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## **Power and politics in resettlement: a case study of Bhutanese refugees in the USA**

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## Introduction

This paper examines the complexities in the resettlement of Bhutanese refugees. It explores the power dynamics between the employees of a refugee resettlement organisation and the refugees and analyses the intricate webs of power within different institutions, such as local NGOs and healthcare institutions. The study is based on 9-weeks of ethnographic research conducted in a small town in the USA in summer of 2009. It addresses three questions: What are the structural discontinuities in resettlement? Are the expectations and ambitions of resettlement organisation different from those of the Bhutanese refugees? If so, how are refugees impacted by these differences?

Generally, humanitarianism is understood as assisting people in need of help –an action based on notions of saving humans and humanity from real and perceived danger. Since post-WWII, the number of humanitarian organisations has grown exponentially (Black 2001). However, humanitarian actions and interventions are often driven by bureaucratic politics and policies that contradict what humanitarianism stands for as apolitical and value-neutral. These contradictions or paradoxes in humanitarianism are present in refugee resettlement. Despite the benevolence and well-intended motives behind resettlement efforts, humanitarian acts are often shaped by a victim-saviour mentality that reify asymmetrical social hierarchy between refugees and humanitarian workers (Harrell-Bond 2002).

This study questions how certain actions and assumptions of resettlement organisation about refugees have unintentional impacts on the refugees. Questioning the value neutrality of humanitarian work, this study analyzes the mechanisms through which humanitarian organisations such as the Local Refugee Resettlement Organisation (LRRO) control and regulate refugees' everyday lives. Such monitoring and regulation of refugees blur the organisation's role as a value-neutral and apolitical humanitarian entity –which is a telltale sign of deeper structural and institutional issues. One of the paradoxes of resettlement is that it is a “calculated kindness,” (Loescher and Scanlan 1986).<sup>1</sup>

In addition, resettlement is characterised by paradoxes and contradictions. Examining these complexities and paradoxes, the study highlights the local resettlement organisation workers' micro-management and surveillance of Bhutanese refugees. These paradoxes illuminate structural discontinuities or gaps that result from differences in expectations between the refugees and the employees of resettlement organisation.

The study reveals refugees' anxieties and worry about the future, their feelings of exclusion (alienation) in the community, their mistrust of resettlement organisation and institutions, and the difficulty in navigating bureaucracies, thus, exposing the complexities in resettlement. The asymmetrical relationship between the resettlement organisation staff members and the Bhutanese refugees informs and shapes refugees' understanding of what it means to be an American and what it entails to integrate into American culture. Critically assessing forms of regulation and control of refugees' behaviours, the study shows that the resettlement organisation

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<sup>1</sup> Loescher and Scanlan's (1986) use of the term calculated kindness opens a space to examine possible political agenda of a state or government, i.e., the US state, behind acts of benevolence as humanitarian projects.

workers' conception of Americanization through integration is embedded in neoliberal understanding that urges refugees to become 'self-sufficient' and 'independent.'<sup>2</sup>

Resettlement is an on-going process that does not end with refugees' arrival to the host country. Rather the process continues in the host state as refugees rebuild their lives, familiarize, and adapt to the dynamic social, economic, and political environment in their new place. It is a complicated and unsettling process for all of the stakeholders. In highlighting structural discontinuities, this study questions the host state's role and responsibilities towards refugees and over-burdened staff members of local NGOs.

Anthropological analysis of resettlement opens up a space to examine bureaucratic management of resettled refugees by different institutions and reveals social inequalities and politics of power in humanitarian work. Drawing on analyses of the paradoxes and complexities in resettlement, the study concludes that bureaucratic management of refugees reinforces social inequalities and hierarchies of power that masks state's responsibility towards both the refugees and local NGOs making resettlement an unsettling process.

Relatively few studies have examined how larger structures of power work at individual levels and how these structures affect relationships between employees of resettlement organisation and refugees (Hinton 1996; Daniel and Knudsen 1995; Harrell-Bond 2002; Hyndman 2000; Keles 2008; Malkkii 1996; Ong 2003). This study contributes to the emerging field of the anthropology of refugee studies and examines the paradoxes and complexities in third country resettlement by examining the impacts of larger structures of power. It illustrates that differences in expectations between refugees and resettlement organisation reveal a disjuncture between theory and praxis in everyday bureaucratic management of refugees. In doing so, the paper highlights the micro-politics of power that maintain asymmetrical hierarchies within the "humanitarian industry" (Pandolfi 2003).

Research methods consisted of participant-observation, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews. The Local Refugee Resettlement Organisation (LRRO), that is responsible for resettling Bhutanese refugees, offers weekly a collection of 8 sessions of cultural orientation as part of the resettlement process. Topics range from legal rights and civil rights, U.S. federal and state laws to banking information. Each course is designed to provide refugees with an opportunity to hear from professionals in the community speak on a variety of subjects about American culture.

40 participant observations were conducted at the LRRO office, refugee home visits, and the cultural orientation sessions. 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted. They include: four LRRO staff members and eight Bhutanese refugees of whom four were males and four were females of diverse age groups and education levels.

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<sup>2</sup> The social theory of neoliberalism is based on the argument that everyone has the potential to benefit from capitalism and that poverty exists because of poor people's inherent inability to take advantage of open-market system (Harvey 2007). I use the term neoliberalism to explain the ways in which the resettlement organisation workers expectations of refugees to become independent and self-sufficient are linked with the LRRO workers' understanding of what it means to become Americans.

To protect research participants' identities and maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are used. All of the interviews with the refugees were conducted in Nepali and with the LRRO staff members in English. Some of the Nepali concepts do not easily translate due to difficulty in interpreting cultural contexts.

The paper consists of two main parts. The first part is a short section that provides a brief background description of the journey of Bhutanese refugees from Bhutan to refugee camp to resettlement in the U.S. The second part examines two main themes: 1) paradoxes and structural discontinuities in resettlement; and 2) conceptualization of American culture and the implications of Americanization.

### **The odyssey of Bhutanese refugees**

Bhutanese refugees are ethnic Nepalese whose origins trace to the eastern part of Nepal. In the early nineteenth century they migrated to the southern part of Bhutan (Hutt 2003). Bhutan is a small land-locked kingdom bordered by China to the north and India to the west, east, and south. A sparsely populated country with estimated population of 680,000, it self-advertises as a “fairy tale land.” Bhutan is also known as the “Druk Yul” or Land of the Thunder Dragon (Tourism Council of Bhutan). It became a unified polity in 1950 when King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk brought the country under a single administrative system and established Thimpu as its capital (Hutt 1996).

An ethnically diverse nation, Bhutan officially recognizes four main ethnicities: *Ngalong* in the west, the “central Bhutanese,” the *Sharchop* in the east, and the *Lhotshampas* or Nepali Bhutanese in the south.<sup>3</sup> The *Ngalong's* language, Dzongkha, was established as the national language in 1961. The Bhutanese commonly distinguish between the Buddhist *Drukpas* of the north and the Hindu Nepali-speaking *Lhotshampas* of the south (Hutt 2005).

The Nepali-Bhutanese, who are ethnicized as *Lhotshampas*, predominantly lived in the southern region. In 1958, the Bhutanese government granted citizenship to ethnic Nepalese under the Nationality Law (HRW 2003).<sup>4</sup> However, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW), Bhutan began to perceive the growing numbers and formation of political parties of ethnic Nepalese as a threat to their cultural and political order. This perceived threat multiplied when, in 1975, the growing Nepali population in the neighbouring Sikkim region supported a merger with India.

Fearing a similar occurrence in Bhutan, the government introduced a series of repressive citizenship laws and “Bhutanization” policies in the late 70s and 80s, which led to the political, economic, and cultural exclusion of the Nepali-Bhutanese people (Frelick 2007; Hutt 2003). The denationalization of ethnic Nepalese began with the Citizenship Acts of 1977 and 1985 that

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<sup>3</sup> Lhotshampa is a problematic term that Drukpas use to refer to the Nepali-Bhutanese. Based on conversations with Bhutanese refugees, they prefer to be recognized as either Nepali-Bhutanese or Bhutanese.

