UNACCOMPANIED REFUGEE MINORS AND THEIR STRATEGIES TO NAVIGATE A NEW WORLD: A GROUNDED THEORY

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Unaccompanied Refugee Minors and their Strategies to Navigate a New World: A Grounded Theory

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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I dedicated the effort I put into this project to my family—past, present and future—especially to Rachel, Eliza, Lydia and Elinor.
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This study explored how unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) define success. The population of URMs consists of individuals who, through forced migration from their country of origin, were resettled in the United States through the URM program. Little is known about the ways in which refugee adolescents view the resettlement process once they have left the URM program. Through a traditional grounded theory method, 15 interviews with former URMs were conducted with the aim of laying the groundwork for a theory that would explain how success is defined, the unique challenges URMs face, the mechanisms for overcoming challenges, and the role that culture plays in the resettlement process.
Chapter 1
The Problem

Social problems arise from competing values, and values emerge through the context of culture. Taking a global perspective on a social problem assumes inherent risk of being ethnocentric and—if left unchecked—devaluing diversity. The care of underage and unaccompanied refugees in the United States involves inherent complex challenges, varied perspectives, and competing values. There are political and legal issues, cultural and familial issues, psychological and social issues, professional and personal issues, and local and global issues. Forced migration of unaccompanied minors is an ongoing social concern and challenge since no country is exempt from shifting political tides, natural disasters, civil and international conflict and war, epidemics, severe poverty, and other atrocities result in forced migration.

Although some progress has been made in recognizing and serving this resilient but vulnerable population, the social work perspective is underrepresented in a literature of importance to our profession. The first two chapters of this dissertation provide an overview of the historical and political context of refugee and asylum seeking minors, the response in discovering and meeting their needs, and the varied application of several contemporary social theories. Given the goal of better understanding the experience of URM's and how best to foster their success, I ask former unaccompanied refugee minors about what has been of value to them. More specifically, I ask the questions: How do former unaccompanied refugee minors define success? How does their perspective on success change over time? And what strategies are most helpful—from the perspective of unaccompanied refugee minors—to achieve success in the U.S.? I outline the
research design, an emergent grounded theory methodology based on the Strauss and Corbin (1998) Traditional Grounded Theory (TGT) that will be used to address these research questions. Three existing theoretical frameworks guide the initial areas of inquiry and serve to more accurately ground the emergent theory based on the data collected from the participants. These three frameworks include Sen and Nussbaum’s (1993) Capability Approach; Berry’s (1997) Acculturation Framework; and Ungar’s (2010) Resilience Across Cultures. The goal of exploration of participants’ experiences with a program designed to help them adjust and become successful is the development of a theory to help inform future practice, policy, and research relevant to unaccompanied refugee minors.

**Personal Narrative**

As a young child, I can recall meeting Gifti for the first time. She was tall, in her mid-20s, and had very dark skin. She came from Ghana and had a thick accent. She met my older brother in London, and traveled to the U.S. to visit our family. She stayed for several weeks. She was treated like an older sister during that time. I came to love her loud laugh and her curiosity with what I thought was everyday stuff. A few years later, José came to our home for a few days around Christmas time. He was from the Andes Mountains in Ecuador and spoke only Spanish. He was selling llama rugs in our town from his village when my brother invited him home for the holiday. He seemed so different from everyone I knew, and that intrigued me. In high school, Omar came as a foreign exchange student from Ecuador, and again exposed me to the excitement of cultural diversity.
As a young adult, I spent two years in Guatemala as a stranger in a completely new world. I later returned to Guatemala, working in an orphanage for several months. Although conditions in the orphanage were not bad, I can vividly recall children and youth looking through trash piles for anything of value to trade for food; teens crouched in an ally huffing glue or paint to numb the hunger pangs; and the youth playing soccer in the street, laughing and joking with friends in spite of oppressive poverty and domestic abuse. These experiences have guided the development of my professional interests.

Since that time, I have sought to put the privileged position I enjoy to use by studying, advocating, and engaging with oppressed populations from culturally diverse backgrounds. Those journeys lead me through an exciting adventure of education and learning where I discovered the social work perspective. This project combines my fascination and appreciation of cultural diversity, with the motivation to learn about and advocate for the resilient but vulnerable youth who come to the U.S. as unaccompanied refugees.

**Definition of Terms**

Given that multiple disciplines study this population using their respective nomenclature, clarity and consistency of terms is important. The terms “child” or “children”, “youth”, “adolescent”, or “minor” are used interchangeably to indicate a person under 18, the legal age of majority in the U.S. The term “unaccompanied” refers to their status as unattached, in a social sense, to any adult caregiver capable of providing a safe and secure environment. The term “refugee” is used in this study as a legal description rather than an experiential description. The legal definition refers to legal status granted because one was able to prove founded persecution—or fear of
persecution—based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion (UNHCR, 2002). In contrast, “forced migration” is a term that refers to the act—rather than legal status—of crossing international borders in order to seek refuge based on the experience of persecution or fear of persecution. The term “asylum seeker” also refers to those forced migrants who seek it, but have not been granted legal refugee status. The term “alien” refers, again, to the lack of legal recognition in a country other than that of origin. The study participants all received services through a federal program entitled the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program. These participants are referred to as former Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URM’s) who have emancipated from the program based on turning 18 years of age.

Identifying the Population in Context

Children and youth who enter the U.S. unaccompanied are served by the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program (URM), entering services in three possible ways. In legal terms, they are initially distinguished as Unaccompanied Alien Children (UAC), Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URM), and, though it was not relevant to this study, Victims of Human Trafficking (VHT). A brief description of the first two groups will help frame some key aspects of the broader social problems at play, and will begin to highlight the variety of personal histories and context of these young people.

Unaccompanied alien children

Ultimately, some youth enter the URM program, but the process is often harrowing and unpredictable. According to a 2007 report by the Congressional Research Service (CRS), U.S. Customs and Border Protection has apprehended around 86,000 juveniles per year since 2001. About four out of five are Mexican nationals and
voluntarily return to Mexico (Haddal, 2007), while most of the remaining come from Central America. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) often place the youth in adult detention centers to await removal proceedings before the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR), part of the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ). They are not provided legal representation by the government, but may be assigned a pro-bono lawyer (if available), and attempt to prove that they fled their country of origin due to persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. If their case is deemed to have merit, the teen will enter federal custody by being referred to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) under the Department of Health and Human Services by ICE.

