
A Reflection on IRSC AmeriCorps Experience and Design Research Combining to Address Challenges of Resettled Refugees in the US

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Abstract

This paper reflects on my work and research experience with resettled refugees in the United States. I served as an AmeriCorps member for the Immigrant and Refugee Service Corps in Indianapolis, Indiana. During that time, many needs and barriers of resettled families became evident, and I began to dream up an idea of how gaps in access to resource information could be addressed. I co-led an exploratory study with a former professor that involved mentoring undergraduate students as they tackled some of the challenges resettled families faced through web design, which eventually led me into graduate school. My graduate studies are teaching me about qualitative research methods and human-centered designing. Some of this was put into practice in order to facilitate modified design workshops with resettled refugees in a pilot study. I continue to evolve my initial project idea as I learn more in order to let a solution emerge rather than jumping on an idea right away. I believe my experiences can contribute to the HCIxB symposium, not to mention the rich interactions and insights I would gain from participating in it.

Author Keywords

Resettled refugees; refugees; human-centered design, HCD; user experience design, UXD; participatory design, PD; design workshops with refugees.

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Introduction

In May of 2014, I graduated from Purdue University with a degree in Computer Graphics Technology. In my undergraduate studies my main focus was in Graphic Design: combining print and web design classes with traditional art and design courses and a Human-centered Design Development (HCDD) class. I held several internships and part-time jobs in graphic design or marketing assistant roles, as well as volunteer roles producing print and digital designs for organizations.

Outside of school activities as an undergraduate, I participated in and held leadership roles in a student ministry on campus. This ministry led many educational and service trips, one of which involved our students collaborating with a church of resettled refugees from Dallas, TX to work together to restore an impoverished community's nursery school in New Orleans, LA. This experience combined with the mentorship of a dear friend, and now brother, from Democratic Republic of Congo, helped nurture and develop skills and competencies communicating and working cross-culturally. These developing skills and expansions of my mind in understanding, compassion, and learning about people, became a driving force as I continued my educational and post-educational pursuits.

After graduating with my B.S. degree, I decided to not seek out the often traditionally sought after industry jobs, but instead to seek out multi-cultural opportunities to immerse myself into using my learned and natural skills to empower disadvantaged people. This came to fruition through my acceptance into an AmeriCorps program in Indianapolis called the Immigrant and Refugee Service Corps (IRSC). This service role revealed challenges that resettled refugees face. Observing these challenges reminded me of the HCDD course I took as an undergrad, and sparked an idea for how technology could be used to help address some of the challenges. This idea eventually led me back to school, where I am now studying Human-centered Design Development. I am specifically focusing on how design and technology can be used to address challenges of resettled refugees in Indianapolis. Additionally, I am learning about qualitative research, learning how to use User Experience Design principles, and researching participatory design methods in order to work and design as much as possible *with* resettled refugees, instead of *for* them.

The remaining sections of this paper further describe my AmeriCorps experience that inspired my project idea, what the project idea was, where my research stands currently, and what my research project plans are moving forward.

IRSC AmeriCorps Experience

The Immigrant and Refugee Service (IRSC) AmeriCorps program hosted twelve adult AmeriCorps members (myself included) from a wide spectrum of demographics and backgrounds (age 22 to 52; male and female; U.S-born, 1st and 2nd generation immigrants, and resettled refugees from Eritrea and

Responsibilities Outside of my IRSC Host Site

Responsibilities outside of my service at my host site involved organizing, leading, and planning an ACA health insurance enrollment event for resettled families from Burma (thirty families were enrolled); coordinating and collaborating with health organizations and facilities, ethnic minority community groups, and other non-profits; making referrals for families with needs beyond my host-site's services; and attending cultural, religious, and social justice events, conferences, discussions, and lectures throughout the city in order to learn more about the diversity, values, and lack of privileges within many different communities in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Togo; both high school and college graduates; and a wide variety of religious backgrounds.

The IRSC Member's Role

Each IRSC member was to serve full-time at a different non-profit organization (we called them host sites) in Indianapolis. The IRSC role was to listen, learn, and become aware and compassionate towards the disadvantages and cultural and religious differences and barriers immigrant and refugee families face in the U.S. We were also to assist the twelve non-profits in beginning to serve refugee and immigrant families, or to help expand and support existing programs already serving them.

In addition to our service roles, as part of our AmeriCorps contract, we were to live off of a small living stipend that would be acknowledged as living below the U.S. poverty line, and often meant we needed to attain food stamps, aka SNAP benefits, to support ourselves, cultivating a glimpse of what it is like to live in the challenges and lack of resources that so many families face, and breaking down stigma surrounding people who use resource assistances.