<sup>4</sup> Under the Nationality law, an adult may obtain citizenship by owning land, residing in Bhutan for ten years, and taking an oath of loyalty to the King.

tightened the requirements for obtaining and retaining citizenship. These acts allowed the Bhutanese government to revoke their citizenship (HRW 2003).

In 1989, the government introduced a “one nation, one people” policy that forced the practice of the Drukpa culture. It required all Bhutanese to observe the national dress code of Drukpa culture and to terminate the use of Nepali language instructions in schools. Before this policy, the ethnic Nepalese were allowed to wear their ethnic clothes: women wore *saris* and men wore *daura suruwal*. In addition to this cultural prohibition, during the 1988 census the Bhutanese government required the Nepali-Bhutanese to produce a 1958 tax receipt, as proof of their Bhutanese citizenship in order to register for the census.<sup>5</sup> This invalidated Bhutanese citizenship cards acquired after 1958 and leading up to 1988 (Hutt 2005, 46).

When the Nepali-Bhutanese revolted against the government for such encroachments on their civil rights, the government responded harshly to protests and public demonstrations, closed down schools, and suspended health services in the southern region. By 1992, a majority of Nepali-Bhutanese had fled or were forced to leave Bhutan. Not permitting the refugees to set up permanent refugee camps, the Indian government transferred the refugees by truckloads to Nepal, where they spread out over 7 UNHCR- administered camps in Jhapa and Ilam districts in the south-eastern region in Nepal.

Because neither Nepal nor Bhutan was unwilling to give citizenship to this population, the refugees had been living in a state of liminality for over two decades. The revocation of citizenship by the Bhutanese government, the subsequent construction of their illegality through a series of denationalization processes, and the refusal of refuge and of civil rights by the host states of Nepal and India have rendered this group disposable.

The disposability and the social construction of citizenship are illustrative of the delicate relationship that often exists between a state and its citizens. The history of this population’s marginalization and rendering them disposable non-citizens at every junctures of their lives: from the government of Bhutan exiling the group to Indian government’s refusal to allow them to set up settlement camps in Bhutan-India border to Nepal government’s denial to grant asylum to this population, are indicative of Bhutanese refugees’ marked status as the “other.”

### **Resettlement of Bhutanese Refugees**

The exiled group has been given an opportunity to rebuild their lives through third country resettlement programs. In 2006, the U.S. government offered to resettle 60,000 of the estimated 107,000 refugees (Frelick 2007). Other nations such as Australia, Canada, Norway, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Denmark, and the United Kingdom, have also offered to resettle some of the refugees (UNHCR 2010).

The first wave of resettlement to the US began in early 2008. The U.S. government has identified ten Voluntary Agencies to implement the resettlement program. These agencies have their own

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<sup>5</sup> 1958 is the same year as when the Bhutanese government granted citizenship under the Nationality Law.

branch offices or sub-working partner agencies in different cities/states (Bhutanese Refugees: The Story of a Forgotten People). In this state, where refugees began arriving in January 2009, a local non-profit organisation, Local Refugee Resettlement Organisation (LRRO), is responsible for resettling the Bhutanese families. LRRO is a small local organisation that is part of a larger voluntary agency that resettles refugees throughout the USA. LRRO's main head office is located in X-Metropolis with a branch office in Y-town.

The U.S. State Department gives a one-time resettlement grant of \$450 per person for resettlement, according to one LRRO staff member. The modest support places the bulk of the resettlement burden on the organisation for finding funding sources from private donors. For the first three months, following arrival, LRRO supports refugees financially by paying housing rent, providing small stipends for food and bus passes, and other services. Refugees are also enrolled in Federal and State welfare programs such as Food Stamps, Wilson-Fish Program, and Temporary Assistance Program.

Although Federal welfare grants continue to support refugees anywhere from a year to 5 years, it is a very modest monetary support. Therefore, LRRO tells refugees that the organisation expects them to be self-sufficient and independent (i.e. find a job and support themselves financially) by the end of the third month. This expectation is a source of constant pressure for both refugees and LRRO staff members. The limited funding sources and meagre support that the organisation receives from the Federal government amplify the stress and pressure.

The continual financial burden impacts how refugees and employees of LRRO perceive and understand these pressures and expectations of one another as refugees integrate into the new society. Examining these issues of resettlement is important for identifying challenges and barriers in the integration of refugees.

### **Paradoxes and structural discontinuities in resettlement**

Stark differences in the expectations between the Bhutanese refugees and LRRO staff members were observed. Specifically, refugees believed that LRRO did not provide adequate support to refugees and LRRO's expectation for refugees to quickly become independent were perceived as unreasonable. In contrast, LRRO staff members perceived that refugees had too many expectations of resettlement and living in the U.S. that was often translated as refugees' neediness.

Differences in the perception and expectations between refugees' assumptions about LRRO and the LRRO employees' responses and actions towards the refugees are illustrative of "structural discontinuities" (Ong 2003). Structural discontinuities are disjunctions at structural or institutional levels in the refugee-citizen continuum. As refugees integrate into the community and learn to become citizens, certain gaps due to inconsistencies and ambiguities at structural or institutional level become barriers to refugees' successful integration.

Ethnographic data illustrate that structural discontinuities often result from differences in the expectations between refugees and LRRO employees, lack of clear and inconsistent information,

contradictions in LRRO employees' approaches, and other complexities of structural bureaucracies of power that contribute to ambiguities in LRRO's role as a humanitarian organisation. These discontinuities maintain unequal power hierarchy between refugees and resettlement organisation that reinforce the politics of humanitarianism. Politics of humanitarianism is a theoretical framework that is useful for analyzing how humanitarian actions and interventions that are driven and shaped by bureaucratic politics and policies impact refugees.

There are many implications of politics of humanitarianism. First, differences and inconsistencies facilitate mistrust between the two groups creating tension and stress. Second, ambiguities in LRRO worker's actions, such as constant surveillance and regulation of refugees' behaviors, perpetuate unequal hierarchy of power between refugees and LRRO employees. The asymmetrical relation also contributes to antagonization between the two. Finally, institutional bureaucracies of power complicate resettlement. In sum, this chapter argues that structural discontinuities obscure larger webs of power and politics of humanitarianism within which both refugees and LRRO employees are caught-up.

Participant-observation of interactions between refugees and LRRO employees reveal many inconsistencies and irregularities in LRRO's level of commitment and support towards the refugees. Their commitment depended upon how long a refugee had lived in the U.S. Due to this variation, refugees often perceived LRRO's support as inadequate. However, further examination of the variation in the commitment within the context of the state's policies and budgetary restrictions placed on LRRO demonstrate that the bureaucratic constraints that limit LRRO employees' services and commitments.

One refugee stated that he expected the [LRRO] employees to continue their support with the same level of dedication and enthusiasm as they had shown when he first arrived. Other Bhutanese refugees shared similar perception of decreasing and varying level of LRRO workers' commitment towards them. Some of the refugees indicated that they received smaller stipends compared to other refugee families that had equal or greater number of family members.<sup>6</sup> Although, it was not clear who decides which refugee or refugee family would be enrolled in which type of welfare program, it was evident that the apparent discrepancy in the stipends was due to being enrolled in different welfare programs and not due to difference in LRRO workers' commitment towards refugees. However, lack of clarity on the stipend issue was a source of conflict. This is indicative of a structural gap that contributes to refugees' mistrust of the organisation.

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<sup>6</sup> According to LRRO staff members, stipends are allocated and determined by the type of Federal welfare program in which each refugee or refugee family is enrolled. Refugees are enrolled in one of three types of Federal welfare programs through the office of LRRO: Temporary Assistance Program (TAP), which funds a family for up to five years; Wilson-Fish Program (WFP) for adult single refugees or couples without children funds a person for up to three years; and Cash-Assistance Program, a match grant program.



## Uncertainties and differences in expectations

Another difference in expectation was that refugees expected to get support from the organisation until they were completely independent and self-sufficient – i.e. get a job. Based on informal conversations, many Bhutanese refugees believed that LRRO staff members were responsible for finding jobs for them. This expectation arises from their mis-understanding of information provided in the camps. Some refugees indicated that prior to their departure for the U.S., they were given an orientation course in the refugee camps and shown a video recording of the types of jobs that they could get in the U.S. These jobs included working in a factory, housekeeping, or working in the meatpacking industry. The refugees stated that they were told in the camp that local resettling agencies would find jobs for them.