According to ORR statistics, between 7,000 and 9,000 youth are referred to ORR per year from the Department of Homeland Security and ICE (ORR Report to Congress, 2007). Under the ORR these youth are provided limited services through the Department of Unaccompanied Children’s Services (DUCS) and are placed in foster homes, but remain in federal custody during court proceedings. The youth are sent to foster homes in one of 14 states and Washington DC that provide services through government contracts. In federal custody they are restricted from working or obtaining a driver license, and ultimately, wait for an immigration court to decide if they meet the requirements of refugee status (Byrne, 2008). These youth have often experienced significant poverty, violence and abuse, or other trauma and insecurity in their home country (Deluca, McEwen & Keim, 2010). They face additional challenges on the journey to the U.S., while in custody, and after entering the DUCS program. For these
youth, the ultimate goal, other than reunification with a safe and secure family member, is to be granted refugee legal status and enter the URM program.

**Unaccompanied refugee minors**

Each year, the U.S. accepts a quota of youth who typically come from refugee camps abroad when it has been determined that they have no opportunity of being raised by a safe and secure adult. These youth enter the U.S. directly under the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program (URM), also housed under the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). Since 1980, more than 13,000 youth have entered the URM program (ORR, 2010). The youth coming from refugee camps abroad have often been exposed to severe and persistent danger from such circumstances as conflict and war. These youth are referred directly to one of two social service agencies and are entitled to refugee legal status and benefits automatically upon arrival in the U.S. They enter the custody of either Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services (LIRS) or the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). The youth are entitled to education, health care, mental health care, family reunification services, case management services, funding for foster care placements and assessment of family placements, and coordination with pro bono legal representation and appropriate guardian ad litem services (Knight, 2004).

In the mid-Atlantic state where this research took place, the URM program falls under the Department of Social Services under the Office of Newcomer Services. A private faith-based organization (referred to hereafter as PFBO) provides services for URM, UAC, and Victims of Human Trafficking. The PFBO generally provides services for between 50 and 70 minors who fit into one of these categories. For the purposes of this study, the primary focus was on adults who received services under the URM
program, but have now emancipated and are over 18 years of age, regardless of how they entered the program.

Sample population

This study population reflects diversity in background and experience prior to receiving services. Some come to the U.S. from refugee camps where it was determined that there was no adult to provide for their long-term needs. These camps were often established due to persistent political or civil unrest, or war, such as the case of Sudan or Burma. The survivors of such ordeals, particularly youth, have likely experienced significant trauma. Refugee camps are intended to provide only the most basic needs to sustain life and are often a source of further psychosocial, emotional, and physical trauma (Kline & Mone, 2003; Stepakoff, 2006; Vu, 2007). Grief, loss, and first-hand witness of violence can add to the stress and trauma experienced by children and adolescents who lack appropriate care.

Other young people who matriculate into the URM program from the DUCS program are more likely to come from Central America without legal documents. Poverty, abuse, and civil unrest are common sources of stress and trauma for this group. In some cases, the young people entered the U.S. with family members, but were subsequently estranged from them. Whether with family or alone, the journey was often dangerous and traumatic (Deluca, McEwen & Keim, 2010; Lustig et al, 2004). Upon reaching what they believe to be safety, they are detained at the border in detention centers or apprehended as undocumented aliens, and face uncertainty and are treated as criminals. A few studies of unaccompanied minors have begun to explore these challenges through the lens of resilience to such adversity (Hopkins & Hill, 2010; Kohli,
Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010); however, greater understanding about the interplay of adolescent development, culture, and capability to access resources is needed in order to continue this line of inquiry.

**Rational for Current Study**

This section briefly describes pertinent themes or areas of study, in the literature, identifies key gaps, and introduces a rational for the current study. The following three theoretical frameworks or approaches that help frame this study are introduced and explored more fully in Chapter 2: (a) Sen and Nussbaum’s (1993) Capability Approach; (b) Berry’s (1997) Acculturation Framework; and (c) Ungar’s (2010) Resilience Across Cultures from the Theory of Positive Development. At the conclusion of this section, a rational is provided for the role of a social work perspective in the development of a grounded theory relevant to the URM population.

**Themes in the literature**

This overview will be revisited in more detail in Chapter 2, but an identification of common research themes that have focused on refugee youth is useful in demonstrating the rational for the current study. One theme focuses on unaccompanied teens’ experience of trauma and a substantial lack of familial support (Ehntholt & Yule, 2006; Kira, Lewandowski, Somers, Yoon & Chiodo, 2009; Montgomery, 2008). Some studies have focused on legal issues and complex challenges related to unaccompanied alien children or asylum seekers (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2008; Young & McKenna, 2010). Relatively little research addresses challenges presented when faced with adaptation to a new culture without family or clan support, with some notable exceptions (Beiser, 2006; Luster et al., 2003; Puig, 2002). Educational barriers that unaccompanied
minors experience are also present in the literature (McBrien, 2005). Most research focuses on the assessment and treatment of mental health problems among unaccompanied minors (Bean, Eurelings-Bontekoe, Mooijaart & Spinhoven, 2006; Derluyn, Mels & Broekaert, 2009; Kohli & Mather, 2003). Huemer and colleagues (2009) call for more research on the range of psychopathology among URMs. Another theme highlights the risk associated with trauma, social deprivation, or stigma (Ehnthold & Yule, 2006; Ellis, Macdonald, Lincoln & Cabral, 2008; Grove & Zwi, 2006; Spinhoven, Bean & Eurelings-Bontekoe, 2006). Much of the current research has focused on applying existing social theories to various refugee populations, but with limited uniformity (Berman, 2001; Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003; Derluyn & Broekaert, 2007; Gibson, 2001; Gibson, 2010).