Responsibilities at my Host Site

The types of responsibilities my IRSC team accomplished in our roles at our host sites varied from site to site. Some of us were assigned to serve at refugee resettlement agencies, some at community and faith centers, some at arts and cultural centers, and some at healthcare-focused organizations. I was assigned to serve at a non-profit that provides holistic (educational, physical, nutritional, spiritual, mental, and emotional) support programs for families facing cancer. My specific duties at this host site were to develop

events, programs, and support groups for resettled refugee and immigrant families facing cancer, and to provide feedback on how to modify any existing programs and organization procedures to become more accommodating to their unique cultural and language barriers and needs. Additionally, I was in charge of serving as a community partner member and representative of my host site in the Indiana Minority Health Coalition, the Marion County Refugee Health Forum, and the R.E.D. Alliance for African American Breast Health Disparities.

IRSC Team Meetings

Every other week we met as a full team to:

1. Share what we were learning and experiencing in our host sites
2. Discuss challenges we were facing in developing programs and seeking to serve families or in seeking to educate our host sites on immigrant and refugee barriers
3. Learn about resources and services around the city available to resettled refugees and immigrants
4. Visit each member's host site
5. Meet with refugee and immigrant families to hear their stories and discuss challenges they face
6. Plan events as IRSC members outside of our host-sites that educate the city about barriers, cultural differences, and misconceptions of refugee and immigrant communities
7. Plan opportunities and events to bring education and healthcare access to refugee and immigrant communities.

"Karen people are very diverse. Among the Karen people there are different languages, different cultures, different religions, and different political groups. No one can claim to speak on behalf of all Karen people, or represent all Karen people..."I would recommend you to read this book, but also try to meet many different Karen people and learn more about our people and culture." [10]

Figure 1: When Venerable Ashin Moonieinda (a Karen man resettled to Australia) was responding to many requests to educate people about the Karen people, he wrote a book about the culture [10]. This is a quote from the Introduction that resonates with insights I gained from my IRSC service.

Insights gained from IRSC Service

When trying to develop cancer support groups for resettled refugee communities, it became difficult to find community groups with families that have cancer (in some ways that can be a good thing) and if I did find any, it was difficult to provide service to them. Community leaders from Burma said that they knew of no one in their communities with cancer. That did not necessarily mean there were no individuals from Burma with cancer in Indianapolis: that could mean that people were not aware of it to inform the community leaders or that they were hesitant to share that information. A breast cancer survivor from Ethiopia shared that there were many women in their community with breast cancer, but they were too afraid to discuss that with others. They said that in their culture cancer is often a taboo topic because people do not understand it well. If someone gets cancer, they usually do not tell even their close family and friends, and often go untreated and suffer great pain. They would feel uncomfortable in a support group and in individual counseling due to cultural and language barriers [personal communication, 2014]. Even if some of the people from their culture were willing to participate in wellness programs, my host site would not be able to accommodate very well unless they speak English or unless we find interpreters if they do not. Some people needed transportation in order to get to my host site to receive wellness programs, and that is something my host site did not have enough funding to offer at the time.

While the organization discerned feasible ways to sensitively adjust to the needs of resettled refugee families, my direction transitioned into focusing on developing support groups for Spanish-speaking families who were actively seeking cancer support

programs since no group offered that form of support in Spanish in the city.

Another important insight I gained from my IRSC service was that while community leaders have very good ideas of what challenges families and individuals are facing, it is impossible (and inaccurate) to group everyone into having the exact same challenges and barriers. What is a challenge or barrier for one cultural community, is not necessarily a challenge or barrier for another, and some may not be perceived as urgent by families as service providers perceive them to be. Just as one resettled refugee cultural community's challenges cannot represent the challenges of every resettled refugee cultural community, one person within a single cultural community cannot represent the experience of everyone in that community. This resonates with a quote made by Venerable Ashin Moonieinda shown in Figure 1.

Project Idea

In the various committees and meetings I was an active participant or representative in as an IRSC member, there were patterns of need and gaps in resources that existed. One area of need in particular, is for a centralized online location where resources, services, and programs that serve refugee and immigrant families can be looked up (both via search and filters and via a map) and accessed for free by either a resettled person themselves or by a social worker/service member. My proposed tool would also include important information about public transportation, interpreters, and documents needed in order to access the service or program. Hours and hours are spent searching for services and facilities for families. Tools like Connect2Help 211 exist in Indiana, but do not address refugee and immigrant needs [4].

When a family has adapted to the U.S. and to the English language enough, they are still limited in accessing information and resources by not knowing how to easily and effectively search for information, by having too many incomplete sites to search from, or by having to depend on an organization or employee to get back to them with the information they need, in an often unintentionally untimely manner. Many resource tools have been designed in Europe to address various challenges of resettled refugees there, like the Ankommen mobile app [1], which would serve as a good inspirational example for designing such a tool.

