

# Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology

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Online First Publication, August 5, 2021. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000459>

### CITATION

Dutt, A., Jacquez, F., Chaudhary, N., Wright, B., Adhikari, R., Adhikari, T., Al Shehabi, A., Arnaout, M., Bhandari, M., Macow, H., Mbuyi, M., Ernestine, M., Alexandre, M., Muhamed, Y., Constantin, M., & de Abughosh, L. S. M. (2021, August 5). Creating Collective Solidarity: Insights From the Development and Process Evaluation of Civic Action for Refugee Empowerment in Cincinnati. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000459>

# Creating Collective Solidarity: Insights From the Development and Process Evaluation of Civic Action for Refugee Empowerment in Cincinnati

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**Objective:** Our goal was to describe the development, progress, and functioning of Civic Action for Refugee Empowerment in Cincinnati (CARE: Cincinnati) as a model for community-based participatory research (CBPR) with refugees. We conducted a participatory evaluation to assess our collective ability to employ shared power and equitable decision-making, and to facilitate structures that build member ownership and solidarity. We identify principles and processes that can be used by researchers, practitioners, and activists interested in working toward the creation of more equitable community spaces for refugees. **Method:** Twelve refugee research team members representing seven different countries and ranging in age from 16 to 75 engaged in the participatory evaluation and are coauthors of this manuscript. All participants were interviewed by an external researcher, who transcribed and anonymized responses. Academic researchers first developed preliminary themes and then the entire research team verified, prioritized, and expanded themes. **Results:** The experiences of refugee team members illustrate an iterative process of reflection and action that are both personally satisfying and encourage work for deeper change. The themes further illustrate that the CBPR process aided in developing a sense of solidarity among diverse team members and that the dynamic and participatory organization of the group fostered equitable and creative decision-making. **Conclusions:** Our participatory evaluation suggests that future research partnering with refugees that brings together diverse teams to share power will not only improve research quality and dissemination, but will also serve as a tangible benefit for refugee team members. The shared reflection, analysis, and action process inherent in the research process are individually motivating to refugee team members and foster possibility for transformative change.

### Public Significance Statement

There are increasing numbers of refugees throughout the world. Resettled refugees have several barriers to civic participation. Community-based participatory research offers a way to increase refugee voices and perspectives in civic life.

**Keywords:** refugees, community-based participatory research, civic engagement, solidarity, participatory evaluation

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This material is based upon work funded by the Office of Research and Evaluation at the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) under Grant No. 18REHOH001 through the Community Conversations research grant competition. Opinions or points of view expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of, or a position that is endorsed by, CNCS.

Anjali Dutt served as lead for conceptualization, formal analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, supervision, writing of original draft, writing of review and editing; performed equal contribution in data curation, methodology, project administration, validation. Farrah Jacquez as lead for conceptualization, formal analysis, funding acquisition, writing of original draft, writing of review and editing; performed equal contribution in data curation,

investigation, methodology, project administration. Nabiha Chaudhary served as lead for data curation; performed equal contribution in formal analysis, writing of review and editing. Bryan Wright served as lead for conceptualization; performed equal contribution in formal analysis, funding acquisition, methodology, writing of the review and editing. Roshan Adhikari, Tika Adhikari, Amenah Al Shehabi, Maher Arnaout, Muna Bhandari, Hodan Macow, Mels Mbuyi, Marembo Alexandre, Yasmine Muhamed, Mwesa Constantin, and Lourdes Santos Martínez de Abughosh performed equal contribution in data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology. Manirambona Ernestine performed equal contribution in data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology; served as lead for project administration, supervision.

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The contemporary refugee<sup>1</sup> crisis casts international attention on the devastating realities of the millions of people forced to leave their homes due to violence and persecution. The crisis further illuminates complex challenges that arise with resettlement efforts including the hostility and discrimination many refugees experience, along with significant limitations to the agency when seeking to build new lives (Bevelander & Pendakur, 2014; Khawaja et al., 2008; Tilbury & Colic-Peisker, 2006). Simultaneously, resettled refugees contribute to their new homes in countless ways including increasing cultural diversity, participation in the workforce, starting businesses, and social capital (Lamba & Krahn, 2003). Additionally, although refugees often exhibit numerous strengths including resilience, supportive social networks, and strategic problem-solving skills (Methmann & Oels, 2015; Schweitzer et al., 2007), refugees more commonly are portrayed as recipients of public support, rather than people actively participating in improving the local community. In a global context marked by increased refugee and asylum-seeking populations, there is growing incentive to identify processes that affirm the agency of these groups in seeking to create more just local communities.

One way to explore mechanisms that promote the inclusion and active participation of refugees in host communities is through community-based participatory research (CBPR; Hanza et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2009). This is an approach to research that prioritizes equitable collaboration among partners in seeking to gain a better understanding of specific research topics important within a community. Moreover, the aim of CBPR is to combine knowledge and action to produce justice-oriented social change (Vaughn et al., 2017). Engaging in CBPR with team members from the refugee community can facilitate a process that affirms the agentic contributions refugees make in their communities, takes seriously the knowledge and vision of refugee team members, and opens up the possibility of enacting broader transformation in support of refugee communities. Furthermore, CBPR processes can catalyze a sense of empowered solidarity among all those involved that can support diverse groups of refugees in actualizing shared goals.

