NEGOTIATED GRATITUDE: RESETTLED REFUGEES
AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

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Abstract

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Theory in the sociology of emotion suggests that receiving help from a position of relative lack—with no ability to reciprocate—should lead to negative emotions. How, then, does one sustain flexibility through positive emotions while receiving significant support even for the most basic material needs? This paper presents a case of a group who are able to negotiate a web of negative emotions and generate the flexibility needed to pursue long-term goals. Using interviews with 14 recently resettled refugees, I find that gratitude, surprisingly, is associated with capacity to generate and sustain flexibility and positive disposition. Gratitude and flexibility seem to open opportunities in a new context without denying the incredible difficulty of the challenges of the first months and years of resettlement. This study has implications for the study of emotion in situations of resource deprivation and policy implications regarding the resettlement process.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The narratives in this study represent the experiences of a small group of resettled refugees who are adapting to very difficult life-circumstances. Their stories illustrate the emotional challenges of resettlement, beginning with the loss of family and friends to war and conflict. They are a group defined by loss. Now, in the life they are given in resettlement, they struggle to find a sense of social connection, working long hours (often at multiple jobs) to pay bills, negotiating cultural and linguistic differences. Despite these challenges some are forging their way to a stable job, homeownership, and perhaps a better life for their kids. In this paper, I articulate how this group is able to negotiate the web of emotions in resettlement and pursue long-term goals. The conclusions from this study are limited by my focus on the emotional experience of a small group who are adapting well—they are success stories. The sample is also limited by the predominance of male voices. However, these stories of success reveal an opportunity in the study of emotion to investigate further into the emotional dynamics of gratitude, dependence, and shame in assimilation and adaptation.

The stories recounted in this paper suggest that there are situations when highlighting a position of deficit by receiving assistance can lead to an emotional response associated with flexibility in one’s capacity to pursue long-term goals. Gratitude,
even though it is primarily felt as a “moral memory,” is a powerful emotion that opens
the appraisal of one’s current situation to opportunities in the future, contributing to a
sense that one’s goals in the future are possible. This process is a negotiated freedom in
resettlement. For refugees, this may be emotional flexibility, a response that opens up
opportunities in a new context without denying the incredible difficulty of the challenges
of the first months and years of resettlement.

The central theoretical view of emotion and the loss of resource shows that
receiving help to overcome obstacles in situations of resource deprivation may actually
highlight a person’s low place in a social or economic hierarchy, leading to negative
emotions of anger (Kemper 1978; Collins 2007), alienation (Turner 2002), shame (Scheff
1994), and dependence (Summers-Effler 2002). Furthermore, in *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss
(1954) argued that when a person is not able to reciprocate generates negative emotions.
This is to say that in the sociology of emotions we might think that hope, a positive
future-oriented emotion, would play a key role in success among resettled refugees.
However, gratitude, a past-oriented emotion, actually played a more important role in
maintaining flexibility and pursuing goals. How, then, does one sustain gratitude rather
than emotions associated with dependence and resentment while receiving significant
support even for the most basic material needs? This question addresses a central theme
in the sociology of emotions—why and how emotion influences a sense of self relative to
resources like power, status, and material wellbeing (Kemper 1978; Collins & Kemper
1990; Collins 1990; Turner 2009).

In this paper, I present a case of resettled refugees who are threatened by the
resettlement process—the necessary adaptation that takes place in a new environment.
This case shows how receiving help from a position of relative lack does not necessarily lead to negative emotions. Paradoxically such help can contribute to emotional resilience. This case illustrates a process of how gratitude is important for: 1) sustaining flexibility and 2) overcoming emotional obstacles to pursue opportunities in the future. This insight is gleaned from micro-level analysis of semi-structured interviews that shows how the emotion of gratitude shape the emotional experience of one’s self in a positive direction, even under conditions of relative deprivation— in this case, a group of resettled refugees.

The resettled refugees I include have arrived in the last 1-7 years, reside in a suburb of a major U.S. city, and have received significant ongoing services from organizations and individuals in their community. While this situation could create a one-sided relationship based on dependence and/or shame, I suggest that the emotion of gratitude influenced my respondents’ capacity to avoid these negative emotions and sustain emotional resilience despite repeated challenges of language and cultural difference and the transition into the U.S. labor market. Gratitude emerged from field observations as associated with sustaining a positive sense of self, indeed it was one of the most powerful emotions; it was associated with demonstrations of flexibility and pursuing goals in the difficult social and economic situations in resettlement.
CHAPTER 2:
METHOD AND SELECTION

Resettled refugees in the United States are faced with the immediate challenges of relocating to a new environment. But they are also given immediate and ongoing social support and services, primarily in the form of social and welfare services, citizenship rights, and initial social ties with volunteers in the host community. On a global scale, refugees are a population of political and social outcasts, defined by the nature of the departure from their home. The legal category of a “refugee” was established by a UN Convention in 1951 and Protocol of 1967, defining a refugee as someone who is forced to leave their home nation in fear of political, ethnic, ideological, or religious persecution (Betts & Loescher, 2010). In the U.S., the Refugee Act of 1980 standardized services and rights given to resettled refugees, guaranteeing protective social welfare for the initial transition to life in America, rights and services not awarded any other immigrant group. These services are provided through a “resettlement organization,” or VOLAG.¹ These provisions make resettled refugees the most protected group of immigrants in the United States (Bloemraad 2006). Since this act, the State Department has closely controlled the number of refugees admitted, capping resettlement at 50-70,000 refugees per year. In the

¹ “Voluntary agencies” (VOLAG) have a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of State to provide resettlement services to refugees upon arrival. The agreement is, simply, that the Department of Homeland Security assigns a certain number of refugees to each VOLAG according to their capacity and that VOLAG is responsible to resettle those refugees with basic social services, including employment services.
city where I collected data for this project, around 200 refugees of various ethnicities are resettled yearly.