**Key gaps in the literature**

A brief overview of relevant themes in the research revealed three important issues: (a) the research that has focused specifically on the URM population has been conducted outside the U.S.; (b) little is known about the active role URMs play in defining and pursuing well-being, including how culture fits into that process; and (c) there is a distinct lack of research based on a social work perspective, or any more holistic, person-in-environment perspective.

One explanation for the limited research on URMs is the variety of circumstances that lead to forced migration. In order to maximize homogeneity in research participants, many studies tend to focus on refugees who come from similar backgrounds or geographic locations. For example, much research has focused on the so-called Lost Boys of Sudan (Bates, Baird, Johnson, Lee, Luster, & Rehagen, 2005; Geltman, 2005;
Luster, Qin, Bates, Johnson, & Rana, 2009; McKinnon, 2008; Tempany, 2009) or the Pedro Pan refugees from Cuba (Gondra, 2000; Goyos, 1997; Haymes, 2004; Ramírez, 2008). Indeed, when considering research on all refugees, as opposed to strictly URMs, place of origin tends to be a key selection criterion. One challenge with this approach of selecting for geographical origin is that theory or practice implications are limited to that specific population.

This study utilized a participant selection criteria based on participation in the URM program in the U.S., regardless of home country or culture of origin. This emphasizes the shared experience of being in a new place rather than having come from the same place. In addition to being a practical method consistent with the research questions, it facilitates a theoretical sampling strategy aimed at achieving maximum variation in research participants, an important ingredient for developing a grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 207).

**Three Pertinent Theories**

A grounded theory approach uses existing theory to inform conceptual areas of inquiry. The following three theoretical frameworks or approaches are applicable to the study of URMs but have not been fully explored in the relevant literature (a) Sen and Nussbaum’s (1993) Capability Approach; (b) Berry’s (1997) Acculturation Framework; and (c) Ungar’s (2010) Resilience Across Cultures from the Theory of Positive Development. A brief description of each is provided below regarding their contribution to the current study and potential to help address some of the identified gaps in the literature. Each theory was selected because of its relevance to the problem, the population, and consistency with the social work perspective.
**Capability approach**

Capability Approach (CA) starts with a very simple question: “What are people actually able to do and to be?” (Nussbaum, 2009, p. 212). Over the past several decades, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, an economist and philosopher respectively, contest that the typical measures for well-being based on either income (access to goods and services) or happiness (desire fulfillment) are overly simple. They suggest there is more complexity to assessing well-being and the overall quality of one’s life, with a specific criticism that not all people and societies convert income into something of value at the same rate or in the same way. They state that “quality of life [is]… assessed in terms of the capability to achieve valuable functionings” (1993, p. 31). Functioning refers to “…parts of the state of a person—in particular the various things that he or she manages to do or be in leading a life” (p. 31). Capability is defined broadly as a person’s real opportunity or actual choice between functionings (Clark, 2006). Nussbaum (2003) has expanded on CA and identified the following ten universal capabilities that she considers central to a person’s well-being regardless of culture of origin: life; bodily health; body integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; control over one’s environment (p. 42).

CA informs the current study in three important ways. First, culture is recognized as a central component when defining and assessing well-being. Second, CA maintains that individuals and groups ought to be consulted with respect to the value they place on important functionings in their own lives. And third, Nussbaum’s (2003) list of 10 key capabilities served to inform a conceptual starting place, and contributed to the organization and analysis of the data. Though there is important overlap, CA does not
sufficiently integrate the role of culture and human development relevant to URMs. For that purpose, an acculturation framework and human development perspective also inform this study.

**Acculturation framework**

The Acculturation Framework (AF) is credited to Berry (1997), who defines acculturation as “…how individuals who have developed in one cultural context manage to adapt to new contexts that result from migration” (p. 6). He identifies acculturation as intersecting values—*cultural maintenance* and *cultural participation*. The model is represented by four quadrants and suggests that a person can potentially identify with two cultures at the same time. Within each quadrant are two valences, the minority culture (M) and the dominant culture (D). It is possible, according to Barry’s model, to have one of four interactions between the two cultures: (a) dominant culture is favored over minority culture (-M+D= Assimilation); (b) the minority culture is favored over the dominant culture (+M-D= Segregation); (c) both cultures are substantive (+M+D= Integration); or (d) both are diminished (-M-D= Marginalization). Berry (1997) suggests that the most adaptive scenario includes biculturalism known as integration, although his position has been criticized for lack of utility and focus on subcultures, and the ability to explain dominant group attitudes, or acquisition of cultural skills (Rudmin, 2003). Though this framework may lack a sophisticated tool to measure acculturation, it demonstrates the practical process in which refugees engage when entering a new cultural context. Berry’s (1997) framework further indicates that *situational* variables AND *personal* variables have a continuous effect on the process of acculturation, and both are
central to the endeavor of studying this process. Berry (1997) states that “…any study that ignores any of these broad classes of variables will be incomplete…” (p. 15).

For the purposes of this study, Berry’s (1997) AF is useful in recognizing elements of both process and structure as influential on the acculturation process. This justifies the importance of investigating key contextual issues—and also requires understanding personal strengths and strategies in defining and achieving success. Additionally, AF directly informs the conceptual areas of inquiry of “success” and “support,” to be discussed further in subsequent chapters.

**Resilience across cultures**

Resilience Across Cultures (RAC) is substantially represented by Michael Ungar’s work in the area of Positive Development or Positive Youth Development (2004; 2007; 2008; 2010). This approach is relatively consistent with Frazier’s (1999) and Rutter’s (2007) work on risk and coping. The central concept is that of resilience, “…the capacity of individuals to access resources that enhance their well-being, and the capacity of their physical and social ecologies to make those resources available in meaningful ways” (Ungar, 2010, p. 1). Ungar (2008) is clear in defining resilience as an interaction between individuals and their environments, not simply individual attributes. This accommodates cultural diversity without pathologizing differences in coping strategies and other areas related to adaption. Ungar (2010) focuses on positive adjustment in the face of adversity and trauma and accounts for physical and social context, including the youth development perspective.