For instance, one refugee, Arjun also indicated that an IOM representative in the refugee camps had told him that local NGOs in the U.S. would find jobs for them. Sita, who was also present during his interview, voiced similar concerns of noticing a difference in LRRO employees' commitment levels that she perceived to be LRRO's shortcoming.

In addition to the lack of information and ambiguity about expectations, many refugees experience anxieties and stress about their financial situation, especially due to the economic crisis. Starting life over in a new country is difficult for anyone, but lack of English language skills and illiteracy often contribute to refugees' difficulty in securing employment. Moreover, some refugees experience downward social mobility. A few refugees have high school diploma and even a college degree.

Despite having a college degree and work experience in administrative settings, many find themselves working in manual labour positions, which become a source of frustration and stress. The downward social status that some of the refugees experienced through their employment in the U.S. raised many questions among the more educated refugees of whether they were brought here to work in manual labour positions as a “solution for illegal migrants” (Interview with Bimla, June 24, 2009).<sup>7</sup>

A majority of adult Bhutanese refugees stated that their decision to apply for the resettlement process was primarily based on a hope that coming to America would give their children a chance for better opportunities and a secure life that consists of stable and secured employment, which none of the manual labour positions could or would offer.

Refugees' understanding that LRRO will help find jobs meant that they expected LRRO workers would literally find a job for them and all they would need to do is to show up and begin working. In contrast to this perception, LRRO employees' understanding of “helping find jobs” meant helping refugees by locate vacant positions and directing them to resources where they may find jobs. This discrepancy of what “helping find jobs” mean for both the refugees and

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<sup>7</sup> Issues of downward social status through labor that refugees (and immigrants) experience within the larger context of the U.S. Immigration policies and racialization processes are beyond the scope of this study. These issues have been extensively documented in the literature on immigration studies. Although I do not look into these issues, they are nonetheless important to of refugee resettlement that future studies could address.

LRRO employees has been a major source of misunderstanding between the two groups. The downward social mobility, instability of employment status, and refugees' expectations of LRRO finding jobs highlight structural discontinuities that are well beyond the scope and responsibility of a local NGO like the LRRO.

Uncertainty about employment and future were not the only source of anxiety for refugees. Many indicated that learning to navigate bureaucracies –in particular, understanding the U.S. healthcare system –was a constant source of anxiety for the refugees. For instance, sharing his frustrations of dealing with medical bills, Arjun stated, “I am tired of getting medical bills...since I do not have a job and they [LRRO] barely give me enough money through the TAP grant. I give all my medical bills to LRRO and let them handle it. But the [health] clinic continues to send me the bills and I wonder if LRRO is looking into it.” Although Arjun believed that LRRO should take care of these bureaucratic issues, he also doubted the organisation's commitment and interest in helping him resolve the issue.

Comprehending and navigating the healthcare institution can be an excruciating experience for anyone. For refugees, who have to go to different health departments to fulfill a number of health requirements, such as vaccination shots, complete physical and gynaecological examinations that are mandated by the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, working with administrative bureaucracies in healthcare can be an extremely unpleasant experience. Navigating bureaucracies not only become a major source of barrier for integration for refugees, but also add to refugees' frustrations and stress of resettlement. Bhutanese refugees' frustrations were exaggerated by their assumption that LRRO was responsible for handling these bureaucratic issues. Overcoming these barriers not only becomes a crucial matter for successful integration, but they also highlight structural gaps.

Ethnographic data illuminates more than an unfortunate reality of unexpected hardships that the refugees are grappling with. Their disappointments with unmet expectations reveal larger institutional discontinuities that depict LRRO as cold, calculative, and lacking commitment, despite LRRO workers' invested interest and commitment in helping refugees.

The experiences of LRRO employees range from working in humanitarian organisations and international experiences to working in developing countries, working as Peace Corp and Ameri Corp volunteers, and volunteering in local church-based communities. Due to a small number of full-time staff members, administrative and bureaucratic demands take most of their time, which limits their ability to provide adequate services to refugees. The apparent contradiction in their constrained actions and their intentions are illustrative of the politics of humanitarianism.

### **Bureaucracies of power**

One of the main sources of contradiction in LRRO employees' commitment and actions was inconsistency in information provided to refugees. Inconsistent information in resettlement not only creates ambiguities about the organisation's role and responsibility, but also obscures its paradoxical position within larger structures of power, such as LRRO's position vis-à-vis its main head office in X-Metropolis. Ambiguities and discrepancies produce confusions and create

dissonances in both refugees' and LRRO's expectations and outcomes. Throughout the fieldwork, numerous inconsistencies that undermined LRRO's role as a humanitarian organisation were observed.

Moreover, lack of clear communication and discrepancy in LRRO employees' responses to refugees' requests led some refugees to perceive their actions and responses as bureaucratic, robotic/mechanistic in their manner, and doing what "they are paid to do," (From conversations with Gopal and Shyam, June 23, 2009). LRRO employees' discretionary power and bureaucratic practices not only perpetuated mistrust among refugees but also undermined their good intentions and efforts in resettlement.

One such example was the inconsistent information about whether the cultural orientation course was a requirement for refugees. Refugees were told that the course was a requirement and failure to attend would result in sanctioning of their federal grant money. Some of the LRRO staff members, however, had different opinions and understandings about this requirement. The staff members also differed in their opinions about how best to handle a situation if a refugee failed to fulfil this requirement.

Anne, a LRRO staff member, indicated that though refugees were encouraged to attend all sessions they were not required. She explained that the requirement was based on specific federal program in which each refugee family or individual refugee was enrolled. This raises the question then of why all refugees are told that they must attend the sessions or face penalties. In contrast to Anne's understanding of this requirement, Jill opined that the course was required for all refugees regardless of which program they were enrolled in. She believed that a refugee might be penalized for not attending. She provided a case where disciplinary action was taken against a refugee for being "non-compliant."

Jill, a LRRO staff member, emphasized that the disciplinary action taken against this refugee was due to his/her non-compliance behaviour in many things and not only failing to attend the cultural orientation course. According to her, non-compliance could be anything from not showing up for appointments (health, welfare, food stamps, and, job interviews), not paying housing rent or other bills to sending the federal money back to their families in the camps, or failure to attend orientation courses, ESL courses, or job training courses. Although Jill did not dwell on the particularities of refugee's non-compliant behaviour, for her there was a strict demarcation of which behaviours were compliant and which ones were not and failure to attend the cultural orientation course was considered non-compliant behaviour.

In contrast to both Anne and Jill, Christine believed that a newly arrived refugee family may "opt out" if the family had an "anchor" family. An anchor family, as she explained, was a family or a friend who was familiar with the U.S. system and who could help the newly arrived family in the resettlement process.

Unlike LRRO staff members' perceptions, refugees stated that LRRO requires them to attend the cultural orientation course regardless of whether or not they have an anchor family. The discrepancy in the information provided to refugees and different understandings of the requirement have many implications. First, it sends a mixed message to the refugees. Second,

lack of consensus among the staff members implies that the requirement might be an arbitrary rule of LRRO. Third, some refugees perceive this as another bureaucratic nuisance that waste refugees' time – time that they can have spend searching for jobs. Fourth, the fact that some refugees cannot opt out could lead refugees to feel that LRRO may be playing favouritism. Finally, the discrepancy has larger implication of unequal power and privilege to which LRRO employees subscribe and enact upon refugees.

Routinized bureaucratic actions of LRRO staff members illustrate their obliviousness to how unequal power impacts refugees. Ambiguities and inconsistencies in information make it difficult to assess LRRO's commitment in advocating for and helping refugees. Cultural orientation course offers very useful and practical skills necessary for refugees' successful integration. A majority of the refugees indicate that the course is very valuable in terms of disseminating important and practical information about "how things are done in America," as one refugee puts it.

However, these good intentions are undermined by ambiguities, inconsistent information and lack of understanding of refugees' reality. LRRO employees fail to understand the stress these threats of repercussions and sanctions place on the refugees, who feel compelled to attend the sessions. Moreover, the notion of sanctioning of refugees' resources places humanitarian organisations like LRRO in a direct opposition against refugees that further contributes to refugees' mistrust of institutions.