The purpose of this article is to describe and assess the development and progress of the Civic Action for Refugee Empowerment in Cincinnati (CARE: Cincinnati) research and action team, specifically in the context of ethical and methodological considerations related to conducting research with refugees in the contemporary United States. Furthermore, this article examines how refugee coresearchers are impacted by participating in CBPR, attending to both the impact of reflection, action, and their integration in an intentionally diverse setting. CARE: Cincinnati was developed to address inequities experienced within local refugee communities, by facilitating a CBPR process wherein refugees are developing and enacting their own agenda for empowered civic engagement in Cincinnati, Ohio. We describe the process of developing a team representing diverse groups of refugees through collaboration with key stakeholders including four community organizations supporting refugees. We then analyze the results of participatory evaluation interviews (Vaughn et al., 2018; Wallerstein et al., 2008) that were conducted with refugee team members to gain insights into how the CBPR process impacted both individual team members and the group as a whole. The overarching aim is to detail principles and processes that can be used by researchers, practitioners, and activists interested in working toward the creation of more equitable community spaces for refugees.

## Ethics and Methods in Refugee Civic Participation Research

Refugees represent diverse, multiply marginalized communities, with unique identities and experiences that necessitate thoughtful ethical and methodological considerations in participatory research. In addition to the challenges of residing in a new country with different cultural norms and languages, most refugees have experienced severe trauma, many are from racially and/or religiously marginalized communities, and most will encounter various other forms of stigma and disruption to daily life (Goodkind & Deacon, 2004; Goodman et al., 2017; Lenette et al., 2013; Pernice, 1994). These difficulties can be amplified in research processes that neglect the complexity of refugees' realities (Block et al., 2013; Ellis et al., 2007). Furthermore, there is considerable diversity both within and between refugee communities, increasing incentive for the use of methods that allocate depth of consideration to intersectional identities and power sharing in research processes.

Previous research provides insight into dilemmas and challenges researchers working collaboratively with refugee communities may face. To begin with, refugees may be hesitant to become involved in research because of their vulnerable status. Even if refugees have legal status to reside in a host country, prior experiences of sociopolitical turmoil, and ongoing hostile rhetoric regarding refugees may create precarious beliefs about being involved in research or expressing critique about life in a host community (Birman & Simon, 2014; Yu & Liu, 1986). Additionally, several researchers point to the complexity of translation in research with refugees (Birman, 2006; Goodkind & Deacon, 2004; Lenette et al., 2013; Pernice, 1994). Although in some instances language barriers can be bridged by having a translator who is both bilingual and bicultural, comfort around disclosing personal information, accepting participant incentives, and other aspects of the research process may not be anticipated or understood by someone who is not fully integrated into a particular refugee community (Birman, 2006). When conducting research with refugees who are from several different communities these challenges are exacerbated.

The challenges of conducting research with refugees not only pose a limitation to the inclusion of diverse voices in academic research, but also to the ability to ensure the perspectives and visions of refugees are included in civic decision-making bodies. Refugees also have unique barriers to their engagement in civic life. For example, refugees are unable to apply for citizenship in the United States until they have received a green card and have lived in the country for at least 5 years. Thus, traditional modes of civic engagement such as voting are not possible during the first several years of relocation. Additionally, narratives focused on refugee integration are primarily focused around whether or not refugees are deserving of safe harbor in a particular country or community, and not on the ability to play a role in shaping the futures of their resettled communities (Hynie, 2018). Given increasing numbers of refugees, there is growing incentive to examine processes that can equitably support refugee integration into civic matters and decision-making. Particularly in noting that refugees offer

<sup>1</sup> According to the United Nations, refugees are individuals who have been forced to flee their home country because of persecution, war, or violence. Asylum seekers are people who are seeking international attention. Not all people who seek asylum will be granted refugee status and safe harbor. However, because both groups are people fleeing threat in their home country, we use the labels interchangeably in this research.

countless contributions to their resettled communities in the United States, including cultural diversity, unique knowledge and skillsets, labor, and social capital, cooperatively identifying and promoting forms of civic engagement that are relevant and meaningful to the refugee community is increasingly needed.

Engagement in participatory research centered on civic engagement with refugees has the potential to yield several transformative outcomes, both for refugees and the broader community. Previous research with marginalized groups internationally illustrates that creating spaces for engagement in inclusive decision-making practices can successfully increase the civic participation of disenfranchised communities (Baiocchi, 2003; Fung, 2003; Goldenberg, 2008; Grabe & Dutt, 2020). Additionally, CBPR involves decentralizing decision-making practices in research, providing support for community members to deliberate and explore solutions to relevant problems, and thorough attention to ensuring cultural relevance in research processes. Thus, involvement in a CBPR project geared toward increasing avenues for refugee civic engagement can both upend asymmetrical relationships between refugees and members of the host community and connects refugees and community stakeholders with one another to collaboratively identify and address barriers to refugee's civic engagement.

In addition to the positive outcomes of CBPR with refugee team members, the process of engaging in this research itself may facilitate meaningful benefits to those involved. Specifically, CBPR groups can serve as an empowering setting that facilitates processes of conscientization, which involves iterative cycles of action and reflection geared toward creating change (Freire, 1972), and unfolds in a sense of empowered solidarity. Empowering settings are organized spaces formed to increase the ability of marginalized communities to gain more control over their lives, resources, and environment (Maton & Salem, 1995). Group discussions that occur within empowering settings often involve identifying shared realities with other people from similarly marginalized communities, thus allowing for connections to be made between individual life experiences and broader structural inequity (Brodsky et al., 2012; Dutt, 2018). Such discussion can catalyze a process of conscientization wherein members of the group engage in iterative cycles of reflection and action, seeking to actualize more just realities for community members (Dutt & Grabe, 2019; Moane & Quilty, 2012). Although researchers examining processes of conscientization tend to focus on the experiences of relatively homogenous group members working together (e.g., marginalized women residing in the same or similar communities; Brodsky et al., 2012; Grabe et al., 2014; children of migrant farm workers; Stevenson & Beck, 2017), settings that both intentionally emphasize the diversity among the membership and the need for justice for all may result in a sense of empowered solidarity. More specifically, the shared consciousness of being members of underserved communities as refugees, paired with the cooperative investigative processes utilized in CBPR, can both increase the depth of relationships across differences and bolster the capacity of the group to work toward social transformation. Furthermore, this experience may reverberate in more widespread change throughout refugee communities.