For the purpose of the current study, RAC is useful in three ways. First, RAC is responsive to culture, and provides a rational for asking URMs about the strengths and
skills they bring at a personal and social level from their culture of origin. Second, URMs have often experienced significant trauma and adversity, so RAC provides a strengths-based approach to develop a theory that recognizes the URMs’ active role in survival, rather than starting from the perspective that they are passive victims of circumstance. Finally, RAC is compatible with both Capability Approach and Acculturation Framework, but is more explicit in incorporating the strengths perspective. RAC’s framework contributes four conceptual areas of inquiry for this study, including success, challenges, support, and capability.

Social Work Perspective, Values and Ethics

In the U.S., social workers figure prominently within the continuum of care for URMs; however, little research has explored refugee issues from a social work perspective. The field of social work contributes three perspectives to this study: The strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2002); Person-in-Environment (Karls & Wandrei, 1992; Schneider & Netting, 1999); and Cross-Cultural Efficacy (Núñez, 2000). In addition, the core social work values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, competence, and self-determination (NASW, 2008), require the profession to take responsibility for ethical practice and research activities relevant to URMs.

The strengths perspective is an empowerment approach to understanding challenges (Saleebey, 2002). As opposed to a pathology or deficit based model, the strengths approach assumes that individuals have abilities that are untapped, but if the person could be empowered to use those abilities, they could meet their needs with the available resources. This approach is helpful when working and researching with URMs.
because, though many challenges confront them, they often have developed coping strategies that have helped them survive to this point in their lives.

The Person-In-Environment approach accounts for the interaction between an individual and their surroundings. It assumes that the relationship between individuals and their environment is bi-directional—people change their surroundings, and peoples’ surroundings change them (Karls & Wandrei, 1992). In this study, multiple cultures were central to the environmental context of URMs and their ability to adapt. The Person-In-Environment approach also informs this study with relation to resources within the environment that were important to URMs and their acculturation process. This perspective helps recognize the central role of environment in URMs' ability to access meaningful resources, engage in a acculturation strategy, and manage traumatic histories through adolescent development.

According to Núñez (2000), Cross-Cultural Efficacy “…implies that the caregiver is effective in interactions that involve individuals of different cultures and that neither the caregiver’s nor the patient’s culture is the preferred or more accurate view” (p. 1072). Cross-Cultural Efficacy was selected for its congruence with this research study rather than using the term ‘cultural competence’, which implies discrete knowledge about another culture, and possibly the superiority of the dominant culture. Another preferable term is cultural humility—“a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique, to redressing the power imbalances…” (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998, p. 117). Though cultural competence has been the preferred terminology, cross-cultural efficacy and cultural humility more accurately reflect the social work perspective.
Social work is a profession guided by a commitment to shared values and ethics. Social workers provide direct and indirect service to URMs through case management, clinical therapy, foster parent trainings, advocacy, and more. Ethical dilemmas occur frequently with the URM population—encourage cultural maintenance or assimilation; place youth with a family or in a group home setting; provide services even if someone does not technically meet criteria, but obviously needs them—and require a value guided profession to negotiate these dilemmas to benefit the URM.

Mullaly (2002) defines oppression as a social justice issue. By virtue of their precarious situation, URMs certainly qualify as oppressed. With their specialized knowledge and skills, social workers who work with URMs are in a position to expose and advocate for change in oppressive structures that produce social injustice. The value of dignity and worth of the person is central to the relationship between social workers and URMs. Based on this core value, social workers advocate for the fair and humane treatment of all, especially oppressed populations. The importance of human relationships is often overlooked; some placing physical and psychological needs above social ones, though social work maintains the value of human relationships. Integrity guides practice and research with URMs. Competence is also a value that guides social workers; however, in order to practice competently with URMs, an evidence-base of knowledge and skills that inform best practices requires ongoing research. The value of self-determination is central to social work with URMs, and this study in particular. My motivation to conduct this study was, in part, to ask the following: How do URMs determine success, well-being, or quality of life? How can social workers support
URMs’ efforts to achieve their goals? The social work value of self-determination served as a central guide to this study.

**Brief Overview of Methodology**

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to generate further understanding about strategies utilized by URMs in defining and achieving successful outcomes. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), an overarching question is identified, with accompanying conceptual areas of inquiry. The four conceptual areas of inquiry include *success, challenges, support, and capability*. These conceptual areas are consistent with both the research questions and the grounded theory method.

In short, the purpose of this grounded theory study was to generate a theoretical explanation that deepens our understanding about: URM’s definition and achievement of success in the U.S. and how that definition changes over time; existing barriers; strategies that are most useful in overcoming challenges to achieve successful outcomes; and the role of culture and identity through this process.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

This review of the literature begins by addressing the development of terminology related to forced migrants, and how this population has been identified and studied globally, including the U.S. response. The next section introduces asylum-seekers and refugees who are minors, illustrating some practical issues with the way terms are used in practice and research. Subsequently, I identify common constructs and theoretical frameworks that have been applied to refugee and unaccompanied youth populations across several disciplines. This includes a discussion of acculturation, migration, identity development, social and human capital, and risk and resilience. Subsequently, I explore the literature from three overarching perspectives that account for most of the current literature; the legal perspective, and the pathology perspective, and the strengths perspective.

Defining and studying the refugee

The term *refugee* is used in reference to international law that resulted from a United Nations Convention (1951) following World War II. This is a legal definition that outlines criteria for qualification of forced migrants for internationally recognized legal statuses. In common parlance, however, the term *refugee* likely congers images of flight from danger and lack of a safe homeland, and perhaps includes the need for others to provide basic necessities for survival. Gatrell (2005) suggests that, while this can make people more willing to help refugees, it can paradoxically lead people to think of refugees as having lost attributes of humanity, seeing them as *lacking* humanity. It implies that a refugee is incapable and cannot act on their own behalf, but that they must be helped,
framing them as passive victims rather than active survivors. The underlying assumption that being a refugee, or being in need of refuge, implies passive helplessness, is a perspective that is not confined to the uninformed, but permeates the literature and professional practice with refugees as well. Malkki (1995) stated “the term refugee has analytical usefulness not as a label for a special, generalizable ‘kind’ or ‘type’ of person or situation, but only as a broad legal or descriptive rubric that includes within it a world of socio-economic statuses, personal histories, and psychological or spiritual situations” (p. 496).