In addition, larger institutional bureaucratic barriers limit LRRO's ability to adequately support refugees. Informal conversations with LRRO staff members indicated that as a sub-office of X-Metropolis, they controlled Y-town office's budget. The Y-town office was allotted a specific budget for a fiscal year. Any public or private grants that the organisation receives first goes to the X-Metropolis office and a portion then goes to the Y-town sub-office.

Because Y-town's refugee population is rapidly growing, the money that they receive from X-Metropolis is inadequate. Moreover, as a sub-office, Y-town branch does not qualify to apply for a separate outside grant or funding and instead has to go through the main X-Metropolis office. Thus, some of the LRRO staff members expressed frustrations of such institutional and bureaucratic barriers placed on their organisation.

Nancy, a LRRO staff member, accounted some of the difficulties she had experienced in her years of working at LRRO. According to her, one of the major sources of difficulties was the financial limitation. She discussed difficulties of managing with limited financial support from private and government grants, and the budget restrictions placed by X-Metropolis office. She bluntly stated that the meagre federal funding that LRRO receives from the State Department for resettling refugees is not nearly enough to even get an apartment for a family. Pouring out her frustrations, she asserted, "We have to buy things for the apartment...food, household items, beds, pillows, which we try to get from donations. When we get an apartment, we have to pay deposit and utilities... that money [federal stipend] is gone quickly."

Bureaucratic controls and financial restrictions on LRRO demonstrate a complex web of the politics within humanitarian organisations where larger structural forces control smaller local

NGOs and constrain the latter's ability to provide adequate assistance. Intricate bureaucratic and political webs are reflective of the politicization of humanitarianism where, as Foucault (1980) calls, systems of domination intersect in ways that negatively impact refugees' lives.

The following interview excerpt reveals that NGO workers are aware of the institutional hierarchies of control:

Christine: *The most difficult for me is...how frustrated I have been at how the organisation has to run sometimes, the kind of the bureaucratic issues between our organisation and X-Metropolis... I do not understand all of it, but I think that it is frustrating having restrictions on your services and when you can really...so many people needs so much more than you can provide...that has been very difficult.*

CS: *Can you give some examples of what are some of the bureaucratic things that have been restricting?*

Christine: *Well, it is that the Y-town office does not have its own budget [...] this is from whenever I was writing the grant. It was very difficult to write a grant when you do not know what their current budget is, so it is kind of like...X-Metropolis is kind of like a parental type office to us. So I guess...*

Christine's reference to the X-Metropolis office as a "parent" and her aggravation demonstrates her genuine interests in helping the refugees and working at LRRO. However, the "parental" restrictions undermine the organisation's efforts and good intentions. These restrictions illuminate that webs of power and politics in humanitarianism place local NGOs in a paradoxical position against refugees. The institutional hierarchies within an organisation and the bureaucracies of power also highlight structural discontinuities that impact refugees and destabilize local NGO's role as a humanitarian entity.

### **Surveillance and the micro-politics of power**

Although bureaucratic webs of power and structural hierarchies within an institution constrain local NGO's levels of service and commitment, it is also important to recognize that there is unequal power between local NGO vis-à-vis the refugees. Examining the interaction between a LRRO staff member and a refugee, the following long excerpt from the field notes illustrates the micro-politics of power where LRRO employees have the power to decide and choose who gets aid and to what extent. It highlights unequal power relations reproduced at everyday miniscule level and problematizes the hierarchical donor-recipient relationship that exists between refugees and LRRO workers:

*One afternoon in June as I chitchatted with Kamala outside the LRRO office, she told me that their family was almost out of food. Kamala had arrived to the U.S. about two weeks prior. Fearing that she would confuse LRRO staff members with her broken English, she asked me to ask Jill if someone from the organisation would bring food for her family. On Kamala's request, I called Jill and explained that the family was almost out of food. I asked her if*

*someone from LRRO could bring food for Kamala's family or take them for grocery shopping. Jill responded that someone from the office had brought food to the family from a local charity organisation a few days prior and that the family should have plenty to last for at least a week. I asked Kamala about the food drop-off. She said that they [LRRO] had brought batta (boxes) of food; however, she did not know how to cook or open cans. The only food she recognized were some small bags of rice, which were almost gone.*

*Since it was a Friday afternoon and the LRRO office would be closing soon for the weekend, there was an urgency to resolve this matter. Assuring Kamala that LRRO would find a solution, we entered the office to see if anyone could help us. The office was almost empty except for an intern and a staff member. When I relayed Kamala's concerns to them and asked if they could give us some money so I could take her grocery shopping, the staff member replied that she did not have the authority to hand out money.*

*Understanding the constraints and restrictions of bureaucracy, I called Jill again. I explained the situation and asked her if she could tell the staff member to give us some money. In what seemed to me an annoyed tone, she retorted that she had taken the family for grocery shopping earlier that week and had bought 7 1-pound bags of rice in addition to the food brought from the local charity organisation. "Surely," she insisted, "it should not be gone by now." When I explained to Jill that the canned foods and boxed pastas were completely foreign to Kamala, she replied that the family should still have rice emphasizing that she had bought 7 bags of rice. I explained to her that rice is the main staple food of Nepalese and Bhutanese and we eat rice for lunch and dinner. Jill responded with irritation that the family needed to learn to ration their food.*

*As she spoke these words, I wondered what Jill meant when she said that the family "needed to learn to ration food." Was she implying that the family should learn to eat less because she knew how much food should last for one family? Or was she implying that the refugees needed to learn to conserve food and not be wasteful of the food? Kamala had spent most of her adult life in a refugee camp where food was rationed weekly at the UNHCR refugee camps and she had to make sure that it lasted until next round of distribution.*

*When I asked Jill if she had ever observed the family eat during their meals, she said that she had been at the family's home when they were having rice for breakfast. I responded that she must have seen how much rice the family ate to understand the importance of rice. She should multiply the amount she observed the family eat at least by two, if not three times, for each member of the family per day. Jill replied, "Well that is 7 bags, 1lb. each, and surely a family of four cannot possibly finish that much rice in just few days. How much rice can they eat?" Then, she asked me if I had gone to their house to check if the family was truly out of rice. I replied that I had not gone nor was I planning to go and check on whether Kamala was telling the truth.*

Trust plays a central role in any relationship –especially between aid organisations and recipients. Scholars of refugee studies have explored in-depth on the issue of trust and mistrust (Daniel and Knudsen 1995; Malkkii 1995a & 1995b; Hynes 2009). In particular, they have examined how mistrust between refugees and institutions is reproduced through ambiguous spaces and contexts. Rather than trying to understand why there was not enough food for Kamala’s family –until I explained to Jill that Kamala did not know how to open the cans nor she knew how to cook the pasta, Jill mistrusted Kamala and attempted to regulate her resources.

Perceived as dishonest and “cheating” the system, and thereby undeserving of aid, refugees are mistrusted and they mistrust the resettlement organisation. These forms of regulation and surveillance are indicative of how the daily routine work of over-worked and burned out NGO workers, over time, reproduces micro-politics of power. Moreover, the micro management of refugees’ resources is illustrative of the LRRO workers’ authority over the refugees. Jill’s declaration that the family needed to “learn to ration” not only reinforces an unequal hierarchy between the LRRO employees and refugees but also demonstrates that humanitarian organisations could easily slip into the older political hierarchy that replicate colonial patterns (Hinton 1996; Redfield 2005). What is at stake when NGOs validate their position and authority through control of their subjects?

Kamala’s expectations that LRRO should provide adequate food were well founded. However, Jill’s expectations that refugees need to learn to ration food were not only unreasonable but also unfounded. To simply state that this difference in expectations is due to cultural differences that are characteristic of resettlement process would be a gross over-simplification of the complexities surrounding the politics of humanitarianism. Moreover, this simplification would essentialize the concept of culture as static and universalize and reduce culture to generalizable traditions and practices. In addition, the use of “cultural difference” as an explanation masks and leaves unquestioned structural inequalities (Abu-Lughod 2006).