Although a few studies have been published outlining processes of participatory research with refugees in physical and psychological health research, virtually no research has been published on participatory strategies of civic engagement with refugees in the United States. In our process, we have encountered unique questions

to consider when discerning factors for developing a team focused on civic engagement. First, the refugee population in Cincinnati has grown over the past decade<sup>2</sup> and is considerably diverse. Although it is challenging to calculate accurate numbers of refugees residing in a particular region due to factors such as secondary migration (i.e., when refugees move to another location within the U.S. after their initial resettlement), records from local organizations serving refugee populations estimate that there are more than 25,000 refugees residing in Cincinnati and the surrounding region. Official records indicate that 278 refugees were resettled in Cincinnati in 2017, and 333 refugees in 2016. Currently, more than half of the refugees are from the Bhutanese community, though there are significant groups of refugees from Burundi, Central America, the DR Congo, Eritrea, Iraq, Somalia, and Syria.

In many instances (e.g., health research into a specific medical challenge) it may be preferable to focus on only specific refugee communities, in order to allow for a deeper focus on the social, cultural, and religious values and needs of a specific group. However, with an overarching aim of seeking to foster broader inclusion of refugees in civic life, we were reluctant to exclude refugees from any community in developing our research team. Rather, we opted for diverse involvement in regard to country of origin, age, and gender. An emphasis on diversity is also important to emphasize in the context of civic life because civic decision-making inherently involves taking into consideration the perspectives, needs, and desires of the plurality of people in a community. Having a diverse team creates an additional incentive to ensure that the goals of power sharing and equity that are foundational to CBPR are actualized. In addition to power differentials that stem from academic/nonacademic partnerships, the unique positionalities of refugee team members related to race/ethnicity, gender, length of time spent in the U.S., and fluency with English can increase the likelihood that societal power inequities will disrupt the capacity to develop an empowering setting. However, history is replete with examples of transformative change that occurs when a sense of solidarity is matched with the agency to create change.

### Developing a Participatory Research Team With Refugees in Cincinnati

Noting many of the challenges and inequities faced by refugees previously described, CARE: Cincinnati was developed to create an inclusive and equitably developed agenda for refugee civic engagement in Cincinnati. Currently, and consistent with national standards, refugee integration into the Cincinnati community occurs through an official resettlement organization. Through this process, refugees are supported in finding housing and employment, signing up for school, utilizing public transportation, etc. for an average of 60 days. Although these areas of support in navigating life in a new country are essential, the prescribed nature of this support does little to acknowledge refugees' own agency, nor promotes the full integration of refugees into the civic life of their new community. Our participatory project thus focuses on refugees developing and enacting their own agenda for empowered civic engagement in the Cincinnati region.

<sup>2</sup> Cincinnati ranked #82 among metro areas resettling refugees between 2007 and 2016 with 1,743 resettled in the metro area between these years. Fiscal Policy Institute analysis of WRAPS data, January 2007 to end of 2016.



## The Present Study

CARE: Cincinnati was intentionally created as a diverse group of refugees from around the world working together to increase civic engagement and improve well-being of refugees in our city. In the spirit of reflection and iterative feedback inherent in the principles of CBPR (Springett & Wallerstein, 2008), we conducted a participatory evaluation to assess group members' perception of the progress and functioning of our team. This manuscript reflects the perspectives of refugees engaging in CBPR and is coauthored by each member of the CARE: Cincinnati team, meeting a critical need to center the voices of refugees in research targeting refugee communities. Insight into the individual and collective experiences of team members can inform best practices for engaging in collaborative and participatory research with refugees.

## Method

### CARE: Cincinnati Team Process

In this section, we describe the development of our team and provide an overview of some of the research and action processes we have engaged in to date. The project was initially conceptualized by the Executive Director of Cincinnati Compass, an immigrant and refugee welcoming organization in Cincinnati, and two faculty members at the University of Cincinnati, both of whom had experience conducting CBPR research with diverse and globally marginalized communities. To ensure the project would have real-world impact for refugee communities, we sought collaboration from the beginning from policy-making stakeholders that have the power to actualize change in the city. Specifically, the City of Cincinnati Mayor's office and the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber of Commerce, through Cincinnati Compass, have been engaged throughout the research process. To recruit a diverse and inclusive team of refugee coresearchers, we partnered with three community organizations supporting refugees' integration in the region: (a) the official refugee resettlement organization in our area, (b) an agency focused on creating networks to foster greater inclusion of refugees in the region, and (c) a nonprofit focused on building community support programs for refugees. All three of these organizations play integral roles in supporting refugee well-being in the region and were funded partners in the research. We asked leaders in each of the three agencies to identify individuals from diverse refugee communities who would be interested in becoming involved in an action research team focused on civic engagement. To ensure our team represented the diverse refugee communities in our city, we specifically recruited coresearchers representing different ethnic, cultural, national, religious, socioeconomic, and age backgrounds. When developing recruitment criteria, we carefully considered linguistic challenges. Although we recognized English language proficiency is often associated with higher access to resources, and thus requiring some level of English proficiency for participation would potentially exclude some refugee community members, the benefit of diverse refugee communities collaborating on the project led us to require that participants have minimal English language proficiency for the initial team. We budgeted funding for interpreters for those whose English proficiency was limited and, in each meeting, we had Arabic, Somali, and French linguistic interpreters.