The term refugee has been in use for at least a century, but the act of fleeing across borders due to persecution, known as forced migration, has likely been a part of all human history. Following World War II, The United Nations developed policies and legal distinctions between groups of forced migrants in order to provide appropriate services. This resulted in the definition of various labels associated with legal statuses and entitlement to certain services. In spite of legal definitions, Black (2001) suggests that academic pursuits currently maintain considerable disagreements around terminology, resulting in the sum of research as a whole being “…less than the sum of its parts” (p. 58). In this way, scholarship on refugees has been trying to “catch up” to policy and practice, rather than informing it in meaningful ways. This section briefly and critically outlines the emergence of terminology, identifies relevant policy changes and the U.S. response, then concludes by discussing important developments in the study of refugees leading to the current state of knowledge and theory.

Emerging terminology, stigma, and the U.S.
Following World War II, the 1951 Geneva Convention established the modern
definition of the term *refugee*, although it referred specifically to European Displaced
Persons at the time. The emergence of the term *refugee* was referred to by Malkki (1995)
as a “social category and legal problem of global dimensions [which] did not exist in its
full modern form before this period” (p. 498). The 1967 United Nations Protocol on
Refugees updated the phrasing and the legal term *refugee*, referring to persons who are
forced to cross international borders because of persecution or fear of persecution based
on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political
opinion, and who have no recourse or protection within their own country (UNHCR, 2000).

The United Nations General Assembly established the United Nations High
Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1950, with the mandate to protect refugees and
work to resolve related issues worldwide (UNHCR, 2008). The U.S. eventually passed
the Refugee Act of 1980, establishing the Office of Refugee Resettlement, having made
no formal distinction between refugees and immigrants prior. In 2008, the UNHCR
reported that there were 11.4 million refugees worldwide. The top seven sending
countries included Afghanistan (3 million), Iraq (2.3 million), Somalia (41,000), Central
African Republic (31,000), Chad (20,000), the Democratic Republic of the Congo
(19,000), and Sudan (8,000). Of the top 10 receiving countries, the U.S. is number 10,
home to 281,000 refugees as of 2008. With most of the forced migration population
coming from Iraq and Afghanistan, the leading host countries are Pakistan and Iran. The
U.S. State Department, Bureau of Populations, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) have
tracked the numbers of refugees given asylum in the U.S. since 1980. In 1980, 207,116
refugees were allowed into the U.S., but that number has declined with relative consistency to 60,108 in 2008 (U.S. State Department, 2009). This decline is actually moving back up from a dip to 26,776 in 2002 with Afghan and Iraqi refugees most prominently figuring into the refugee population. By 2008, 147 countries had signed the 1951 UN convention, but seeking asylum continues to be a difficult and sometimes dangerous process for vulnerable people around the world as refugees continue to suffer from a stigmatized status. The development of policy in response to this oppression has sparked academic interest as well.

**The Study of Refugees**

Refugee populations have been the focus of study for more than 60 years, and much can be learned about the current context from earlier work. It can be difficult to trace the origins of this research, but some core work was done on refugee camps in the wake of World War II (Chandler, 1959; Kee, 1961; Kulisher, 1948; Proudfoot, 1957). Multiple disciplines contributed to developing perspectives on refugees, most notably the 1981 volume of *International Migration Review*, dedicated to examining the refugee dialogue. Black (2001) suggests that this special issue was the beginning of an abundance of more scholarly research on refugees. Black (2001) further summarized Zetter (1998) suggesting the field of refugee studies, a field based on a ‘label’, had “come of age” (2001, p. 57). The early theorizing about refugees is thought to have initiated with Kunz’s (1981) article entitled *Exile and resettlement: Refugee theory*. Since those early days in refugee studies, the ‘label’ of refugee has been divided, dissected, reexamined, and explored from many angles and by many disciplines. The result is an international literature lacking a clear organization and flow because it is relatively young
and underdeveloped. Black (2001) also suggests that relatively little policy has developed out of the last 15 or 20 years of theorizing and study. A more focused line of inquiry needs to emerge in order to bring interested researchers under one tent to inform policy. This is particularly true of social work research in the U.S., as we ought to have significant contributions to a field with which we are so closely connected.

**Unaccompanied Refugee Minors**

The UNHCR reported that, in 2009, more than 18,700 asylum applications were submitted from unaccompanied and separated children. These children were in 71 countries, the highest numbers of applications coming from Afghan and Somali children. Most of the more than 7,900 minors granted protection ended up in Europe (UNHCR, 2010), spurring the European Commission’s proposal of the *Action Plan on Unaccompanied Minors (2010-2014)*. This action plan addresses issues including prevention, reception, and durable solutions (Intervention by Commissioner Cecilia Malmstrom, 2010), but such a domestic strategic action plan remains absent.

In the U.S., the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) reports that almost 13,000 children and adolescents have entered the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) program since it began in 1980. Currently, the ORR has approximately 1500 children in care in 14 states and the District of Columbia (ORR Report to Congress, 2007). These children have entered the URM program through various channels. The U.S. state department issues visas to a limited number of minors from abroad and invites them to resettle in the U.S. These youth typically come from refugee camps abroad where it has been determined that there is no capable adult available to provide protection and care for them. Limited background information is sent to the ORR from the camps, which is
filtered down to local contracting agencies only a few days prior to the arrival of the youth. Local child welfare workers attempt to match these youth with foster homes with very little available information, often resulting in multiple placements (Luster, et al, 2009).