I spent nine months, between December 2013 through September 2014, interviewing and gathering ethnographic data in a community of resettled refugees in a western suburb of Chicago. For this paper, I draw heavily from transcribed and coded interview data. I gained access to this community through the non-profit organization “Faith House” which primarily works to provide education and financial support to refugees pursuing homeownership or higher education. The refugees who have procured the services and financial support from this organization provide a group that is relatively well networked and successful. Although the success of this group is not necessarily representative of the general population of refugees in my city, they provide a methodological opportunity rather than a challenge. A focused sample on those who receive ongoing support of some kind reveals the importance of specific emotions used to overcome challenges while receiving social support.

Through initial fieldwork in December 2013, I began relationships with six families in the Faith House program. I met the remaining six families via snowball sampling through those I interviewed, the staff of Faith House, and a local realtor. Eleven of the fourteen families included were either currently in the homeownership program with Faith House, had graduated, or were applying to join. In this program a family rents an apartment owned by the organization, but their rent money goes directly into a savings account reserved for a future down payment. The family and the organization both have access to this account. In a sense, the family is paying rent to themselves and saving that money to buy a home. The amount that a family receives at
the end of the program—from $9,000 to $12,000—is a gift that is hidden behind two years of rent checks. The two families that were not in the Faith House program had received what they described as meaningful or life-altering help from either World Relief (a resettling organization) or an individual.

I conducted 14 tape-recorded, semi-structured interviews in English, asking open-ended questions that allowed my respondents freedom to frame their response as they pleased. This procedure gave them ultimate control over the outcome of the interview. What I found when I gave my respondents control of the interview was an eagerness to frame my questions within a larger narrative of experience, pre and post resettlement, which reflected their identity and sense of self. Six of the 14 interviews included multiple members of a family. Thus, including all individuals who appear in my data, my sample is of 20 resettled refugees. These interviews lasted between 42 minutes and 87 minutes. After each interview, I noted aspects of the setting and emotional mood that are not captured in the tape-recording. Then I transcribed the interviews, noting also what I remembered of the emotional and physical aspects of the interviewees and myself. I attempted to make these interviews informal, as close to normal conversations as possible, while also considering the limits of the interviewer and interviewee positions.

These interviews are limited to the expression of gratitude, which is not the same as feeling the emotion. However, self-reported emotional expression is important data in itself because there is much to know of the social world through “front-stage” dynamics. Hochschild (1983), for instance, shows the importance of feeling rules in shaping interactions and generating genuine emotions. I acknowledge the tension in my data
between feeling and expression. This will only be resolved through further fieldwork, allowing me to access more backstage emotional dynamics.

Throughout the process of collecting interviews, I employed in-interview theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin 1990; Breckenridge & Jones 2009) and followed leads that seemed to indicate emotional importance, or points when my respondents seemed to change their appraisal of a situation. In fact, I did not initially ask questions about gratitude. The power of gratitude in resettlement, through comparing past circumstances with future opportunity, became apparent after several interviews. Hearing again and again, in both direct and nuanced terms, about appreciation and gratitude, I began to shift my focus to the evident influence of gratitude on emotional resilience.

The families and individuals I interviewed were resettled in the last seven years, originally displaced from Togo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Burma, Bhutan, and Iraq. They range in age from 20 to 51, with an average age of mid-thirties. Due, in part, to the nature of implicitly defined roles in patriarchal cultures, men speak for their families. Thus, the sample is predominantly male. Though they are not a homogenous group or community, this sample shares several characteristics; most notably, they are refugees who have received social services and significant help in the first years of resettlement. All refugees in this study were resettled through World Relief, the only resettlement organization in the western suburbs of Chicago. In addition to this interview data, I spent eight months living in the City, collecting ethnographic data. I also interviewed three staff of the non-profit and a realtor who has found homes for several of the families I interviewed. I took copious field notes throughout my time in the field,
during home-visits, workshops, and informal interactions. I have changed all the names and identifying characteristics of my respondents to protect their identity and privacy.

Resettled refugees negotiate a web of emotions produced by their relationship with service providers combined with the reality of immediate challenges of adapting to life and work in America. Emotional resilience—the capacity to adapt to disruption with appropriate positive emotion (Tugade & Frederickson 2004)—is needed to accept these challenges without assurance of economic or social security. I am presenting the case of a group of immigrant who receives social and financial help, highlighting a position of deficiency, and also, paradoxically, leading to emotional resilience. How and why this happens begins with a brief history of the resettlement process.
CHAPTER 3:
DATA

Overview

My respondents often talked about life before resettlement. I encountered this discourse around their previous life on a wide range of issues regarding present conditions, future goals, and past experiences. The importance of these forays into their previous life were especially important when they discussed the emotion work involved in resettlement in America. Referencing past experiences highlights my respondents’ struggle to negotiate emotions around receiving aid and pursuing goals. Some of these accounts revealed how receiving immediate help during resettlement may have been a source of frustration, anger, alienation, and even shame, which follows what we might expect from theory in the sociology of emotions (Kemper 1978, Scheff 1994; Turner 2002; Collins 2007). But, for other refugees, these accounts revealed how sustaining a sense of gratitude may be important for maintaining flexibility and overcoming emotional obstacles to pursue opportunities in the future.

I begin in the following section with two stories that illustrate the expected account of the emotions many refugees must feel when they are resettled in difficult circumstances—frustration, anger, resentment, shame, disappointment, and sadness. In the second and third sections of this chapter I explore accounts of gratitude, which show
how the negotiated struggle around maintaining this emotion may, in some way, be associated with the capacity to overcome emotional obstacles and pursue future opportunities and goals.