Through collaboration with the community organizations, we successfully recruited a team of diverse refugee coresearchers, most of whom are advocates and leaders in ethnic community-

based organizations and serve as liaisons between CARE: Cincinnati and their communities. Our Program Manager was also recruited from the refugee community and serves as both a member of the team and is the primary coordinator of meeting planning and logistics. Over the course of 1 year, CARE: Cincinnati met a total of 10 times (approximately monthly), mostly on Friday evenings. Dinner catered by refugee or immigrant-owned restaurants was served at each meeting. Our first three meetings were in community settings (e.g., community recreation centers), but coresearchers were driving long distances in rush hour traffic and requested a more central location. Coresearchers voted and agreed that the university was the best location, so we used grant funding to cover parking and have held all other meetings on campus. CARE meetings are held primarily in English, but three members of the teamwork with interpreters to facilitate participation.

A major emphasis of CARE meetings is the prioritization of shared decision-making. During initial meetings, the CARE team collaboratively refined our research questions and discussed methods of data collection that were most appropriate. Our research team then decided that a survey with a large sample of refugees from diverse populations would provide the most convincing evidence to drive program development and policy change. Although the purpose of this article is not to discuss the findings of this survey but instead the experiences of team members in designing and executing the research process, we describe some details about survey development. For 3 months, we collaboratively worked to design a survey to capture how refugees are currently living, working, and socializing in their communities, and to identify strengths, resources, and insights on what is needed to increase civic engagement. To gather insights that would inform the development of the survey instrument, refugee team members had conversations with people in their communities about their concerns and goals regarding civic life in this region. We discussed the outcomes of these initial conversations and created a list of the concerns that were identified by refugee communities. The faculty researchers then used these conversations to draft an initial survey in English that reflected the insights derived from refugee community conversations. All of the team members went through each question in the survey, making suggestions for changes and additions. Coresearchers not comfortable reading in English worked with a bilingual and bicultural interpreter to make changes. Faculty researchers updated the survey to accommodate the suggestions and the team went through another iteration of edits. Coresearchers then administered surveys in the community with a collaboratively developed incentive strategy. Manuscripts providing further details on the design and results of this research are currently in preparation. CARE: Cincinnati is further preparing to disseminate results in refugee communities and to policy-making stakeholders. The group was awarded the second year of grant funding with which action research informed by survey results will be enacted.

## Participants

For the present study, each refugee team member on the CARE: Cincinnati team participated in an interview to share their individual perspectives and a group meeting to collaboratively identify prioritized themes. The 12-member team represents 7 refugee communities: Bhutanese, Burundian, Congolese, Iraqi, Guatemalan, Syrian, and Somali. Participants were diverse in age (range 16–75), gender (42% male, 58% female), and years living in the United States (range 2–12). Nine members of the team were fluent in English

and participated in team meetings without the assistance of an interpreter; three members of the team participated in meetings with an interpreter. See Table 1, for de-identified demographic information. Participants are all funded members of the CARE: Cincinnati team; they received an additional incentive of \$25 to participate in the interview.

## Procedure

The initial intention of our participatory evaluation was to understand the impact of the refugee team member experience on individual CARE: Cincinnati members, on group functioning, and on civic engagement of refugees in Cincinnati. To meet this end, all 12 refugee team members participated in semistructured, in-depth interviews to assess views of the perceived agency, group functioning, and collaborative impact. Using the protocol from an evaluation of another CBPR team in our area as a model (Vaughn et al., 2018), we developed an interview protocol that used open-ended prompts to probe overarching perspectives and Likert-scale<sup>3</sup> items to elicit ratings and prompt-specific feedback on trust, shared decision-making, agency, belonging, equality, collaboration, and solidarity (see, Appendix for interview protocol). The protocol was adapted collaboratively, with iterative feedback between the faculty members, the community organization director, and the Program Manager. Although the general idea for the evaluation was discussed with the entire CARE: Cincinnati team, coresearchers did not develop interview prompts. To encourage open, honest reflection, an external person not previously part of the project was selected to conduct interviews. The interviewer was a graduate student with training in qualitative research methods who had recently immigrated to the United States for her doctoral degree. Over the course of 4 weeks, the interviewer met with each CARE: Cincinnati member at their homes or workplace. The interviewer took detailed notes with quotes in response to each prompt. Interviews lasted 60 min on average. Nine interviews were conducted in English, and three were conducted through interpreters who regularly interpret during CARE: Cincinnati meetings (two in Arabic and one in French).

**Table 1**  
*CARE: Cincinnati Team Demographic Information*

Interviewee	Years in		Age	Gender	Community represented	First language
	USA					
1	12	23	Male	Burundi	Kirundi	
2	3	46	Female	Iraq	Arabic	
3	3	75	Male	Congolese	French	
4	6	19	Female	Somali	Somali	
5	5	27	Female	Guatemalan	Spanish	
6	2	44	Male	Syrian	Arabic	
7	7	23	Female	Bhutanese	Nepali	
8	3	29	Male	Congolese	French	
9	9	25	Female	Bhutanese	Nepali	
10	6	16	Female	Somali	Somali	
11	9	18	Male	Bhutanese	Nepali	
12	12	27	Female	Burundi	Kirundi	

*Note.* Interview numbers are not the same as participant numbers listed with quotes in the results section to maintain anonymity.