Asylum Seekers

Another way that youth enter the URM program is through seeking asylum as Unaccompanied Alien Children (UAC) through U.S. immigration court proceedings. These youth have typically been detained as they attempt to enter the U.S. illegally at the Mexican/U.S. border. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) refers those teens for which deportation may constitute a safety risk to ORR. These youth are served until 18 years of age under the ORR by the Department of Unaccompanied Children’s Services (DUCS). The youth are restricted from working, driving, or leaving their placement state. If the court grants them refugee legal statuses, they are entitled to services under the URM program until they are 21 years old, and custody is transferred from the federal government to the local placing agency. Victims of Human Trafficking who are unaccompanied and under age are also incorporated into the URM program with the associated benefits but limited legal status (ORR, 2010). While the legal definitions make a clear distinction, the terms asylum seekers and refugees are frequently used as synonyms in the scholarly literature, and youth are generally treated equally in practice. This implies that the practical focus is not necessarily on legal distinctions, but on the social construct of a population, a construct that often assumes they are helpless and passive victims rather than active survivors.

Unaccompanied Refugee Minors in the Literature
This research comes from England, Scotland, Ireland, Sweden, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, Canada, but very little from the U.S., and tends to focus on one of three phases of the forced migrant experience: pre-migration, migration process, and post-migration. Pre-migration literature tends to look at trauma based on war and conflict (Berman, 2001; Ehntholt & William, 2006; Thomas, Thomas, Nafees, & Bhugra, 2003), while process level migration tends to focus on legal aspects of the refugee journey (Engebrigtsen, 2003; Singh, 2008; Young & McKenna, 2010). The post-migration experience includes topics of study such as identity development (Fantino & Colak; 2001; Gibson, 2010; McKinnon, 2008), grief and ambiguous loss (Luster, Qin, Bates, Johnson, & Rana, 2008 & 2009), trauma (Bean, Derluyn, Eurelings-Bontekoe, Broekaert, & Spinhoven, 2007; Ehntholt & Yule, 2006; Yohani, 2010), stigma and racism (Ellis, Macdonald, Lincoln, & Cabral, 2008), acculturation (Kunz, 1981; Portes, 1993), risk and resilience (Goodman, 2004; Hodes, Jagdev, Chandra, & Canniff, 2008; Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010), and mental health (Huemer et al., 2009; Montgomery, 2008).

While much has been learned about URMss over the past few decades, some important gaps in the literature have been identified. The medical model or pathology focused approach clearly influences much of the literature. The few exceptions tend to relate to studies using a strengths-based approach, most often employing the theoretical lens of risk and resilience, and will be further explored under the subheading Risk and Resilience. Raghallaigh and Gilligan (2010) point out that much of the research depicts URMss as extremely vulnerable, emotionally distressed, and otherwise at-risk (i.e. Bean et al., 2007; Hodes et al., 2008; Rea, 2001; Sourander, 1998), often overlooking their resilience to adversity and their strengths. German (2004) asserts that resilience studies
are given less attention than the ones focusing on vulnerabilities. This is not to suggest that researchers should ignore the traumatic histories, the desperate circumstances of the sending countries, or the mental illness often observed once safe. Additionally, however, research ought to inform practice regarding the strengths and ability to access relevant resources demonstrated by this population. While much research has focused on describing, explaining, and responding to the problems and pathologies of URMs, relatively little has sought to apply or develop theory in order to guide scholarship and practice from a social work perspective, particularly in the U.S. In order to begin to fill this gap, an overview of recent scholarly literature is presented next organized by theoretical orientation.

**Theories Applied to URM/Refugee Research**

In what Black (2001) points to as perhaps the first original piece of ‘refugee theory’, Kunz (1981) sought to develop a framework that allows for predictive power based on an established set of observable and distinguishable group characteristics. This theory is one of the first to identify factors at three phases of refugee migration that act as predictors of outcomes. These factors fall under home-related, displacement related, and host related, with the central predictor of success being cultural compatibility. Much of the research following this article continues in the three-step framework, but seems to extend the focus on vulnerabilities rather than giving equal attention to defining success and identifying strategies used to achieve it.

The following sections provide an overview of some prominent theories as they have been applied to URM and refugee research. Though not exhaustive, it includes acculturation, migration theory, identity development, social and human capital, and risk
and resilience. The purpose of reviewing this literature is to learn what various fields of study and other disciplines have learned about the URM population, identify where the social work perspective can best serve to fill a gap in the current knowledge base, and to develop broad conceptual areas for initial inquiry in the current study.

**Acculturation**

“Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups” (Radfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, p. 149). This process takes place over time, where adaptation of behavior, values, identity, language, economic situations, social, and political, occur at the individual level (psychological acculturation) and the group level (social acculturation). Psychological and social factors influence acculturation through pre-migration, process, and post-migration phases respectively (Berry, 1997). Liebkind (2001) determined that successful acculturation is defined by physical health, psychological satisfaction, positive work performance, high self-esteem, and good grades when studying in school. This view of positive individual well-being is associated with the successful adaptation or incorporation of the dominant culture by the newcomer. The concept of biculturalism is outlined by Berry (1997).

Acculturation is the overarching concept and contains strategies labeled assimilation, separation, integration and marginalization (Rudmin, 2003). While acculturation is used to represent a variety of strategies, much of the research uses the terms *acculturation* and *assimilation* interchangeably.
One acculturation strategy is known as assimilation. Assimilation was broken down by Gordon (1964) into three categories or models: (a) host-conformity, or refugees and immigrants becoming more like the dominant culture; (b) the melting pot theory where all cultural identity is mixed and blended; and (c) cultural pluralism where refugees engage in dominant culture, but also maintain their culture of origin in communal settings. Though it is understood to be a vital protective factor, the maintenance of one’s culture had been de-emphasized and conformity was promoted in U.S. policy through the 1970’s (Lu, 2001). Assimilation represents replacing or mixing ones culture and identity in order to ‘fit in’ the dominant cultural context and is arguably still a preferable acculturation strategy held by many members of the dominant culture in the U.S.