Jill’s actions to control Kamala’s food ambiguates her role as a humanitarian worker. Her actions resemble more as policing refugees than helping them. It is understandable that LRRO employees have to place restrictions on the amount of food they are able to donate due to their financial limitations. Such paradoxical position not only produces ambiguities in LRRO’s role, but also causes the organisation to miss opportunities of truly helping refugees and understanding the position and context in which refugees are compelled to manipulate the system. This contradictory position of the organisation is a harbinger of deeper structural and institutional issues.

The incident is exemplary of constant monitoring and control that LRRO workers often employ onto the refugees. Surveillance and oversight of the refugees have become part of LRRO’s daily dealings that complicate resettlement. Specific mechanisms of disciplinary power and gate keeping of resources contradict the organisation’s value-neutral position and render it as an extension of the U.S. state’s apparatus.

Other forms of surveillance and regulations of refugees’ behaviours legitimize the institution’s power, sustain notions of deserving and undeserving refugees, and transform the organisation into an extension of the state’s apparatus. In so doing, these micro-dynamics of power demarcate

who belongs and who does not and who are deserving and who are undeserving of aid. LRRO regulations of refugees' behaviours take on state-like functions, to use Hinton's (1996) phrase.

The complexities in resettlement illustrate a deep structural disjuncture where the organisation's commitment and actions are paradoxical. Bureaucratic structures seem to support these contradictions and ambiguities for the purposes of surveillance and regulation of refugees; and thereby, reinforce unequal power hierarchy. Structural discontinuities within and outside the humanitarian regime position the organisation as a governing institution.

Simultaneously, discontinuities obscure and undermine LRRO's goals and render refugees as dependent subjects. Furthermore, webs of power and politics contextualize the politicization of humanitarianism, illuminate asymmetrical positionalities of LRRO as the "donor" and refugees as the "receiver," and reveal how they impact both refugees and LRRO workers.

### **Becoming American**

*American culture is like a khichadi [hodge-podge or mixture] ...In orientation class, LRRO tells us that this is how things are done in America or this is American culture... all these things that they say are American culture, these things come from various cultures like Mexican culture, Japanese culture, and other countries' culture.*

Gopal (a Bhutanese refugee)

Although the United States is a *khichadi* of different cultures, Gopal's observation of the cultural orientation course is suggestive of how specific notions of American-ness are used to describe life in the U.S. writ large as though they are universally applicable.<sup>8</sup> The phrase "this is how things are done in America" has an underlying implication that in order to belong and integrate into American culture, refugees must incorporate specific features that define what it means to be an American into their lives. This raises the question of what would exclude them from belonging to American culture and make them the "other."

The term "other" denotes marginalization of specific groups or individuals considered to be outside of the mainstream majority group. The process of othering often result from racial, ethnic, gender/sexuality, class, and religious marginalizations.<sup>9</sup> Such othering and exclusion have been used to mark some groups or individuals as either legal or illegal persons. Abu-Lughod argues, "culture is the essential tool for making the 'other'" (Abu Lughod 2006, 470).

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<sup>8</sup> I use the terms American culture, Americanization, and American-ness, interchangeably to refer to the processes that reinforce refugees' understanding of what it means to be an American.

<sup>9</sup> Critical race theorists and other social scientists have extensively explored marginalizations through the lens of intersectionality where they argue that persons are marginalized on many accounts of socio-cultural factors and not just one factor of either race, class, gender, or sexuality. The issue of intersectionality in the context of marginalizations of refugees is beyond the scope of this study. However, the intersectionality theory offers a useful framework for understanding integration of refugees in the larger context of the U.S. racialization processes.



The process of Americanization supports and reinforces politics of belonging and exclusion thus maintaining the constructed notion of the “other.” Drawing on ethnographic data from cultural orientation course and from conversations with refugees and observations of their actions, the study illustrates how refugees integrate and become Americanized via specific mechanisms of othering.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the study demonstrates that integration processes entails reinforcing notions of belonging that are embedded within specific values that LRRO identifies as American.

The discourse analysis of American-ness is useful for revealing how certain values that are based on neoliberal understanding of personal accountability and responsibility are reproduced through everyday actions, such as LRRO employees’ frequent use of the phrase “this is how things are done in America.” One must then ask, who decides whether a refugee has successfully integrated into American culture? Who defines what it means to be an “American”?

Embedded in the Americanization process is the notion of deserving and undeserving subjects. The process of embodying American-ness, then, renders refugees as the “new” neoliberal subjects.<sup>11</sup> A critical examination of the process of Americanization based on neoliberal logic exposes how institutions avert their responsibility of integrating refugees onto the refugees.

### **Conceptualizing American culture**

During one of the cultural orientation sessions, the facilitator introduced the topic for that session saying, “Today we will talk about cultural differences.” The speaker asked refugees what cultural differences they had noticed between American culture and the cultures from their respective countries. Although everyone in the room understood what she meant by the phrase “your respective countries,” its use in the context of refugees seemed ironic because the phrase conveniently ignored the fact that refugees’ identity and link to their countries have been severed. The reference to “your countries” implied a “them” and “us” discourse that suggested refugees to be outsiders.

The phrase “American culture” has different meaning for Bhutanese refugees and LRRO staff members. The two groups had different conceptualizations of American-ness and of integrating into the American culture. For LRRO staff members, the phrase American culture indicated specific values and concepts such as individuality, independence, and self-sufficiency. These perceptions about American culture are strengthened in the cultural orientation sessions, which are supposed to help refugees understand the notion of American culture. In contrast, Bhutanese refugees associated the phrase American culture to material and tangible items, such as clothing, food, and specific behaviours and mannerisms.

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<sup>10</sup> I use the term integration in the same manner as the LRRO staff members have applied the term. Generally, they refer to successful integration as refugees, who, through acquiring employment, are economically independent and are able to understand and balance cultural differences between their own culture of origin and that of the host nation.

<sup>11</sup> The social theory of neoliberalism derives from the poverty studies of early 50s and 60s that shaped welfare policies. The theory blamed the conditions of the poor on their behavior and way of life rather than on structural and institutional power that perpetuate their poverty. Neoliberal theory is often used to place value judgments on this marginalized group and hold accountable for their poverty, while disregarding the political, socio-cultural, and economic factors, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion.

In addition, for refugees, integrating and belonging to American culture meant discarding “bad” (Nepalese-Bhutanese) traditions and retaining only “good” traditions from it. The ways in which refugees integrate and learn to belong to American culture are interconnected. In other words, refugees “become Americans” by incorporating what they perceive as “good” American behaviours.

For instance, there was an incident where an apartment management complained to the LRRO that some of the refugees’ kids were being left unattended near the apartment pool. Speaking of this incident, Gopal opined, “This would not have happened if our kids behaved properly like American kids do.” He asserted that parenting was one of the things that the Bhutanese refugees needed to learn implying that the kids’ behaviours were reflections of Bhutanese refugees’ poor parenting. For Gopal, “bad parenting” was an ominous Bhutanese cultural trait that must be discarded.

Refugees’ understanding of becoming American by incorporating good behaviours is illustrative of how they inculcate certain values as Americans. Although some of the refugees share Gopal’s belief that bad Bhutanese cultural traditions should be discarded, they also believe that certain American traditions were equally bad and should not be embraced. While it is important for Bhutanese that their children integrate (i.e. speak English fluently and move upward in social/class status) into the American culture, it is equally imperative for them that their children retain their cultural identity.

Scholars of refugee resettlement studies have examined that although refugees are eager to integrate they also express a desire to maintain cultural integrity and identity (Ager 2008; Phillimore and Goodson 2008; Warriner 2007; Brettell and Sargent 2006; Feldman 2007). Ambivalences about integration and becoming American are evident in conversations with the refugees who indicated that they are aware that integration will allow them to belong to the American society. However, they feared that their children become too “American.” Such conversations with the refugees reflect the complexities of belonging both “here” (America) and “there” (Nepal/Bhutan) (Suárez-Orozco 2001; Peteet 2005).