_Frustration, Resentment, and Disappointment in Resettlement_

Gregoire, a gracious and kind Rwandan man, had formed a sense of injustice with the first months of his new life in America, particularly with the aid he received in finding a job. In Rwanda, he worked as the director of an NGO. His family fled in the last five years from ethnic persecution. He began our conversation by telling the story of his life in Rwanda, showing me pictures of his large house and his work in the NGO. He told me that he travelled often, even as far as Europe and Asia for the NGO. He did not appear to hold bitterness, but he was deeply sad recounting his first months in America. He said,

> The big problem I saw here in most of these organizations that help people, is the tendency to treat everybody in the same way. I understand them, because what they do is just provide the basic things to people—what is really very important and very helpful and what everybody should be mindful of. But when you look very well, there is no specific program [for those] who came [here] with a certain level.

> You go to World Relief, they say, ‘You have the credentials? Ok, we have a job somewhere.’ And they give you the job of lifting heavy things. You have never, never done this. I know, not everybody can work in the office. But sometimes you may see there may be other [work]. They don’t have, they don’t take the time to look. Because it’s when you fall in a situation like this, you feel really sad. ‘Oh this is not possible,’ because you have never, never done this. Even you, physically, emotionally, mentally you start…

He often lost his stream of thought, appearing overwhelmed and muddled in the remembrance of the sadness he felt in that first year in the U.S. He continued,

> You think, ‘Is it a social punishment?’ And they think, ‘Ok, he has got a job.’ They don’t think for instance, ‘Ok, we can give you a training.’ They should have something like this: various training to make people to be ready to
work…Because someone who is a director general of a company you ask him to do the same work as someone who has never been at school. First you feel as if/ as if you are/ You have died. Physically you are not capable. I say, no, no, no.

I say [all of this] to you because I know this is academic stuff. I have to tell you the truth as it is. But it is really frustrating. For them they don’t take into consideration it’s as if all of what you were or have been is nothing. This is not really the best way to help people.

…

This is frustrating. You feel as if you are in prison and you are being punished for something. And you have to feed your family your kids, so you are obliged to do something you didn’t think would happen in your entire life. So this is the bad, the worst experience I have ever seen.

…

He or she does not take time to know what you did before. What she wants is to put you in this job, regardless of your experience, what you have done, what you are capable of doing. And this is really not a kind of help I may wish someone to have.

They are killing you. You are done. You are doing something like this with too much physical energy. You are done.

…

There is a proverb saying, “Everybody is a genius. But if you want to judge the fish by its capacity to climb a tree, the fish will die knowing that it is stupid. But if you judge a monkey by its capacity of climbing a tree…” [Smiles at me] You see. You say, ‘Oh, I’m intelligent.’ If you, if you take someone who has never, never done a work requiring too much physical energy, you put…Oh I’m telling you, you can even suicide yourself, saying, ‘I’m nothing.’

Situations of receiving aid in resettlement are undoubtedly felt along the dimensions of emotional hierarchy. This is especially true in situations where the one-sided relationship of giver and recipient can easily contribute to feelings of shame and/or dependence. As Schwartz (1967: 4) says, “To accept a gift is to accept, at least in part, an identity, and to reject a gift is to reject a definition of one’s self.” The definition of an identity is an “individual’s ongoing narrative account of who she is at present, modeled on the future self that she imagines becoming” (Frye 2012: 1576). The narrative account of one who is receiving substantial social and material support reflects the hierarchy associated with the situation of support.
Gregoire expressed (and in some ways relived) the emotional frustration he experienced in the first months of resettlement. This typifies how Kemper (1978; 2011), Collins (1990; 2004), and Scheff (1994) explain the emotional outcomes of stratified interactions. He struggled to reconcile his self with the social position given him in resettlement. Negative emotion was produced from attributing his lack of status and inability to influence his situation (lack of power) to World Relief, the labor market, and, ultimately, himself.

Gregoire showed that a sense of shame in one’s position could derail his sense of purpose, recalling that he felt like he was in prison. In this, there was a sense of dissonance between his previous life in Rwanda and the manual labor he was asked to do in America. He said, “It’s as if all of what you were or have been is nothing.” It is like asking a fish to climb a tree. Shame, sadness, and frustration emerge from his comparison between positive experiences in his home country and negative experiences in his host country. The next account, like the first, reveals the complex and often-difficult emotions that resettled refugees negotiate.

Thierry spent most of his life in a camp in Tanzania and was resettled in the U.S. in 2007 at age 19. Thierry was born to refugee in parents Rwanda after they had fled Burundi in 1972, due to an ethnic conflict. Thierry said, “I grew up a refugee because I never had a chance to live in my parents’ country. If I was in Burundi, I wouldn’t have been called a refugee … Even though I was born [in Rwanda], my birth certificate said I was a refugee … Until I came here [to America], I was a refugee.” In 1994, he told me, “there was genocide” in Rwanda and his family had to flee again. This time they went to Tanzania. He reflects on his life in Tanzania without any sense of longing. “We had a
tough life living as a refugee. First of all, we didn’t have much freedom, we didn’t have freedom up there. It was very hard to live in a refugee camp. Some people didn’t have jobs and it was hard to eat. No clothes. It was real hard.”

This comparison is what he drew from when I asked him if he is happy in the U.S. He said, “Oh yeah, I feel happy to be here. Because the truth is, I didn’t like living in refugee life when I was in Africa … Because in Tanzania, man, where I grew up, I didn’t like that life, I didn’t like it. So, yeah, I think I’m happy now. I am happy now. Nobody calls me a refugee here. That makes me happy.” His feeling of life in America was positive, but he did not discuss a sense of gratitude (which we will discuss in the next section). He remembered back to a life in Africa and he recalled few opportunities to flourish.