Portes (1993) advances another model with similarities to Gordon’s (1964), but critical of the value placed on giving up ones cultural identity. In Portes’ Selective Assimilation, he suggests three patterns of assimilation also: (a) linear assimilation, where groups slowly integrate socially and culturally into the middle class; (b) selective assimilation, where a strong ethnic group is maintained with deliberate strategies to preserve or adapt their homeland culture. This social and cultural support system promotes assimilation into the economic middle class as well; and (c) marginalized assimilation, where racial discrimination or lack of opportunity has created momentum toward the lower class and poverty. Portes (1993) uses this three pronged approach to discuss assimilation in second generation immigrants, finding that “…adopting the outlooks and cultural ways of the native-born does not represent, as in the past, the first step toward social and economic mobility but may lead to the exact opposite” (p. 81). He
suggests that youth who maintain strong connections with their own ethnic communities actually have a better chance for economic and educational mobility through their access to social capital. However, in the case of URMs, there are limited social structures that offer the same support as an intact family or community structure. Further theoretical development is needed in order to address strategies for making use of the social capital that URMs have in the context of assimilation.

McBrien (2005) framed her literature review relating to educational needs and barriers for refugee students with Portes’ (1993) selective assimilation theory. She found that much of the literature concurred with the idea that adapting to the host culture provided many advantages, but maintaining connections to an ethnic community can provide additional support, particularly in students’ educational pursuits. Additionally, subtractive assimilation and negative coping can occur when refugee youth seek acceptance from peers by rejecting previously held cultural ties. In summary, the general consensus is that those who adapt to a new culture and continue to maintain their culture of origin and social connection to an ethnic group tend to have more positive outcomes. This concept is similar to Berry’s (1997) bicultural or integration acculturation strategy, though it is identified as an assimilation strategy by Portes (1993).

In the case of some URMs, however, a community reflective of their ethnic origin is not always available. When placing youth in foster homes, lower levels of depression were found among URMs when they were placed with parents of the same ethnic background (Linowitz & Boothby, 1988). Luster and his colleagues (2009) have written about the experience of Sudanese URMs in foster care, finding that the acculturation process was facilitated by having close relationships that supported cultural difference,
even if the relationships were cross-cultural. Weine and colleagues (2006), point to the importance of understanding how refugee youth adapt their family of origin belief systems during transition and acculturation. Cultural maintenance among Somali adolescents was found to reduce the negative relationship between discrimination and PTSD, particularly when applied to females (Ellis, McDonald, Klunk-Gillis, Lincoln, Strunin & Cabral, 2010). Ellis and colleagues (2010) also remind us that more research is needed to explore the relationship between social identity, discrimination, and mental health. Gibson (2001) suggests that more research is needed to better understand how the experience of acculturation differs based on history, social and political forces, age, gender, race, and class. Culture is understudied as it relates to URMs, as many of the findings suggest family support or communal cultural support are important protective factors, but are not immediately available to URMs in the forms suggested by the literature.

Migration

Refugees are forced to consider the alternatives between danger or persecution in their homeland, and loss of individual and social identity in a new land. This is described by Kunz (1973) in his Kinetic model and illustrated by the idea of push rather than pull migration. Stein (1986) describes refugees as generally successful people, not having failed in their homeland, but being pushed out, contrary to their desire. Forced migration, including refugees, can be broken down into two further categories. Kunz (1981) calls the first group anticipatory refugees. This group is typically more well off, has time to prepare and gather resources, leaves voluntarily, and chooses a destination. They resemble the pulled group of immigrants. The second group is acute, which represents an
undeniable *push*. This group is subject to political crisis or war that requires they leave without preparation--escape is the goal. However, in the literature, the circumstances surrounding forced migration are not always explicit, adding to the challenge of interpreting and comparing important findings that may be incomparable.

Youth who are allowed to participate in the URM program meet the criteria of the *acute* refugee. The relevant research on adolescent pre-migration experience identifies the prevalence of trauma, particularly war trauma (Berman, 2001; Derluyn, Broekaert, & Schuyten, 2008; Thomas, Thomas, Nafees, & Bhugra, 2003). However, it is also important to note that many youth, specifically those who attempt to enter the U.S. from Mexico, Central and South America, may look like they are being *pulled* by the economic prospect, but share more in common with the *acute* refugee group, firmly *pushed* from their homes because of abuse or extreme poverty and danger. Victims of human trafficking most certainly meet the standards of the *acute* refugee group.

When unaccompanied children and adolescents are brought into the equation, the idea of being *pushed* out of their homeland seems most accurate. The next section reviews some key theoretical approaches that have attempted to understand identity development within one’s context, and informs this study by providing an overview of the social and psychological context for URM well-being.

**Identity Development**

This section introduces the basic components of identity development as it relates to the literature about URMs. Ethnic identity and how this concept is similar to and different from acculturation, is explored, followed by a discussion of social and human capital. In Erikson’s (1968) theory of social development, human beings pass through
eight stages of development. Each stage is marked by conflict because of role confusion, which, in a healthy person is resolved into a new identity stage, or ego identity. The progression continues throughout the entire lifespan, but the inability to resolve stage conflict can result in pathology. This process of social identity development is complicated by shifting values and socially acceptable modes of adaptation, particularly during the imperative adolescent years. Group membership is key. Self-concept and self-esteem have been linked to group identification in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Social identity theory posits that as people are identified with a particular social group, they increasingly view this group favorable, which in turn contributes to their psychological well-being. Thus Social Identity Theory connects group and individual identity with well-being.

Garbarino and Kostelny (1993) expand the definition of development as “the process of becoming human, whatever that means in a particular child’s culture” (p. 35). Their definition offers significant latitude; they further emphasize the need to broaden the way we conceive of the developmental process to include the social context and the spiritual, philosophical, and political ways that meaning is constructed. This adds emphasis to the active role that URMs play in identity development, while considering the uniqueness of their social and cultural context. Children can form a positive sense about their group if there is an ethnic community that provides a context (Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2000)

Identity development is also expressed through ethnic identity (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). The lines between acculturation and ethnic identity can sometimes be blurry as they are often used interchangeably, although some
“…consider acculturation to be a broader construct… ethnic identity is that aspect of acculturation that focuses on the subjective sense of belonging to a group or culture” (p. 495). Though URMs do not typically have naturally occurring cultural enclaves, the literature does not address how they individually develop an ethnic identity.