### **Belonging, othering, and language**

The process of integrating into any culture is often mixed with ambivalences. In addition, the politics of belonging and specific mechanisms that mark groups as “the other” or outside of the dominant culture further complicates this process. For instance, language has been historically used as a marker of ethnic/cultural identity. Throughout the city of Y-town, many local NGOs offer language courses to refugees and the Y-town community. Observations of ESL classes demonstrate how the politics of belonging and othering are reinforced through the discourse of speaking English well

During one of the conversations with the ESL teachers about the importance of learning English and of different levels of ESL courses from beginners to conversation level, one ESL teacher commented that it would be great to have an “accent reduction” class in Y-town.<sup>12</sup> When asked what she meant by an “accent reduction course,” she clarified that many foreigners have heavy accents and “Americans” find it hard to understand them. Using one refugee’s accent as an example, she commented that because of this refugee’s heavy accent, “we (Americans and ESL teachers) have a hard time understanding him.” The ESL teacher continued that having an accent did not signify that the foreigners could not speak English. She asserted that an accent reduction course could help him and others like him to improve their English language skills.

This exchange illustrates the ESL teacher’s unawareness of how historically language has been used to marginalize and discriminate minority groups and how language-learning practices are linked with the politics of belonging. The suggestion of emphasizing “American” accent is indicative of how non-native English speakers are excluded via language. The idea of “us” (Americans) not understanding “them” (non-Americans) has a significant implication about power, privilege, and hierarchies of belonging. The reference to the refugees as “foreigners” indicates a form of othering by distinguishing non-native English speakers as outsiders.

Moreover, this exchange exemplifies that the ability to speak English not only becomes a necessity for refugees for mobility and accessing resources, but also the ability to speak English understandably (i.e. with “American” accent) becomes a necessity and a requirement for belonging. An individual’s accent is used as a measuring rubric to determine his/her American-ness. Exclusionary and othering practices continue to shape refugees’ understanding of what it means to be an American – in this case, being American means speaking English well and without accents.

Doris Warriner (2007) argues that the English-language proficiency does not always translate into economic self-sufficiency or upward social mobility. However, LRRO workers frequently emphasize the importance of English language skills and encourage –to a certain extent mandate –refugees to attend the ESL courses. LRRO staff members argue that requiring the learning of English-language is in the refugees’ best interests to ensure job security and gives them a chance for social upward mobility. As much as this argument is problematical because it implies a form of cultural hegemony, it is equally erroneous to deny critical resources, such as the ESL courses, to refugees because lack of English language skills becomes a barrier for refugees to effectively communicate their needs and to find employment.

Therefore, it is critical that both ESL teachers and LRRO employees are cognizant of the fact that teaching English to communicate is different from teaching to speak English with an American accent. The latter becomes a tool of social exclusion and shapes refugees’ conception of American-ness. For instance, many of the older refugees, above the age of 65, do not speak English. They do not work (due to covert age discrimination, despite legal mandates against it) and their socialization is limited to other Nepali speakers. For this elderly group, the requirement

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<sup>12</sup> The ESL teacher is a volunteer who teaches English at a local community center whose mission is to increase learning and literacy in the community. This non-profit community organisation is not part of LRRO, but they work in collaboration and offer ESL to refugees.

of attending ESL classes, which were generally designed for working adults, become a burden. In contrast, other adults indicate a desire to speak English fluently so that they are able to effectively communicate and find jobs. For the latter group, learning English language is a necessity for survival.

Informal conversations with refugees indicate that they desire to speak English fluently and have a conversation beyond simple greetings. For instance, Maya expressed a desire to read, write, and speak English well. She was aware of the cultural, social, and political capital that knowing the language held. Her interest in learning English was not unique among the Bhutanese refugees, and particularly among the women of her age group because most of the middle-aged Bhutanese women are not literate in either Nepali or English.<sup>13</sup> For them, it was crucial to learn English in order to find jobs, particularly in a suburban town like Y-town.<sup>14</sup> Despite being a quick learner and picking up the English language fast in her ESL classes, she was apprehensive and dismissive about her ability to speak it well. Other Bhutanese refugees also shared similar lack of self-confidence in their ability to speak English fluently.

Anu, who dropped out of school in secondary school, indicated similar desire of speaking English fluently. Compared to Maya, she could read and write in English better because she had attended grade school set-up by the UNHCR in the refugee camps. She also understood and spoke much better than she gave herself the credit. Yet, she was apprehensive and lacked confidence in her ability to speak the language. In fact, she felt that her language skills were completely inadequate. She worried that she will not be able speak as well as the Americans and they [Americans] will not understand her.

Despite clear evidence of language ability, refugees like Anu, Maya, and even those refugees who had attained higher post-secondary education, feel that their English language skills are inadequate due to lack of “American” accents and limited knowledge of colloquial phrases. Arguably, refugees’ lack of self-confidence and apprehension about their language skills reveal their internalization of the politics of othering and suggest that for refugees becoming American meant speaking English fluently.

Lack of language skills not only creates barriers in terms of articulation and communication of ideas/concepts, but, as these ethnographical examples demonstrate, they also reinforce feelings of exclusion and marginalization particularly for non-native English speakers. These exemplify how the Bhutanese refugees as newly settled citizen-subjects are taught to belong and integrate into American culture, and are simultaneously excluded via language.

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<sup>13</sup> Many women indicated that they never went to school. This is exemplary of women’s marginalization due to gender biases and discrimination.

<sup>14</sup> In comparison to metropolitan cities where ability to speak English is not necessarily a requirement to get a job, in Y-town, the ability to communicate in English is a necessity and a requirement. According to one refugee, she was turned away from applying for a job because she does not speak English.

## **Policing ‘good’ and ‘bad’ behaviours**

Becoming American is not only shaped by learning to speak English well, but also the regulation of refugees’ behaviours to reflect “American” values. The notion of Americanization is inculcated into refugees through policing of their behaviours that institutions identify as “good” or “bad” behaviours.

For instance, during one of the staff meetings, Christine noted that LRRO received a complaint from an apartment manager about the refugees (Bhutanese) non-compliance with apartment policies. The complaint was that the refugee kids were playing in the swimming pool unattended by an adult. A staff member at the meeting suggested, “It would be better if someone could scare them [refugees], so that they will listen and comply with the policies.”

Another staff member added that perhaps Dee, another staff member, could set up a meeting with the refugees to talk about these issues. That person joked that the refugees were scared of Dee because she was firm and serious. As one of the older staff members who have had many years of experience working at LRRO, Dee was sturdy, firm in her mannerisms, and stoically professional in her approach to refugees. Although the staff members were only joking, it was a problematical statement about scaring refugees, who already were frightened and apprehensive of institutions.

Disciplining of the refugees through fear tactics illustrates how institutions police refugees. No one thought of speaking with the Bhutanese refugees to understand the context of the complaint and to get their perspective of the story. It was automatically assumed that the refugees were wrong and thus their behaviours needed to be corrected. This ethnographic example is illustrative of infantilization of refugees through constant regulation of their activities.

Other institutions also police Bhutanese refugees’ behaviours. For instance, when Kamala visited the health department because of her abdominal pain, it was interesting to observe the ways in which the doctor regulated her actions. When Kamala misunderstood the doctor’s instructions to lie down on her back and instead she lied on her side, it was evident after a few repetitions of the instructions that the doctor was losing patience.

Further cause of aggravation was when Kamala gave long drawn out narratives of the history of her abdomen pain rather than giving short “yes” and “no” answers per doctor’s instructions. The doctor stopped her medical exam and told Kamala to give only a yes or no response. The doctor further added that she would do most of the talking and not Kamala.

Although it is understandable that doctors are pressed for time and overburdened by many patients, one must ask how effectively would a doctor be able to treat patients if she/he was not willing to listen to the patients’ stories. The apparent discrepancy between Kamala’s and the doctor’s perceptions on the importance of detailed narrative illustrates a structural and a cultural disjuncture. This exchange raises concerns over the doctors’ role in policing refugees’ behaviours.

The cultural disconnect on both the refugee's and the doctor's side illustrates the power of structural disjuncture where certain actions of the refugees are perceived as non-compliance. Scholars (Fadiman 1997) have analyzed how medical personnel justify regulation or correction of certain behaviours justifying them as correcting "non-compliance" behaviours. In doing so, such regulatory actions of institutions function to "Americanize" the other.