When Thierry arrived he was told that he was too old to attend high school. He referenced this event many times, for example, when I asked an open-ended question about how his life has been since he was resettled.

Thierry: I was almost 19 when I came here and they didn’t want me to go to finish high school. They thought I was too old to go back to high school. That made me upset too because it is too hard to go to school now for me. And I thought I was coming here to go to school. That made me upset. It was like my dream was crushed … When I was in Africa I was a student. My first job [in the US] was like 12-hour job, yeah, that [was] very hard for me.

Me: So when you came you had to get a job right away? They wouldn’t let you go back to high school?

Thierry: They didn’t want me to go back to high school. And then World Relief helped us to get a job. I think after three months, we start working. Found a job real quick, and then I forgot about school … So even though I wanted to go back to school, if I go to school and quit the job, I’m not going to be able to pay for rent … Then I tried to do both, and I failed. Still it was too hard. At that time, I quit school.
This illustrates how the emotional experience of an expectation that is not met may influence resettlement. After his dream was “crushed,” the prospect of going back to school seemed beyond his control. And then when he did go back to school at a community college it was “too hard” and he had to quit.

I asked what the most surprising obstacles have been in resettlement. He said, “Poverty, man. Even though here, I mean, I’m in a better place, but I [still] didn’t have money. And if you don’t have money, you don’t have anything.” How his expectations shaped his experience was important for how he was able to recover from these negative experiences. He continued,

I didn’t have that money so that kind of surprised me because I thought I was coming to a rich country. Especially people that live there [in Africa], they think we collect money on leaves like this [hand motions]. You know how leave fall from trees? They think we just collect money like that. I didn’t know you could be poor here in America. I thought everybody was rich. Then when I came here, like I said, the first thing that made me upset was when I couldn’t go back to high school. I didn’t like, that kind of surprised me. And then the life, I thought it was going to be an easy life. But it’s not, it’s very difficult.

When I asked about Thierry’s goals for the future, he recalled again how he intends to go back to school and get a better job. But he was unable to form a clear sense of how to accomplish his goals.

Me: What are some of your goals for the future?

Thierry: For the future, first of all, I have my mom and sisters in Africa, I was thinking about going back to school, get a better job, because I want to help my family. Life’s still hard in Africa, especially where they live. I was trying to help them get another house in a different city because where they live is bad, and they don’t have a nice house. So, I’m hoping to get back to school, get a better job, help them get a better house, and my family too. You know, I’m married. I’m married and I’m about to have a child.

Me: Congratulations!
Thierry: Thank you, Ben! So, I want to have a better life here too, because I don’t want to the same life I had in Africa, I want to have a better life here in America. …

Me: Do you have a goal for a better job?

Thierry: I don’t know. Because like I said, I never worked before and the job I have right now, it’s my first job since I came here. I might want to go to school. I want to study about computers. My wife is going to school. I’m going to wait until she’s done, then I’ll go to school. See if I can’t get a better job. First of all I do want to help my family. They are very poor over there. I want to help them. Also because I’m not going back there, I want to have a better life here, have my own house so I don’t have to pay for rent no more.

Thierry’s experience is characterized by a sense that the future is not secure. He lacks a clear and achievable objective, but indicates that he hopes to “have a better life here in America.” This lack of clarity may have something to do with a feeling of fear in making plans and insecurity navigating a new system. He came to America with two expectations that frame his experience: first, that he would have the opportunity to finish school, and second, that he was coming to a rich country and would not live in poverty. These two expectations were not realized, leaving him anxious about paying bills, working twelve-hour shifts.

*Negotiated Gratitude*

Contrasting the two accounts in the previous section, another Rwandan man, Nelson, discussed a sense of gratitude he had in association with the opportunities available to him in America. He too made comparisons with his life in Rwanda and a refugee camp in Tanzania. But he had formed a generally negative perception of his life in Rwanda and a positive outlook on his new life-situation in America.

Nelson was a math teacher at a secondary school in Rwanda. In contrast, he had a very difficult life since resettling. At the time of my interview, he was working two full-
time jobs in the secondary labor market (what he described as entry-level work) to save enough for his car payments and rent. From the example of Gregoire and what we know of emotion in hierarchical situations, this work seems like it would be a source of sadness and even shame for Nelson. He did not overlook the challenges of his new life in the U.S. “To be able to integrate, that one [integration], is something that is not easy,” he said, “But, I can say that … really, here in America, opportunities, there are a lot, there are a lot.”

This seemed to have something to do with the way he negotiated his struggle in resettlement. In “corrupt countries” like Rwanda, he said, “all the [resources] for the country are going to just some few individuals who get power and the other ones will be suffering…[and] hungry.” This assessment of corrupt countries was in sharp contrast with “countries like this country, like America,” where “they really have democracy and it is everywhere. If you work your work, you get your pay. You go to school and nobody will cheat you…In America there is opportunity open for everyone. It depends on your capacity…I can say that the opportunity is for everyone but it depends on your capacity and your background.” The comparison for Nelson was between a country of corruption and a country where all things are a democratic distribution of opportunity.

Nelson and Gregoire have contrasting outlooks about the relative opportunities here in America. Gregoire’s response is an understandable feeling of overwhelming insecurity. Why does Nelson reflect on a similar situation so positively?

Nelson’s description of the reception from World Relief and other services presents a picture of how he felt gratitude for what he was given. I asked what the first
year of the resettlement process was like for Nelson. He said, “It was good.” Then I asked what services World Relief provided him.

Nelson: The service they provide – I don’t know if I can define it all, but there are a lot. And for me, I appreciate it. It’s enough for me, [for] somebody … to integrate himself in the United States. You see they will receive you from the airport. The time we reach [America], they receive us from the airport. They find somewhere [for us] to sleep … it was very nice. The next morning they carry us to our apartment. Everything was there [at the apartment] … I see that really the service is—how can I call it—it’s wonderful; it’s best.

