



The Role of the Cultural Expert in a Skills Training Program for Refugees: A Case Study of the *Sew You Know* Program

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Refugees accounted for 69,909 of the immigrants that were admitted into the US in 2013 (U.S. State Department, 2015). The United Nations High Commissioner's defines a refugee as a person who has been forced to flee his or her country of origin out of fear of war, persecution, or natural disaster. Upon approval for resettlement in the US, a refugee is connected with one of nine resettlement agencies that have been approved by the US government (U.S. State Department, 2015). Despite the resettlement services available to refugees, assimilation into the dominant culture has been slow as many arrive with limited levels of formal education, scant English language proficiency, and lack of work experience (Abdelkerim & Grace, 2012). Assimilation is defined as the process by which the characteristics of an immigrant group begin to resemble those of the native dominant group (Zhou, 1997). Segmented assimilation theory suggests that a variety of assimilation trajectories exist based on the characteristics of the immigrants and the geographical and historical context of entry (Zhou, 1997). To minimize these challenges that refugees face, community organizations sponsor skills training programs. However, many of these efforts have proven futile due to the lack of alignment between refugees' needs and employment opportunities within the community (Abdelkerim & Grace, 2012). Furthermore, these programs often hire cultural experts who would bridge communication between organizers and refugees. However, there is evidence that cultural experts may hinder some of the positive assimilation experiences that refugees truly need, due to the expert's relationship with the immigrant community (Fong, 2004).

In this light, this case study was designed to explore the assimilation experience of an African refugee group, via a skills training program, *Sew You Know*, in a small mid-Western city. This program, sponsored by a local Caucasian-majority church since 2009, focused on developing basic sewing skills. Five Caucasian women ages 42- 71 years organized the program. Over twenty refugees, mostly from Burundi, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, participated in the program. Most of them had little formal education, lived in refugee camps for over a decade before coming to the US, brought very few financial resources with them, and knew no one in the new community. The program used a cultural expert, Maria, a Rwandan, as a mediator between the organizers and the participants. However, Maria was well educated and had worked for the French Embassy in Rwanda prior to being resettled in the US, suggesting a very different background from the participants. In-depth interviews were conducted using an open-ended question format lasting 20-30 minutes each in 2015. Data were collected from 12 participants (1 male and 11 females), aged between 23 and 71, and had either served as organizers (5), the cultural expert (1), or participants (6) in the program. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for repeated themes.

Results showed that Maria was pivotal to the perceptions on the objectives, implementations, and outcomes of the program. First, Maria recruited participants by saying that “maybe from the sewing we can make clothes and we can make a big store,” while the organizers’ goal was “to provide a social outlet and a way for them to learn English, and start a sewing hobby.” This miscommunication created a gap between the parties throughout the duration of the program. Second, Maria did not seem to fulfill her original promises because she did not have the ability to provide real, permanent solutions to the participants, which was “to learn how to cut [make] dresses, different designs for women’s clothing, or pants for men.” Rather, Maria was simply translating what organizers said to the participants without providing feedback. In this role, she became the representative of the dominant U.S. Anglo-Saxon culture to the participants, rather than the advocate of the participants to the US community. Therefore, the program outcomes were assessed rather ambivalently. It was deemed successful by the organizers because some participants “got to love to sew.” However, it was considered unsuccessful to the participants because they “can’t even sew for anyone else.” Maria agreed with both sides, yet also pointed out that “there is [was] no pay, no money, nothing from the organizers” and that participants left the program early as “they wanted to work [full time elsewhere] so bad.”

This study findings show the cultural expert as a central figure in a skills training program offered to an African refugee group as part of assimilation processes. In this particular case, the results show an unqualified cultural expert who lacked not only the ability to serve as a role model for refugees, but also the necessary cross-cultural experiences. Because of that, the program suffered, from the participants’ perspectives, who desperately needed successful assimilation. Therefore, the findings recommend that a more careful selection of proper and qualified cultural experts, as well as proper training and compensation for them, are critical for meaningful and successful assimilation experiences of the refugee populations in the US. Future research is recommended to examine other skills training programs for refugees that have succeeded or failed and to further assess the role of cultural experts in such programs to help refugee resettlement success in the US.

References

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