Current Status of Research Project

I originally presented this problem and idea to a professor of mine, Dr. Esteban Garcia, from undergraduate school at Purdue for a real-world scenario for his students to attempt to solve. He ecstatically agreed to collaborate with me. I spent about 2 months driving between Lafayette, Indiana and Indianapolis in 2015 to co-mentor Dr. Garcia's freshman class as they worked in groups to consider the barriers families face, the design considerations, and develop ideas to address the problems. For the last class meeting I brought IRSC members with me to help critique and provide feedback on their projects, one of which was originally resettled to Indianapolis as a refugee. Upon the end of their semester Dr. Garcia and I continued to discuss how this project could be continued. After declining a partnership (due to a slight mismatch in vision and intentions) with a company that expressed interest in developing the project for us, Dr. Garcia encouraged me to come to grad school so that I could guide the direction of this project and learn the necessary research methods, theories, and procedures to do so in an ethical and empowering way for a community that I care about. I agreed and was

accepted into Purdue University's Master's program for Human-centered Design Development in the Computer Graphics Technology department. Dr. Garcia became my advisor.

In one of my User Experience Design Studio classes during my second semester of graduate school, I was introduced to a design approach called *Participatory Design (PD)*. PD brings the intended users of a product/service/tool into the design and development process of said product/service/tool, ensuring their voice, ideas, and needs are included every step of the way [5]. Participatory design methods have been used quite frequently within the HCI and design community when researching and designing cross-culturally. A few of many examples include:

1. PD workshops were used with youth at Za'atari refugee camp in order to understand how Syrian youth help others in general and in terms of ICT wayfaring [7].
2. Bennett, et al. used participatory design workshops when designing HIV Awareness and Prevention Posters in Kenya [3]. They included Kenyans into the design process to ensure the posters were culturally appropriate and something Kenyans could more closely relate to by using language, images, and sayings that they identify with.
3. Fisher, Yefimova, and Bishop wrote a case study paper on their fifth collaborative design workshop that sought to understand the role of ICT in the daily lives of immigrant and refugee youth when trying to help others with healthcare, transportation, education, employment, and more [6]. Altogether, their workshops involved youth from East Africa, Myanmar, Syria, and Latin America, with this particular case study focusing on

Lessons from Design Workshops with Refugees from Burma

1. Activities take longer when interpreters are needed in order to communicate, resulting in having to cut out some activities from the workshop plan, or modifying them.
2. When the researcher and participants do not speak the same language, activities should have more visuals than words.
3. Accessing interpreters is very difficult, especially for resettled refugees with very specific dialects that are uncommon (sometimes interpreters are non-existent). In my workshop, a refugee community leader of an education center reached out to the bilingual teen in order to interpret for three participants who did not speak the Karen dialects, Burmese, or Karenni dialect that the interpreter spoke.

Latino teens. In this study, they discovered the significant role music and other visual media play on the youth when wayfaring.

Principles applied in these works and works by other researchers in participatory design were applied during two modified design workshops I facilitated with two classmates in Indianapolis with Karen and Karenni refugees from Burma. The workshops required two separate interpreters and several visual, hands-on activities. After expecting only five to ten participants per workshop, 20 participants attended each workshop. The workshops taught me valuable lessons, *see side bar*, about the difficulties in applying theories and methods of research and design in cross-cultural settings.

Insights from my second and current (third) semester coursework, and from HCI works done by others cross-culturally or specifically with refugees, led me to re-evaluate my original project idea of an online tool after realizing I made some assumptions as an eager, passionate, beginner researcher. For example, before starting graduate school and through my first semester, I had in my mind already the idea for a solution for addressing challenges that I observed and learned from resettled refugees and service providers, but I did not allow that solution idea to emerge from collaboration with resettled refugees and service providers. That idea emerged from me, and became a *designing for* scenario, not a *designing with* scenario. This mismatched with my personal view that for a person or community to be empowered, their voice(s) need to be heard and included. While that was my intention, I overlooked the fact that I was starting my research with my interpretation of their voices rather than their actual voices. Additionally, suggesting resettled

individuals to rely on an online tool for help (instead of interacting with people for help) may not help resolve the feeling of isolation that was discovered by Rebecca Joie Habeeb-Silva during her research on challenges that resettled refugees face in the United States [8]. Social isolation was also discovered by Almohamed and Vyas as a theme that affects resettled refugees and asylum seekers in Australia [2].

It is possible that my initial idea may still be a good, helpful solution and something that would emerge from collaborating with all stakeholders, however, I find it necessary to take a few steps back and to conduct further research inspired by participatory design methods in order to truly allow a solution to emerge together with the users. As stated in the workshop proposal paper of Talhouk et al. (a follow up from their preceding paper on the same topic), "it is critical that our work be informed by refugee communities and have a deep understanding of their current context, needs and aims." [9]. Taking these few steps back would ensure that I do not jump to conclusion prematurely, but rather ensure that the beliefs, values, needs, goals, desires, and people within the population I desire to use my skills to help solve challenges with are included in the research and design process, and empowered as a result.

Moving Forward

My research continues to evolve and transform as I learn more about qualitative research and collaborative design theories and methods. Moving forward, I will be conducting more field research, interviews, and modified participatory design workshops with groups of resettled refugees as well as their service providers. I will take measures to let a solution emerge through my research on addressing challenges of resettled refugees

in Indianapolis, rather than making premature guesses. The HCI Across Borders Symposium would be a tremendous opportunity to learn from others in the field, collaborate, and provide insights from my experiences learning to design with resettled refugees.

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