Me: Were you expecting those services when you first came?

Nelson: Oh, no! I was not expecting that. But what I had in my mind, I am going to United States and I knew where I was going is better [than] where I am. So, I expected something.

Me: Were there specific things that were most helpful in the first three or four months?

Nelson: What they do, all the material from the house was there. Whatever we need the house, they were there. Those time we get a food stamp, we get a cash money. Ah, it was enough. It was enough.

Me: What was the most difficult thing since coming to the US in the transition?

Nelson: I will not say something difficult. Only something that we see [as difficult] sometimes [was the] … change of the weather. But I don’t see that something difficult was there.

Me: Really?

Nelson: I see it was very easy for me to settle myself … My English was somehow bad but I was able to communicate with everybody, even my kids [were able to communicate]. And I got my job. Since then I never lose a job. … I really appreciate, I appreciate whatever I meet here maybe because of the treatment we get here, the way World Relief treat us really is good … What I like in the United States, if you are lucky or if you want to work, they prepare you to be self- uh, self-reliable or self / to be independent, to take care of yourself.

Me: Self-sufficient, maybe?

Nelson: Yes, that is the proper way to use [the word]. So I’d say we are doing our best, and World Relief also did their best. I cannot say maybe World Relief is
supposed to do this for us and they didn’t do it. They help the kids to integrate, going to school, whatever. Even today they [are] still helping the kids.

Nelson’s gratitude is apparent in this recounting of his first months in America. The comparison with Gregoire shows that Nelson could have felt the overwhelming difficulty of adapting to a new context where communication is difficult and he has to work long days at a low wage job. Instead, Nelson seems to maintain emotional flexibility amidst difficult circumstances. This flexibility was, in some way, associated with a sense of gratitude with the circumstances of his resettlement.

Another account of this process comes from Anatole, a Congolese man who was resettled four years ago from a camp in Tanzania. Like Nelson and Gregoire, he made explicit comparisons with his previous life. Anatole was resettled from a camp in Tanzania. When he learned he was being resettled in the U.S., he was surprised, “Because,” he said, “I was not even thinking about that [resettlement].” He reasoned that he was “given” a new country by the UNHCR because, he said, “we could not be again back to my country. I married a Burundese. I am Congolese. So, in my country, they don’t like those Burundese. So that was very tough for me to come back again to my country. So I was supposed to be all my life stayed outside of my country. So that way UNHCR proposed me to give me a country that … I could stay all my life.” After he told me this I asked him about the most difficult things since resettling. He said, “There are a lot, oh [chuckle-laughter]. [When] we first came, we could not speak English. We came from Swahili and French. So English is our second language, I can say so. To learn how to communicate with people, it was very, very tough, very tough. So that was our first obstacle to [settle] here in America, and also how to find new friends. It was not easy.” When I asked him whether he felt social community here, he said, “Sure, sure. Right now
I have a lot of friends. I am the same as I am in my country, yes. At the beginning it was very tough, because you have to think back to your relative, things like that. But now, I’m ok.” Anatole did not have an entirely different experience in the first months of resettlement than, say, Gregoire. He experienced the same initial challenges of social isolation, linguistic acquisition, and job insecurity. He worked in the Democratic Republic of Congo as a math teacher, but has worked in factory jobs since arriving, the same type of labor that made Gregoire’s life a prison.

I asked him about the most helpful services he received since resettling. He now owns a home because of the Faith House program and is pursuing a B.A. degree in Manufacturing Engineering. Earlier in the interview Anatole had described his relationship with Barbara, the volunteer for World Relief who encouraged him to buy a house, the services he received from World Relief, and the financial assistance from Faith House.

Anatole: Advice is from Barbara, because from this advice today I own the house. It was not that advice I could not... [pause, change of thought]. From Faith House, they helped me to save the money to own this house. From World Relief, they introduce me to the City community ... So I appreciate each of those three persons ... They did a lot in my life to be integrated in America.

Me: Are there any obligations from World Relief or Faith House? They say, ‘here’s our advice but we want something back from you,’ or is it just a gift?

Anatole: Just a gift, yes. World Relief doesn’t want anything. Nothing. Even Faith House it was the same. It is only the gift they give ... There is nothing they want from me. I do not see that. It is a gift ... I appreciate a lot.

Me: Does that motivate you to [cuts me off]

Anatole: Of course, yes. Of course, yes. I saw the example from Faith House. It gives me an idea to help also some refugees later. ‘Why [are] they helping me?’ So, why should I not help somebody else, you see? I got that idea from Faith House, so I have also to assist those refugees who come after me. It is a good idea so I can’t leave that idea like that, no. I can’t leave only John [founder of Faith...
House] to do that. We have to support John also, to help those coming. We have to support him. It is a great idea.

Me: When you receive something then you feel like you have to give back.

Anatole: Not to that man but to another one.²

Anatole expressed gratitude for receiving a “new country,” a down payment, and social inclusion. This response to challenge is a negotiated freedom in resettlement. His emotional response opens up opportunities in his new context without denying the incredible difficulty of those first months, when everything was very, very tough. Thus, Anatole’s gratitude is a motivating factor for his action even though it is felt primarily as the “moral memory.” In the extended interaction above, Anatole feels moral obligation, but this does not limit his volition. It is through his reflection on what has been done for him (“why are they helping me?”) that he feels freedom as a result of the “gift” that he received. He now has the freedom to help other resettled refugees. I saw him act on this moral motivation as well. During my time in the field, he attended Faith House homeownership workshops, sharing his experience and encouraging more recently resettled refugees in pro-social behavior, like applying to owning a home and pursuing education.