## Data Analysis

The data analysis process was conducted in several phases. First, to distill the data and provide manageable material for a group evaluation process, authors AD and FJ used an inductive approach to condense the raw data into a briefer summary format that conveyed key thematic codes (Thomas, 2006). In the second phase, we took the codes that were identified through open coding and presented them to the larger CARE: Cincinnati team. Over the course of a 2-hr meeting, refugees used their own experiences as CARE: Cincinnati members to verify the codes and to determine the most important aspects and patterns. The analysis meeting resulted in a list of four codes that we as a group agreed best-represented refugee team members' experiences and most accurately assessed impact on individuals, group functioning, and community action. During the group interpretation meeting, all members of the team agreed that these codes reflected their experience as members of the team. After the analysis meeting, the faculty authors went back to the original interview transcriptions to assess for missing concepts or themes and to identify quotations that best-represented identified codes. We further aimed to situate the codes into the broader literature of empowerment and conscientization by analyzing them into thematic categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, we condensed the four initial codes into praxis and transformation, each with two subthemes that capture the initially identified codes.

## Results

Below we present findings detailing aspects of involvement in the CBPR process that reflect how refugee members of CARE: Cincinnati experienced the research process. Table 2 provides an overview of each code we identified in our interview and analysis process, and representative quotes shared during the individual interviews.

### Theme 1: Praxis

The first theme captures the meaning team members placed on connecting with other refugees through involvement in the research process and uniting to develop and engage in actions in support of the diverse refugee communities in the Cincinnati region. Integral to processes of conscientization is praxis, which involves iterations of reflection and action aimed toward the transformation of unjust structures (Freire, 1972). Thus, within our examination of praxis, we assess both how reflection and action in this intentionally diverse setting impacted members and the group dynamic.

### Shared Reflection Builds Solidarity

Refugee team members explained that being able to connect with refugees from several different communities had a powerful impact on their own understanding of what it means to be a refugee. Team

<sup>3</sup> We opted to use Likert style questions based upon the outcomes of previous discussions with team members to discuss survey development wherein we determined that Likert style questions were something all team members were comfortable. Researchers interested in using a similar evaluation method with culturally and linguistically diverse groups should ensure that this method is appropriate, particularly in noting that Likert style questions do not translate across all cultural and linguistic groups (Grabe, 2010).

**Table 2**  
*Summary of the Themes and Examples*

Themes	Description	Examples
Praxis: shared reflection builds solidarity	Developing a deep sense of connection with diverse team members via reflections on shared identity as refugees, and motivation to work improve the realities of all refugees.	“I deeply care about the refugees here and their living status and would always be willing to play any part in it.” [P #5] “People had different stories but somehow we all went through the same stuff.” [P #1]
Praxis: action to create change	Satisfaction that comes from being able to engage in actions to support the refugee community.	“I am a refugee myself. I can relate to other refugees and I know the problems refugees face. So, I like helping them where I can.” [P #11] “Helping people is what stands out to me. It is amazing to be at a place where I can help people in my community as well as others.” [P #10]
Transformation: individual transformation	The experience of gaining knowledge and skills is experienced as personally satisfying and a source of growth.	“Most striking aspect was that I learned about other refugee people. About their cultures and countries and food.” [P #2] “I learned how people belonging to different cultures understand different questions . . . I never thought asking someone about their “necessity” needs would be unacceptable in [some] cultures. [P #4]
Transformation: transformative group context	The development of a respectful and trusting group environment that adapts with the group.	“I was very involved since beginning. I was involved in brainstorming, changing information, making logo, everything” [P #5] “I never felt like somebody is more important than me. We were all given same respect.” [P #8]

members expressed that in the past they had formed connections within refugee communities predominantly organized by racial, ethnic, or religious identities. However, uniting as a team explicitly focused upon the shared identity and experience of being a refugee allowed for a deep sense of connection across differences and desire to seek more just realities for all refugees in the region. The opportunity to discuss and reflect upon the diverse experiences team members had as people from different refugee communities in the Cincinnati region also cultivated interest and appreciation for members’ uniqueness. Furthermore, recognizing the shared marginalized experiences as refugees across diverse communities allowed for group meetings to invoke a shared critical consciousness reflecting initial phases of a process of conscientization.

In particular, members of the team said that involvement in this project deepened their identity as a member of the global refugee community. For example, when asked about what they gained from being involved in CARE, one member shared, “It has made me feel part of the refugee community. I feel more integrated now. Not just with people from my country, but from people all over the world who share the status of refugee” [P# 3]. Being connected with other refugees and collaboratively discussing life experiences and concerns added a palpable connection to members’ own understanding of the meaning of having refugee status. Theorists studying conscientization explain that the process is often catalyzed by “epiphany moments” wherein an individual, often in a group setting, comes to understand how structural inequities shape lived experience (Berta-Ávila, 2003). Learning firsthand about shared hardship and similarities in transition experiences fostered a deeply felt connection with other refugees and shared concern for each other’s communities. Thus the knowledge gained through shared reflection awakened a critical consciousness regarding the identity of being a refugee. Similarly, another team member highlighted shared emotional understanding that came through this process: “I learned . . . that we have same problems. Thus, common grieving” [P# 4]. The recognition that the shared outsider experiences of

refugees across communities results in similar forms of hardship and disenfranchisement awakened a realization of common emotional pain. This then strengthens commitment to support all refugees.

Importantly, the sense of solidarity was not simply achieved through a understanding of what team members had in common. Rather, affording thoughtful attention to the diversity of experiences and perspectives offered by team members from different refugee communities and vantage points emphasized the benefits of learning from each other in seeking to create change. Illustrating this point, one team member shared:

“I used to get fascinated by [another member’s] opinions and perspectives. I learned how every community has its own ways of living and surviving and a special system of talking among themselves. An outsider really cannot get the information which will make a difference for refugees.” [P# 2]

Recognizing the unique insights each person held fostered an understanding that no one group could speak for all other refugees, and thus the insights each team member brought were indispensable. Furthermore, working as a team could bring together insights of both the unique and shared challenges and goals that are needed to bring about meaningful change for refugees. The manner in which discussing diverse experiences related to deepening critical consciousness both demonstrates the role of reflection in conscientization processes and yields additional insight into the process by illustrating the development of critical consciousness in an intentionally diverse setting. One comes to understand not only their own group as necessary voices to be included in change-making spaces, but that other marginalized communities need to be included as well.