As Kamala's case illustrates, the doctor's regulatory actions of Kamala's behaviour shape how refugees understand the notion of "how things are done in America." Moreover, refugees' understanding of American culture is shaped by their encounters with different governing entities. It is important to note, however, that regulating refugees' behaviours does not mean that refugees are passive objects or sites upon which an institutional power enacts. In fact, Kamala's frequent questioning and her long drawn out answers, despite the doctor's repeated instructions to give a yes or no response, could also be interpreted as a form of resistance, albeit an unintentional one.

Cultural differences play a significant role in the interaction between Kamala and her physician, and some of the misunderstandings could possibly be due to the cultural differences. However, to merely state that the doctor's attitude and actions towards Kamala were simply a result of cultural disconnect reduces the complex issues of social hierarchies and structural power. Ong (2003) argues that institutional entities project cultural values, codes, and rules in the process of learning to belong or "integrate," and of making refugees into "good" citizen-subjects.

In shaping refugees' conceptualizations of American-ness, the refugee body becomes a site where neoliberal notions of good/bad and deserving/undeserving subjects are inculcated. In this ethnographic example, the doctor's strict instructions to Kamala reinforced the message of "this is how things are done in America" where the doctors' and patients' roles were clearly marked. Thus, part of being American was understanding and performing the designated role of a "compliant" patient. There is a gap in the literature on how health care institutions become sites that reinforce "conceptions about cultural difference and 'deservingness' of public benefits are elaborated and deployed" (Horton 2004). This ethnographic example contributes to the body of literature that examines how medical institutions have the power to objectify and medicalize the body.

### **Reproducing neoliberal subjects**

Ethnographic examples illustrate how neoliberal logic of individual responsibility is often used. Rather than addressing the structural and institutional barriers, such as language barriers, cultural differences, and transportation issues, refugees are held accountable for their inability to overcome these structural barriers. On one hand, refugees are repeatedly told that part of becoming American is to incorporate American values of self-sufficiency and independence – i.e. finding a job, doing things on their own. On the other hand, they are not given adequate tools to become self-sufficient. Such paradoxes produce an environment where the organisation's bureaucratic management embedded in neoliberal logic becomes a hindrance for integrating and becoming American.

LRRO staff members frequently use the language of “self-sufficiency” and “independence” –the two terms were used interchangeably – advocating that these are “American” values that every refugee must incorporate into their everyday lives. For instance, one Monday morning Kamala in her broken English was trying to convince Anne to either accompany her or help her get to the health department.

Because every refugee has to go for a physical exam and follow-up visits, Kamala also needed to go to the county health department for her follow-up appointment. When Anne refused to accompany her due to limited staff members in the office, she sought help from another staff member. This staff member also declined and responded that she should know how to get to the health department as she has been there before and that she should know how to take the bus.

Because health examinations may be scheduled in any one of the six local county health departments in Y-town, getting to these places becomes a difficult task for newly arrived refugees who are unfamiliar with the city transportation system and/or the healthcare system. In the above ethnographic case, LRRO staff members perceived knowing how to take the bus and getting to places as part of learning to be “self-sufficient” and “independent.”

However, although it may be a simple task for locals and people with cars, even a simple task can be difficult and be a source of anxiety for refugees – an issue that is often overlooked by the LRRO staff members. For families with small children, these simple tasks become taxing. If refugees cannot rely on LRRO for simple tasks as getting help to get to a place, then, for what can they rely? One must also ask, who decides when LRRO’s responsibilities begin and end?

The notions of “self-sufficiency” and “independence” are very abstract. Even there was no consensus among LRRO staff members on the definition of these terms that they advocate to refugees as American values. For Nancy, self-sufficiency is, “Paying their own rent... [being] off of state welfare.” Her idea of self-sufficiency was for refugees to obtain a job and become financially secured. Her response did not address the question of whether financial independence was the only measure of self-sufficiency and independence of refugees.

Unlike Nancy, Christine perceived self-sufficiency as a complex concept that cannot be simplified as merely gaining financial independence. She defined it as:

*Well, financial stability, so yeah getting a job is a big part of that and functioning in a society...being content with what you are doing, who you are, being here...it is not just financial self-sufficiency or financial stability that makes a person self-sufficient. I am thinking of one client in particular from Iraq. She has been here over a year now with her family and they are working, they are paying their bills, their daughter is in high school. But she is still in our office, I would say, on a weekly basis at least, [to get] help with different things. [For example] She wants to go home and visit [her] family; she cries because she is home sick or does not feel well and is sick...that sort of thing. I think that also has little bit to do with personality, you know...I guess self-sufficiency takes a long time and it is a pretty complicated thing.*

Christine perceived the Iraqi woman's repeated request for help in non-financial issues as being emotionally dependent. For her, self-sufficiency and independence did not only refer to financial independence but also to emotional independence. It is unclear what she meant by emotional independence. Nonetheless, Nancy and Christine's views on this conception of self-sufficiency and independence raise an importation question of the implications of labelling refugees as dependent based on ambiguous understandings of the terms. The emphasis placed on these two terms as American values despite ambiguities surrounding the concept suggests that the concept of independence may be merely rhetorical and bureaucratic exercise.

Christine's conclusion that the Iraqi woman was "dependent" resonate with the phrase "culture of dependency" – a phrase that a few of the LRRO staff members use when speaking of some of the refugees. The phrase "culture of dependency" is used in reference to refugees' supposed hesitancy/refusal and/or lack of ability (in LRRO's perception) to become independent. During an informal conversation with Jill at the LRRO office, she commented that because the refugees were used to having things done for them in the refugee camps, they expected the same kind of support when they came to the U.S. She asserted, "Because refugees had been dependent on NGOs' support in the refugee camps, they were used to being dependent on NGOs for their daily rations of food and clothing." The logic of culture of dependency resonate with Oscar Lewis's (1996) "culture of poverty" theory that is based on neoliberal argument of deserving and undeserving subjects.<sup>15</sup>

In this case, the culture of dependency logic blames the refugees for their supposed dependence on NGOs, thus, reproducing the (il)logic of neoliberalism. If refugees are blamed for their supposed dependence and lack of integration, then, how are independence and successful integration into American culture defined? How does one measure "too much" of assistance?

Jill's comment of "culture of dependency" demonstrates that LRRO's bureaucratic power is wrapped in a neoliberal logic of deserving-ness that refugees often have to navigate and negotiate. Shrouded within this bureaucracy is the legitimization of LRRO's authority over the lives of refugees and illustrates that "the maintenance of these [bureaucratic] roles is independent of the actual needs or abilities of the refugees" (Harrell-Bond 2002, 57). Insistence on refugees becoming independent and self-sufficient on LRRO's terms legitimizes the organisation's authority and justifies its actions.

A critical analysis of the Bhutanese refugees' and the LRRO staff members' conceptualizations of "American culture" illustrate how specific mechanisms of integration are tied with the politics of belonging and othering. Examining the significance of these mechanisms allows for understanding of how the concept of Americanization or becoming American is reproduced through notions of deservingness /undeservingness, which also render refugees as good/bad citizen-subjects. These mechanisms of integration and the politics of belonging illustrate how

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<sup>15</sup> Oscar Lewis's 1966 "culture of poverty" theory blamed poor people's reliance on public assistance such as welfare as a product of poor people's cultural practices. The theory draws on neoliberal logic of personal accountability and responsibility and pathologizes the poor ignoring the history of marginalizations and racialization processes that perpetuate the vicious cycle of poverty.



institutional power and specific notions of American culture are intertwined in a complex web of bureaucracy that shapes refugees' understanding of what it means to be an American.

Furthermore, the frameworks of integration and Americanization provide a useful analytical tool for examining the routine management of refugees by institutions, such as LRRO and medical institutions. These frameworks reveal how notions of American culture and bureaucratic power reproduce social inequalities and hierarchies of power.

Rosaldo argues, "Culture and power have become intertwined in a world and in institutional settings where diverse groups, themselves internally diverse, interact and seek full enfranchisement and social justice under conditions of inequality" (1993, xix). Problematizing the institutional approaches to integration that are embedded on the neoliberal logic highlights how institutions shift their responsibility of integration onto the refugees through the discourse of individual responsibility and accountability.