Feeling gratitude is not an inevitable outcome of receiving social and financial support after resettlement. But, as Nelson showed, it is an equally powerful emotion as the shame and depression that Gregoire recalled. Their social position and situation influences affect but it does not determine their emotional responses to current and future

² Gratitude, as Solomon (1977: 317) writes, is “intrinsically self-esteeming” and therefore is linked with pro-social or moral behavior. McCullough et al. (2001) argue that gratitude has three moral functions: barometer, reinforce, and motivator. Simmel (1950), as well, expects gratitude to motivate one to act on moral memory of interactions.
situations. The comparative reflection of Nelson and Gregoire is apparent and their present life experience is viewed through that comparative lens.

Emotions that are powerful shape the cognitive assessment of the present experience (Barbalet 2002). Thus, just as cognitive comparison seems to influence the emotional experience of the present (with depression or gratitude), the emotional experience of the present in turn shapes the comparative cognitive assessment of the past. Gratitude is not only a result of assessing present conditions in comparison with past experiences; it also positively shaped Nelson’s experience of the present.

*Flexibility and Gratitude*

In this third section, I present two accounts that further illustrate an association between gratitude and a disposition that motivates one to overcome problems, a kind of emotional resilience. Emotional resilience is the ability to adapt and “bounce back” from negative emotional experiences of stressful and traumatic situations (Tugade & Frederickson 2004; Arce et al. 2009). The connection that I just drew, linking the comparison of past and present experiences with the emotion of gratitude, is an aspect of how refugees form emotional resilience in resettlement. The way that the feeling of gratitude is recounted, the negotiation of the feelings of struggle and the receipt of aid, seems to reshape how Anatole and Nelson experience possible negative feelings of frustration, anger, or shame that Gregoire and Thierry expressed.

As Anatole said, gratitude motivates not only action between beneficiary and benefactor, it also drives him to act morally “not to that person but to another.” Similarly, for Nelson, gratitude for the unexpected services he received influenced his
appraisal of his social position. Even though he is working second and third shift jobs, which he describes as “entry level,” he compares the favorable opportunities here relative to Rwanda, where economic opportunity is based on hegemonic positioning.

Rose and Kossi, a Togolese couple who were resettled to the U.S. from a camp in Ghana, work full-time and take classes toward B.A. degrees, Rose in nursing and Kossi in mathematics. They are pursuing homeownership and told me they believed that it is impossible to save enough money for a down payment without assistance. This outlook on the financial challenge of homeownership was prevalent in the people I interviewed. This schema for financial responsibility framed what is possible and shaped plans for the future. Kossi said,

The major problem with buying a house is this down payment. That is why people don’t like to buy a house in this country. Where can you find this down payment to pay? Maybe if it’s not because of the Faith House program, maybe we never think to buy a house, because our wage is not enough to save something directly and pay the down payment. If today we want to buy a house, we have to say thank you to Faith House for this program. If not [for the program], we will never be able to buy our house. Maybe we need to wait, find a new job, finish the school. Maybe then when we get a best pay, we can save something, put in down payment and buy a house. It’s the problem for most people in this country. Without this program I think we not be able now. Maybe, after ten years or fifteen years we are able to buy a house in this country … Who doesn’t want to get money for a down payment?

They appeared to be genuinely grateful for the opportunities that were available and they felt secure in a better future despite the obstacles. They had to say “thank you” for the support from Faith House and they were grateful for the educational and occupational opportunities available. This was not denial of the challenges. Their social position, and the struggle that came with it, is attributed to general conditions rather than their own actions since resettlement (“It’s the problem for most people in this country”). They
attribute their current position to conditions beyond their control, which may contribute to feeling confidence in finding a way out of those conditions.

Like the other people interviewed, Rose and Kossi made numerous comparisons with previous experience in Togo and the camp in Ghana. For example, after comparing the welfare systems in Togo and America, Kossi said, “in this country you can find a job too. But in Africa, no, it’s very hard to find a job, very hard to find a job.” Rose added, “Here you can find a job if you are willing to do anything. You know, you have some kind of job some people don’t want to do. But we are ready to do it. We don’t care, we don’t mind doing it if we get something at the end.” Kossi concluded, “There are many opportunities in this country.”

The reasoning about this belief reveals one important aspect of how they formed a sense of security in their future, that they will “get something at the end.” I pursued this line of reasoning about relative opportunities by asking, “Is there more inequality here?”

Kossi: No, in my country the gap between the rich and the poor is very big. Because of the corruption system, just only one [group of people] keeps the most money for them. Most people suffer. But not like this in America.

Rose: I think in America there’s a big gap too, because rich people get rich all the time. If you see are many poor in America. But it’s different. What’s different is in Africa like if you are poor it’s difficult to get something to eat. But here, if you are poor, the government could help you to find something to put in your mouth.

Kossi: For example like food stamps.

Rose: But in Africa, if you are poor, nobody will get you food stamp. That is very different.

Despite their humility (“willing to do anything”) they each expect that their work will pay off in the end. Rose cleans houses and Kossi is a janitor. Kossi, however, said, “After ten years I will finish school, get a good job, own our own house.” I followed, “What’s your
hope for a job?” “In nursing and mathematics,” Rose said, and Kossi added, “My dream is PhD, but my goal now is Masters.” Importantly, they did not appear to interpret the obstacles they are facing with a sense of fear or doubt. They believed that if they endure the “entry-level” jobs they find themselves in and get the requisite education, they would get something better at the end.

Gratitude, coupled with the generalization of their position, appears to help in forming a sense that the future is within their control. Thus, they are able to endure entry-level jobs and pursue better jobs because they have resilience. Their resilience is generated through a positive assessment of undeserved increments of value in life opportunities.

