strengths of their families and communities to do what needs to be done. Understanding the struggles of current refugees will help us to ease the educational way for those who will follow. As Falabia said in reference to herself and another Sudanese friend, “We struggled at [the community college], then the others followed. We opened the way—many will come.”

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