### *Action to Create Change*

Refugee team members also described the importance of engaging in actions to create change for refugees via their involvement in CARE: Cincinnati. As other researchers have noted, refugees are more

frequently viewed as recipients of social support, rather than as people actively contributing to their community (Lamba & Krahn, 2003). Indeed, the bulk of programming that exists for refugees emphasizes ways of being served, rather than opportunities that acknowledge the agency of resettled refugees (Ghorashi & Ponzoni, 2014). Seeing oneself as able to support other people thus was viewed as personally empowering and important because it allowed team members to express deeply felt care for the community. Furthermore, conscientization involves iterative processes of reflection and action to evoke change. Thus, as group conversations moved toward determining actions to gain more knowledge and address community concerns, desire and capacity to work for transformative change deepened.

Consistently, members of the team described appreciation for the ways in which the project prioritized action: “This project is action oriented. It is not just talking. It’s field work, its practically going to refugees and talking to them and doing something” [P #11]. The focus on action enables members to actualize their goals of supporting the community: “I feel good about myself that I am in a position to help other refugees and make them feel comfortable. I have developed this helpful side of me” [P #6]. Processes of conscientization involve channeling growing awareness about the realities of inequity into actions for change. Via involvement in CARE, team members developed a greater sense of empowerment to work for their own desired change and provide support for their community.

A desire to support other refugees was a primary motivation for joining the team, and not merely outcome of engagement. For example, one person shared “I was motivated to be a voice for people like me. I don’t want others to go through what I went through” [P# 7]. Having lived experience of the trauma and hardship people face as refugees transitioning to a new country underscored the importance of doing work to create better experiences for refugees transitioning to life in the U.S. in the future. Team members also recognized this shared concern in each other: “People really care. Even the ones I think are there for money, even they care. I see so many people coming to meetings from far off places because they care. They have faith that their participation will bring some change” [P #5]. Despite this participant suspecting that some members were motivated for the income attached to involvement, it was clear that involvement was also driven by a desire to help others. Uniting shared reflection with action enabled group members to gain a greater understanding of each other’s motivations, which in turn could bolster the collective agency of the group.

## Theme 2: Transformation

The second theme shifts from a focus on the reflection and action dynamics within the CARE meetings that aided in facilitating a process of conscientization, to a focus on how the process yielded transformative outcomes at both the individual and group levels. Importantly, the purpose of praxis in processes of conscientization is the transformation of individuals and their community (Freire, 1972). Although our team had been meeting for only 6 months at the time of the evaluation interviews, examples of transformation had already emerged.

### *Individual Transformation*

At an individual level, team members found the knowledge they gained through participation in CARE: Cincinnati as personally

transformative. Gaining knowledge is an integral part of any form of action research—learning about a phenomenon and its manifestation in different contexts is necessary for all efforts to create meaningful change. As one CARE team member put it, the “intellectually stimulating” environment was particularly meaningful because it added to a sense of personal growth that stemmed from involvement.

Several different aspects of meaningful knowledge gained were described in the interviews. For example, some mentioned joy and growth coming from the conversations that are held during each meeting: “They generate such great discussions that they make me think of questions and I find my mind alive” [P #6]. Others expressed appreciation for the experience of being in a space where information about living in the United States could be shared: “This project has really helped me grow as a person. Now I know more about U.S. policies and ways of living, the rules and regulations” [P #7]. In this sense it becomes apparent that it is not just that knowledge is being gained, but also the way knowledge is being shared plays a valuable role in facilitating space for growth. Although the academic team members in this process may pose specific questions and share insights about the research process, the bulk of knowledge that is gained comes from the collective discussion that unfold in each meeting. For example, sharing information about U.S. policies and regulations was not envisioned as a goal of the meetings by the academic team members, but the information is often shared among team members due to refugee team members’ goals and insights.

Team members also expressed appreciation for learning more about other people’s experiences as refugees, and for learning about the research process:

“I got to meet people from different countries and backgrounds, and it helped me grow as a person in a way that I became more open-minded . . . [and] I learned how to be part of research design. Instead of just following a set protocol, we were part of it and it surely prepares me for future research” [P #1]

In addition to seeing the diversity of the team as a benefit for developing a sense of collaborative solidarity, gaining knowledge about the various backgrounds of people on the team was personally satisfying to members, allowing for a broader understanding of refugee experiences. Additionally, many members expressed excitement about participatory research designs because knowledge about this research process could open up research opportunities both as careers and to continue supporting the community. These examples illustrate how the knowledge gained through the discussion of both diverse refugee experiences and addressing concerns through participatory research was experienced as personally transformative.

### *Transformative Group Context*

Group-level transformation was evident in explanation of the organizational dynamic of the meetings that are held to plan and design the research process. Team members described the meeting culture as a space where everyone is treated as respected equals, and all input is taken seriously and used to guide decision-making. Although challenges arose, the collaborative spirit facilitated a dynamic wherein these challenges did not hinder the overarching value of the process.



Although group dynamics were most often described as successful, evaluation interviews also revealed challenges that were faced. For example, a few members of the team joined late, after a few meetings had already been held, and thus did not have the same amount of input in planning and designing the research. Comfort with English and age also impacted the ability to participate to the full extent one wished. For example, one person shared, “Because of language barrier, I missed a lot. The translator was not always there and therefore I could not be as involved as I wanted to be” [P #10]. And, another explained, “I feel I held back. I feel I could have said more, participated more. And it’s just my nature I guess because I am young, and I felt too junior” [P #8]. These insights underscore that existing societal hierarchies shape the meeting space, and point to ways the team dynamic could improve.