Another example of this process of generating and sustaining resilience come from an interview with two Iraqi men. Abdullah and Ahmed were both resettled in the U.S. after fleeing to Syria. They formed an understanding of what type of personality succeeds in resettlement.

Abdullah was in the Faith House program and bought a home two years after he arrived. He is proud of this accomplishment. Abdullah and his son, Ali, express their pride but also feel grateful for those who helped. Ali said, “Not many people come to a new country and own a house in two years.” Laughing, Abdullah added, “I spent 38 years in my country and I couldn’t, I couldn’t [buy a house].” “But it only take us two years here,” Ali said. “Of course, [it was] with helping people,” added Abdullah, “I mean, without people helping, it’s going to take me a lot of time. But many people helped me.”

In contrast, Ahmed (also present at my interview with Abdullah) was a dentist in Iraq, but here he works at a gas station. He did not express pride in his accomplishments
since arriving. His employment status could be a source of shame but he focuses on the opportunities that are available here. He said, “I was dentist back home actually. But to be a dentist here, it is long process. We need to study two years in a school. But to get an opportunity to study these two years, we have to go a long process until we get this chance. Now I’m almost finished the first year and hopefully [in 18 months], I will graduate. Insha’Allah.” He is going back to school to get the requisite training to be a dentist in America. In Abdullah’s living room, I spoke with Abdullah and Ahmed about their goals for the future and the disposition that they think will get them to those goals. I asked them how they form resilience; how they are able to form clear goals despite the shift from working in a respected position as a dentist to working at a gas station or a factory.

Ahmed: Maybe if we stay living in Iraq this change wouldn’t happen to us. Because when you get in special circumstances you need to change your life. You work on it. You need to be better. So if I am in your position [growing up and living in America], maybe I would be the same forever. If I stayed there, back there [in Iraq], maybe I would not get better. But because I came here, I don’t want to…

Abdullah: To lose.

Ahmed: Yes, I want to be what I was before, or better. So I work on it. I this is the secret.

Abdullah: It gives you…gives you…there is a goal, there is a target—you have to reach it.

Ahmed: Also [it] depends on the person.

Abdullah: On personality…

Ahmed: Because, I told you, I am dentist back home. But I came here I work in restaurant. I work in gas station. I work for some time. But I know it is for temporary. I am thinking to my goal. I just want to make my living.

Abdullah: Survive.
Ahmed: Some people, they get good money, but they keep complaining. So it depends, you know.

Abdullah: It’s personality.

Me: Is there a right personality to come and be able to adapt to this context?

Abdullah: I think our personality…

Ahmed: [laughter]

Abdullah: For me / I mean, to be, to be—what is it? [speaking in Arabic]—down to earth, to be humble, or to be down to earth is better than to be complaining about everything. [mocking voice] ‘I used to have a good life, but now my life is boring, my life is not good.’ You know what I mean? This is not good.

Ahmed: This is our general condition, all our countrymen. We lose our country so it’s not related to me or you. It is more general conditions. I think a goal is I want my kids / if I not get it, I want my son, my daughter to get better life. So I will accept lower little of life because I’m thinking to make their life better than mine. Hopefully everything will be better.


Here, again, Ahmed generalized his position, which allowed him to take a dispositional stance toward his future through a sense of gratitude. Abdullah contrasted this disposition with someone who complains and compares a “good life” from before with a “boring life” now. Ahmed gratefully accepted “lower little of life” because he can imagine a real future where his son and his daughter have a “better life.”

In the midst of the struggle to cope with the, at times, overwhelming challenges of adapting to life after resettlement, negotiating a sense of gratitude seems to be associated with the capacity to overcome the obstacles of resettlement. Gratitude in the course of great struggle—which for some people meant life felt like a prison—seems to presume a sense that the future is in not hopeless (Insha’Allah), supporting emotional resilience to bounce back from obstacles that are out of one’s control.
CHAPTER 4:
DISCUSSION

From the analysis of these narratives, I hope to further knowledge of how emotion—and micro-processes in general—is important for understanding adaptation during transition, especially for groups with few cultural and material resources like resettled refugees. Most studies of refugee and immigrant assimilation focus on macro-level analysis (Portes & Rumbaut 2001; Waxman 2001), missing micro-processes on which these trends are built. There is a growing body of qualitative work taking a micro-perspective on immigrant assimilation (Bulmer 1995; Waters 1999). Scholars are beginning to recognize the influence of affective bonds and emotional responses in the formation of identities during assimilation (Brown 2011; Massey & Sanchez 2010). Following these qualitative accounts, this study illustrates how micro-processes influence

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3 Sociology has a longstanding interest in cultural resilience as a process that influences how individuals and groups assimilate in American society (Bulmer 1986). This interest began with theories of how immigrant groups shed values and language to adopt skill in the culture and language in the host context— basically answering the question of how immigrant groups become middle class mainstream Americans (Park 1928; Thomas & Znaniecki 1919; Gordon 1964). However, this largely one-dimensional and linear process of assimilation has since made way for multi-dimensional approaches to cultural resilience that reveal variation in how people maintain a sense of heritage in cultural identity during the process of assimilation (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Alba & Nee 2005; Warner, 2007). These more recent, multi-dimensional approaches recognize the importance of emotion in cultural resilience (Massey & Sanchez 2010), but they have yet to conceptualize emotional resilience as a dimension of interest in the cultural and social exchanges that occur in immigrant assimilation.
the emotional experience and capacity for action and adaptation during resettlement and assimilation.

I suggest that the accounts presented in this paper motivate further investigation into the role of gratitude in maintaining flexibility and pursuing long-term goals. The stories of gratitude in resettlement hints at how this emotion influences one’s ability to form a lasting affective orientation, providing a powerful lens through which to see past, present, and future challenges. The experience of the people in my sample shows evidence that emotional responses to assistance may be positive or negative. My respondents’ reflections on the resettlement process reveal the importance of flexibility for success—in the sense of emotional disposition and in the steps to attain goals.