Refugees incorporate and internalize these neoliberal American values into their daily lives. With hopes for better future and the promise of inclusion into the American culture, Americanization becomes a technique to either incorporate the refugees as "good" citizens or to marginalize them as undeserving subjects. In the process, notions of successful integration become absorbed into the framework of historical practices of racial and ethnic classifications that separate minorities into good and bad citizens.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

*After coming here, we have high hopes that our children will be able to study that their lives will be better here. Two of my daughters are in school and I am happy about that. My youngest will join school from this August month. Everything is good.*

*We came here hoping for better future for our children. As for us parents, we don't have any hope, we don't have hope of returning to our country. There was no hope of repatriation, and so we thought that coming here would at least ensure that our children's future would be better. We don't know where we will end up.*

Tara (Bhutanese refugee)

Having lived in a state of limbo for the past 18 years in the refugee camp in Nepal, for Tara, being resettled in the "promised land" brings hope for her children's future even if that means compromising her present –i.e. making peace with the uncertainties about her future and learning to deal with the bureaucratic hurdles. The Bhutanese refugees' perseverance and optimism in the face of hardships is illustrative in the above quotation. Unfortunately, her comment also reveals the sad reality that the decision to resettle and persevere with these hardships is the result of lack of viable options available for refugees.

Refugees shared their feelings of not having hopes for a chance for upward social mobility. Their conscious decision to resettle, despite their awareness of the difficulties in integrating into a new culture illustrates their agency. Refugees actively seek ways to improve their situation. A majority of the adult Bhutanese refugees told me that their decision to apply for resettlement was primarily based on a hope that coming to the U.S. would give their children a chance for better opportunities and a secured life.

Many refugees insisted that after living in the refugee camps for almost two decades since the early 1990s, the offer to resettle in one of the developed nations was a better option and a chance to eliminate their constant fear of insecurity and indeterminacy of their statelessness. Recognition of refugees' agency and their autonomous decision to resettle is important. However, it is also crucial not to be blinded by romantic positivism.

Romanticism of refugees' agency obscures the limited options they faced while living at the margins. Although refugees' situation is much better than in the camps, they have and will face disappointments and frustrations in the host communities. Whether it is with regards to employment and financial instability, navigating bureaucracies of power, or their experiences of othering, deskilling of labour, language and cultural barriers, the ethnographical data illustrated the challenges and limitations that refugees are experiencing in resettlement. They do not necessarily view third country resettlement as the best option for them, but the best for their children's future.

Anthropologists have studied the difficulties and complexities that refugees experience in third country resettlement (Holtzman 2008; Keles 2008; Ager 2008; Shandy 2007). Without a doubt, resettlement has a transforming effect in the lives of refugees in terms of providing stability, security, access to resources, and opportunities for "better" life in the host (often Western) nations. However, as this in-depth ethnographic research illustrated, resettlement is a messy process and more research is needed to understand the power relations between the refugees and NGOs, and within the organisational structure of the NGOs.

This study opens up a space to address some of the contributions that anthropology could make for both studying refugee resettlement in the context of the U.S. racialization and Americanization processes and in designing and implementing effective programs that do not reinforce unequal power dynamics.

The paper presented several arguments. First, resettlement is characterized by paradoxes and structural discontinuities that reinforce asymmetrical power between resettlement organisation and refugees. The asymmetrical donor-recipient relationship is illustrative of what Marcel Mauss argues, "There are no free gifts; gift cycles engage persons in permanent commitments that articulate the dominant institutions" (1990, ix).

Second argument is that humanitarian work is politicized and influenced by larger structures of power. The framework of the politics of humanitarianism is useful in contextualizing and analyzing these paradoxes that further complicate resettlement. The contradictions reproduce ambivalence, frustrations, and inconsistencies in the way local NGOs like LRRO manage

resettlement. LRRO employees' routine bureaucratic practices and actions rendered the organisation as a governing body and obscured its role and responsibilities.

Third argument presented in this paper is that bureaucratic practices and micro-management of refugees informed and shaped refugees understanding of what it means to be an American. These conceptions of Americanization are reproduced through and embedded within neoliberal understanding of “deserving” and “undeserving” subjects.

In analyzing the resettlement of Bhutanese refugees, my ethnographic study illustrated that resettlement is a messy and unsettling process that is full of paradoxes and complexities. There is not a simple template or formulae that would make resettlement smooth. Moreover, it answers Barbara Harrell-Bond (2002) question, “Can humanitarian work with refugees be humane?” that humanitarian work is not necessarily always humane. Even with the best interest and intentions, any type of humanitarian work involving refugees is politicized in that larger structural and institutional forces will influence how humanitarian work is delivered.

Some of my recommendations for making resettlement smooth are as follows:

- Keep a clear line of communication between resettlement organisation and refugees
- Timely address any ambiguities and inconsistencies in information.
- Have available a list of culturally appropriate food.
- Give anonymous surveys to refugees at the end of every session of the cultural orientation course to identify which information in the course is most helpful and to know effectiveness of these courses.
- Take a general anonymous poll on refugees' views of the overall effectiveness and usefulness of the cultural orientation course.

This study adds to the anthropology of refugee literature by exploring the question of how structural discontinuities and processes of integration shape the politics in the making and unmaking of the refugees as Americans. Future studies on refugee resettlement could focus on the impact of immigration policies and racialization processes on refugees as they integrate in the developed nations. The history of immigration and the politics of belonging/exclusion unravel the intricate ways that the state maintains social hierarchies among different racial and ethnic groups through modes of surveillance and regulations (Loescher and Scanlan 1986). Social hierarchies that define who belongs and who does not and influence humanitarian work were evident in the organisation's contradictory bureaucratic management of refugees.

Moreover, more research could focus on the politics of calculated humanitarianism at higher structural level – i.e. focusing on the role of a state in resettlement. Future studies could problematize and investigate the power of a state and explore its plurality at the junctures in smaller apparatuses. Conceptualization of state power as an abstract omnipotent force does little in understanding how state power works at everyday micro levels. Analysis of the rationalities and reasoning behind a state's decisions to grant asylum will help to address questions such as: Who decides which Bhutanese refugees will be resettled to a third country? If a state is not capable of fully supporting refugees due to lack of funding, then, why does the state continue to

resettle more refugees only to shift the burden of support onto local NGOs who are already stretched thin?

Anthropological study of the resettlement of the Bhutanese refugees highlighted the nuances and complexities of third-country resettlement. Ethnographic data illuminated that resettlement is neither a smooth transition nor a simple matter of moving people from one place to another. Rather, the issues of power relations, the local and global politics of inclusion/exclusion, the politicization of humanitarianism, mistrusts of and by the institutions, and the inconsistencies and ambiguities analyzed in this study illustrated that resettlement is an unsettling process.

The unsettling complexities and politics in resettlement raise the question of whether refugee resettlement hailed as the “solution” is nothing more than a political gimmick of the states involved. The study highlighted the intricate web of politics and power in humanitarianism revealing that a state’s inadequate support to local humanitarian organisation made resettlement a “calculated kindness,” and a project of managing displacement rather than helping refugees rebuild their lives. In sum, then, the politics of humanitarianism continue to negatively impact the refugees even after resettlement.

## DEMOGRAPHY OF INTERVIEWEES

<b>ID<sup>16</sup></b>	<b>Interview Date</b>	<b>Source<sup>17</sup></b>	<b>Sex/Gender</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>
BR 1	06/01/09	Surya	M	Single
BR 2	06/21/09	Arjun	M	Single
BR 3	06/23/09	Gopal	M	Married
BR 4	06/24/09	Bimla	F	Single
BR 5	07/07/09	Maya	F	Married
BR 6	07/09/09	Anu	F	Single
BR 7	07/27/09	Bir	M	Married
BR 8	08/01/09	Tara	F	Married
LRRO 1	06/04/09	Jill	F	Married
LRRO 2	06/22/09	Anne	F	Married
LRRO 3	07/21/09	Nancy	F	Married
LRRO 4	08/05/09	Christine	F	Single

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<sup>16</sup> BR = Bhutanese Refugees LRRO = Local Refugee Resettlement Organisation Employees

<sup>17</sup> All names are pseudonyms

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