Interviews also unveiled ways in which the development of a group culture that centered on trust and respect among all team members facilitated a transformative group setting in which depth of capacity to share and work together grew. For example, during the interviews team members explained that at meetings they felt they were treated as though “[we] are the experts. Our opinions and thoughts were always welcomed and taken seriously” [P #4]. Another person shared “I felt heard even though there was a language barrier for me, but I enjoyed the way they treated us as experts and never stopped us from speaking our minds” [P #10]. An established culture of respect and mutuality sets a foundation for a generative environment where everyone is encouraged to work collaboratively toward achieving cooperatively developed goals.

The collaborative, dynamic meeting process also involved ensuring that everyone had the opportunity to share their ideas on a particular topic, and subsequently consider all perspectives when making decisions. For example, one team member said:

“We were all equals. We don’t say ‘you are from Nepal, so you cannot decide or say this or that’. We are all equal partners and we respect each other. We all share ideas and try to find a middle ground, a best answer for everything. We take chunks of information from everyone and then come up with a new combined solution.” [P #6]

Team members appreciated that this process allowed for creative solutions to arise: “Everybody had different ideas and so creative solutions were developed after merging all the discussion points. It was such an interesting process” [P #9]. Ultimately, the transformative group context creates a platform for deeper reflection and action allowing for the continuing cycles aimed toward just change for refugees in the region.

## Discussion

According to the United Nations (2019) there are currently more than 28.5 million refugees and asylum seekers, the most the world has ever seen, and this number is expected to grow due to social conflict, war, and environmental catastrophe. Where the political category of refugee was initially developed to catalyze concern and action directed toward protecting human rights, many refugees live in a context of widespread precarity with minimal opportunity to actualize desired change (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2019). With this reality in mind, CARE: Cincinnati was founded to create an empowering space wherein refugees could develop and enact their own agenda for community change. Although there remain substantial barriers to actualizing justice for refugee communities, CARE: Cincinnati

offers a model of community mobilization using CBPR that allows the member of the refugee community to experience and enact a vision of transformation in the local context.

The findings from our participatory interviews illustrate that refugee members of the CARE: Cincinnati team found meaning and value in their involvement. The combined impact of having space to reflect about experiences and concerns, and plan actions to enact desired change with people who both had the shared experience of being refugees but were from diverse communities, yielded several positive outcomes for both individuals and the whole team. This dynamic facilitated a process of conscientization that increasingly supports refugee team members’ civic engagement in the community. Moreover, the process supports team members in gaining knowledge, skills, and capacity to effect broader civic change for the refugee community.

Nevertheless, limitations to our process impacted the team. Most significantly, is the inability of our team to address the most desired structural changes members of the team wish to see. At almost every meeting, team members shared stories of loved ones with whom they are unable to reunite due to bans and caps on refugees eligible to enter the United States. The fact that the research has been conducted in an era in which the fewest number of refugees have been resettled in the United States since the resettlement program began<sup>4</sup>, and a ban exists on accepting refugees from six Muslim majority countries weighed heavily on team members. However, we had to accept that as a team this was an area we were unable to prioritize in effecting change. Additionally, the fact that all the authors of this study were part of the participatory evaluation may be a limitation. Although individual interviews were anonymized prior to analysis, it is possible that social desirability encouraged participants to describe their experiences in a more positive light. However, team members did point out the challenges in their experiences (e.g., youth and language limiting participation), thus we believe that the interviews captured authentic experiences. We also did not consult with refugee team members on the questions to include in participatory evaluation nor in the initial phases of interview analysis, though we did leave space for team members to share any additional insights on their experience both during individual interviews and during the group processing meeting. We encourage future researchers to include all team members when designing evaluations to increase the participatory nature and equity of the process.

## Implications for Participatory Research With Refugees

Although the literature documenting CBPR with refugees in the United States is somewhat limited, several successful examples exist. In most instances, partnerships are with specific refugee communities to address the prioritized needs of those communities. For example, a partnership between researchers and Somali refugees in Maine and Massachusetts works to reduce stigma and improve

<sup>4</sup> During the fiscal year 2018 (October 1, 2017 to September 30, 2018), a total of 22,491 refugees were resettled in the United States. The numbers are expected to be lower for the fiscal year 2019. U.S. President Trump lowered the cap on the number of refugees who can enter the United States to 30,000 in 2019. The cap in 2017 set by the Obama administration was 110,000 refugees.

access to mental health care (Ellis et al., 2007). Another partnership in Massachusetts works with Somali Bantu to investigate mental health in refugee children (Betancourt, Frounfelker, et al., 2015; Frounfelker et al., 2020). Our community research team, however, consisted of refugees representing seven different communities who were united to increase civic engagement of refugees in our city. In planning our project, we approached differences in language, immigration experiences, and cultural norms as challenges to work through. And, as our results show, some challenges arose illustrating that despite our prioritization of inclusivity and power sharing, our team was not immune to ways power differentials of language, age, and other aspects of identity shaped our research process. For example, one member who was less fluent in English explained that at times they felt they could not contribute to the extent they desired because translators did not reliably attend meetings. The reflection process that occurred during these interviews catalyzed the group to take advantage of our network of partners to identify consistent translators. In the end, refugee team members described the group's diversity as the most salient strength of our project. Challenges were not erased but the process of working together through iterations of reflection and action allowed obstacles to become not only manageable but worthwhile. We chose to work with a diverse team of refugee researchers in order to broaden the scope of impact in our city. We had not expected that the collective solidarity of a diverse team would be the most appreciated dynamic among the individuals participating. Future projects considering participatory research with refugees should consider bringing together diverse teams not only to improve research quality and dissemination, but also to serve as a tangible benefit for team members.