In his essay, “Faithfulness and Gratitude,” (1950), Georg Simmel likens the emotion of gratitude to a bridge, a kind of lasting affective track, motivating interaction. “Gratitude,” he writes, “as it were, is the moral memory of mankind” (1950: 388). Moreover, it is a secondary, social emotion that Simmel understood as generating interaction, influencing socialization. It is through this memory of tangible or intangible experiences of goods or relationships that gratitude motivates the social action of “faithfulness,” or trust in a social bond (Fitzgerald 1998). Comparing gratitude with other emotions, Simmel says that it is lasting and influential beyond the effect of “love or greed of gain, obedience or hatred, sociability or lust for domination alone” (Simmel 1950: 388). The small but tough thread of gratitude has “thousandfold ramifications throughout society [making] it one of the most powerful means of social cohesion” (Simmel 1950: 389). Simmel’s understanding of emotion as the foundation of one’s attitude, the lens through which one experiences the world, informs how to read his account of gratitude.
Simmel saw gratitude as a part of a fundamental emotional disposition of faithfulness. This recognition and attribution prompt new interactions, emerging from the lasting affective bond of gratitude (Shilling 2002).

Gratitude is defined in several ways. It is, most generally, an other-praising moral emotion (Haidt 2003). Moreover, it is “an estimate of gain coupled with the judgment that someone else is responsible” (Solomon, 1977: 316). Also, gratitude is “the willingness to recognize the unearned increments of value in one’s experience” (Bertocci & Millard, 1963: 389). Emmons and McCullough (2004) say, “Gratitude is an emotion, the core of which is pleasant feelings about the benefit received. At the cornerstone of gratitude is the notion of undeserved merit. The grateful person recognizes that he or she did nothing to deserve the gift or benefit; it was freely bestowed” (5, emphasis in original). Fritz Heider (1958) argued that gratitude is a response to perceived intention, resting on one’s interpretation of the mind of the giver.

In these definitions, gratitude is directed outward, toward a person, group, or object responsible for the “unearned increments of value in one’s experience.” It is like a feeling of social awe, an “elevation” due to the recognition of “moral beauty” in the action of others (Haidt 2003). McCullough et al. (2001) propose that gratitude has three moral functions. It is, first, a moral barometer, revealing the value of certain relations, bonds, and interactions. Second, it is a moral reinforcer by increasing the likelihood that the giver will give again; giving to someone who is grateful reinforces the positive moral worth of that gift. Third, gratitude is a moral motivator because it spurs pro-social behavior in the recipient toward the giver and others. In psychology, gratitude is shown to have a strong correlation to life satisfaction, optimism, autonomy, personal growth, and
purpose in life (Emmons 2007; Emmons & Mishra 2011; Emmons & McCullough 2004; McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, Larson 2001; Wood et al. 2010). Scholars in psychology and sociology alike recognize it as a positive social emotion that is the result of an attribution felt through some self-process (Turner & Stetz 2006). However, although the positive attributes and consequences have been generally agreed upon, there is work in the sociology of emotions that suggests that the experience of being helped may not straightforwardly generate the emotion of gratitude.

I suggest two comparisons that are relevant for furthering our understanding the emotion of gratitude. First, following Haidt (2003), scholars might contrast situations when gratitude is felt in obligation with situations that elicit gratitude as the feeling of elevation in the acceptance of “moral beauty.” Second, it would be interesting to contrast gratitude with the feeling of grief. Gratitude is, at least in part, the feeling of involuntary gain, whereas grief is the felt experience of involuntary loss. Grief is marked by transitory yet strong emotional waves, which are elicited from cognitive and bodily processes related to symbols and images (Charmez & Milligan 2006). Comparing situations of grief and gratitude might help further understand how cognitive reflections influence dispositions that generate the capacity to form a sense of self in the future.
CHAPTER 5:
CONCLUSION

The sociology of emotion addresses situations like that of resettlement as the real or expected loss or gain of status and power to overcome challenges and achieve goals (Kemper 1978, 2007; Collins 1990; Barbalet 1992; Thamm 2004). Positive emotions like pride, happiness, confidence, and self-satisfaction are most often associated with real, perceived, or expected gain or maintenance of resource, while negative emotions like shame, fear, anxiety, and distress are experienced in the real, perceived, or expected loss of resource (Kemper 1978; 2007). Furthermore, Marcel Mauss (1954) argued in The Gift that social obligation, a powerful force in society, was generated through the need to reciprocate gifts. Mauss’ form of social obligation is driven by a sense of deficit. The receipt of a gift is a compulsory loan.

However, the reflections of some resettled refugees in my sample showed that there might be situations when a person negotiates the expression and feeling of a positive emotion of gratitude, even when experiencing the loss of resource, in order to maintain flexibility and pursue long-term goals. This calls into question the role of emotions in stratified interactions by revealing the possible power of gratitude, a past and present focused emotion, in situations of real and perceived loss of resource. How one focuses on new information from previous experience is, perhaps, why gratitude rather
than hope is most powerful for the formation of resilience and the pursuit of goals for refugees in this new social context.

Emotion is significant in forming a disposition to act and the transformation of a cognitive evaluation of circumstance (Barbalet 2002). But more research is needed in various situations to understand how and why gratitude is expressed when we might expect negative feelings of dependence or shame that could accompany the receipt of services. In many situations too much gratitude may lead to dependence and blind obligation. The situations and conditions for long-term dependence and blind obligation are beyond the scope of this paper. I suggest that further study into the influence of gratitude across situations of giving and receiving would benefit from analysis into the long-term effect on obligation and dependence.
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