As psychologists working through a CBPR lens, the academic authors are consistently striving to be action-focused and to avoid collecting knowledge only for knowledge's sake (Resnik & Kennedy, 2010). When asked to describe the parts of working on our team they most valued, refugee team members consistently mentioned the value in developing knowledge and skills. It is not at all surprising that refugee team members would find joy and meaning in gaining knowledge, and rank this as an important benefit of participation in CARE: Cincinnati—learning and feeling useful are two documented motivators of human behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Nevertheless, this, ironically, was a surprise to the academic partners; our pendulum shift toward using research for action caused us to lose sight of the meaning behind gaining knowledge simply for the sake of learning. Our results encourage those using CBPR not to overlook the individual gains associated with engagement in participatory research, and note that this can sustain motivation to work toward community-level impact.

Refugee team members also emphasized the importance of the dynamic, intentional process that creates shared decision-making and a positive working environment. Their prioritization of group dynamics for equity are consistent with the principles of CBPR, which emphasize intentional processes that facilitate equitable power (Becker et al., 2005). In recruiting a diverse team of refugee team members, we intentionally sought out diversity in age, gender, years in the United States, and refugee community. We also intentionally excluded anyone with current power within refugee-serving organizations to ensure that all voices were considered equal from the start. We found these intentional strategies to center diverse perspectives to be successful in enhancing solidarity and perceptions

of equitable voice in decision-making. Participatory research with refugees should consider the sociopolitical context of team members and the research setting in order to design collaborative processes that intentionally override inequity.

We also note that it was a conscious decision to include only team members with some degree of comfort with the English language and that there were significant costs to this decision. Refugees with greater ability to communicate in English are likely to hold several privileges and faceless alienation than refugees with no English language skills. We considered options such as language translation headsets to make it possible for non-English speakers to join, but through consultation with leaders of local refugee organizations, we opted to prioritize ease of communication to maximize the potential for group cohesion and connection with this first foray into collaborative research. Although we felt this decision was optimal for our group, we encourage future researchers to assess the costs and benefits in their own contexts.

In an era in which even those most concerned about the well-being of refugees tend to use a deficit lens, our team was designed to affirm the agency of refugees and have them drive the research and action process. Our team is living out civic engagement among community members largely neglected in these processes. In doing so, our city is creating space for refugee-led initiatives toward civic transformation.

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## Appendix

### Interview Guide

1. Tell me about being part of CARE: Cincinnati
  - a. First, can you tell me about how being part of the team has affected you as a person?
  - b. What motivated you to want to be part of CARE: Cincinnati and this project
  - c. What parts of being involved in CARE: Cincinnati stand out for you?
  - d. Do you think this project will have an impact on the Refugee community in Cincinnati? How so?
2. What was it like working with the other coresearchers in CARE: Cincinnati? What are the best parts? What is difficult/challenging?
3. What was it like working with the academic members of CARE: Cincinnati? What were the best parts? What was difficult/challenging?

Now, let me ask you about some specific aspects of your relationships and interactions with other people within the CARE: Cincinnati team:

4. When it comes to trust among members of the CARE: Cincinnati team, how would you rate trust?

(5 being the highest amount of trust and 1 being the lowest amount of trust)

1 2 3 4 5

### Tell Me Why You Gave That Rating for Trust

5. When it comes to decision-making among members of the CARE: Cincinnati team, how would you rate your involvement in decision-making? (5 being the highest amount of trust and 1 being the lowest amount of involvement in decision-making)

1 2 3 4 5

### Tell Me Why You Gave That Rating for Involvement in Decision-Making

6. When it comes to learning new skills and knowledge as part of the CARE: Cincinnati team and project, how would you rate your learning? (5 being the highest amount of learning and 1 being the lowest amount of learning of new skills and knowledge)

1 2 3 4 5

### Tell Me Why You Gave That Rating for Learning Skills and Knowledge

7. How much does the process of working with CARE: Cincinnati allow for your voice to be heard? (5 being the highest rating of your voice heard and 1 being the lowest rating of your voice heard)

1 2 3 4 5

### Tell Me Why You Gave That Rating for Your Voice Being Heard

8. To what extent do you feel being involved in CARE: Cincinnati enables you to learn more about the experiences of other refugee communities living in this area? (5 being the highest amount of learning and 1 being the lowest amount of learning)

1 2 3 4 5

### Tell Me Why You Gave That Rating for Learning About Other Refugee Communities

9. To what degree did you feel like an “equal partner” in the CARE: Cincinnati team? (5 being the highest amount of working together/collaboration and 1 being the lowest amount of working together/collaboration)

1 2 3 4 5

### Tell Me Why You Gave That Rating for Equal Partner

10. When it comes to working together and collaboration among the whole team of CARE: Cincinnati, how would you rate the level of collaboration and working together? (5 being the highest amount of working together/collaboration and 1 being the lowest amount of working together/collaboration)

1 2 3 4 5

### Tell Me About Why You Gave That Rating for Working Together/Collaboration

11. To what extent do you feel a sense of solidarity with other members of CARE: Cincinnati? (5 being the highest level of solidarity, and 1 being the lowest level of solidarity)

1 2 3 4 5



**Tell Me About Why You Gave That Rating for  
Solidarity**

12. Overall, what were the most challenging parts of being part of CARE: Cincinnati?
13. Overall, what were your favorite parts of being part of CARE: Cincinnati?

Received June 17, 2019

Revision received January 10, 2021

Accepted January 11, 2021 ■