Arnett (2007) described a developmental period he refers to as emerging adulthood that is relevant to the age group of the participants in this study. In one particular study, Arnett, Ramos, and Jensen (2001) looked at emerging adults’ ideological views on the ethics of autonomy, community, and divinity. They found that, while divinity was referred to infrequently, autonomy was negatively correlated with community. Only a few participants were able to reconcile ethics of both autonomy and community. This finding is particularly important to this study because most former URMs came from cultures that tend to value community over autonomy, whereas U.S. culture tends to value autonomy over community.

Positive psychological outcomes have been linked to bicultural identity. LaFromboise and colleagues (1993) find that bicultural identity is most adaptive when immigrants maintain a strong identification with their ethnic group and with the larger society. The problem, however, can arise when refugee youth struggle in identifying with either culture, and identify with none (Lee, 1988). Fantino and Colak (2001) point out some key differences between immigrant and refugee adolescents that compound the challenges of identity development. Refugees have typically experienced massive and often prolonged trauma and many have lost everything that was familiar to them, whereas immigrants can “…at least envision the possibility of returning to their countries…” (p.
590). These authors point out that behaviors common in one’s culture of origin can be pathologized when they are different from those of the dominant culture.

Though little research has investigated identity development with URMs, one small qualitative study investigated the experience of Bosnian adolescent refugees. Gibson (2010) looked at identity development and adaptation, finding that her research participants had experienced feelings of alienation, discrimination, and ridicule. Additionally, the participants expressed feeling different because of the political violence they had survived. In other research on Bosnian refugees in Australia, Colic-Peisker and Walker (2003) found a loss of identity tied to community, job, skills, language, and culture among forced migrants. Identity was reconstructed and re-negotiated with varying levels of success among participants, largely due to the human capital they possessed individually. The authors suggest that this is an extension of social identity theory that looks at refugees in the context of social structural constraints. This research facilitates the transition to further exploration of social and human capital.

**Social and Human Capital**

Social capital is a theory that seeks to combine two streams of intellectual explanation for social action. The first is the view that social action is governed by social norms, rules, and obligations. The second is more closely related to an economic perspective, assuming that actions are governed by individual goals, and that independent individuals act out of self-interest. Coleman (1988) explains that social capital theory assumes rational actions, framing them within a social context, which accounts for individual actions and group organization. Social capital, then, is described as the contextual elements of a given situation, such as support, comfort, or confidence that help
will be there if needed. Social capital translates into human capital, described as skills, background, and genetic advantages or disadvantages. Theories of social and human capital have influenced the way that some scholars have investigated URMs.

Closely associated with the concepts of acculturation and social identity, human capital is seen as a key ingredient in interpreting the refugee experience. Colic-Peisker and Walker (2003) explored human capital, as defined by skills, language, and rural/urban background, as predictors for successful assimilation of refugees. Those with higher human capital tended to leave behind their ethnic identity, and focus more on individual or family resettlement. Those with lower human capital (low skill, limited English, rural origin), tended to collect in ethnic enclaves and separate from the dominant culture. In order to meet the challenges of assimilation, one group used their human capital, while the other used collectivism. But what about URMs in the U.S. who have neither access to an ethnic group nor high levels of human capital? It seems that little research has been done in this area. However, other studies have investigated URM issues through the lens of risk and resilience, and have begun to answer that very question.

Risk and Resilience

*Risk, protection, resilience, coping…* are terms typically associated with the survival of adversity or trauma. The risk and resilience perspective, as outlined by Fraser (1999), provides an overview of these terms. *Risk* refers to the chances of something happening, given a certain set of contextual characteristics. *Protection* is something that mitigates or diminishes risk associated with a negative outcome. *Resilience* is understood in reference to adaptation in order to overcome adverse circumstances. *Coping* is related
to having tools, skills or abilities that facilitate resilient outcomes. Fraser explains that “...resilience is the transactional product of individual attributes and environmental contingencies” (p. 136). The risk and resilience perspective lends itself readily in describing and explaining behavior through emphasizing the strengths, skills, and abilities of individuals in the face of overwhelming adversity (Rutter, 2007).

The strengths perspective (Saleeby, 2002) has been advocated by Raghallaigh and Gilligan (2010) in their study of URM s in Ireland. They conducted a qualitative investigation to explore active survival strategies using a resilience perspective. They found that, while many risk factors do exist, much of the current research overlooks the protective factors and coping strategies utilized by URM s. In addition to six coping strategies, they identified an overarching protective factor, religion, to be a coping strategy to foster resilience. Hopkins and Hill (2010) found that, although practical needs exist, a strong commitment to education and the capacity for hard work served as a buffer to risk factors, and supported healthy coping strategies among URM s.

Although framed as something unique, coping theory (Lazarus, 1993) clarifies what might be going on during or following adverse circumstances. Lazarus differentiates between coping style, understood to be a personality characteristic, and coping process, “...efforts to manage stress that change over time and are shaped by the adaptational context out of which it is generated” (p. 234). Where style suggests that coping is an internal trait, process maintains that coping is a transactional experience, the interplay between actor and environment that is adaptable. The process approach to coping seems consistent with the research that studies URM s through a risk and resilience perspective. Rousseau and colleagues (1998) found that coping strategies that
were culturally based rather than internally based resulted in remarkable resilience among young Somali refugees. Coping process and resilience is not necessarily easy to understand, even in close relationships. Luster and colleagues (2010) found discrepancies between the perspectives of young Sudanese refugees on adaptation and coping, as compared to the perspectives of their full-time foster parents. The young refugees talked about their focus on education, while foster parents thought personal history and individual attributes were more influential in coping and adapting. This example highlights the difference between coping process (accessing education) and coping style (personal attributes), and the misconception of those providing services to URMs.

Goodman (2004) conducted research using a narrative approach with young Sudanese refugees in an attempt to discover ways they cope with trauma and hardship. The interviews resulted in four themes related to the topic: (a) collectivity and the communal self; (b) suppression and distraction; (c) meaning making; and (d) emerging from hopelessness to hope. Using a resilience perspective, collectivity is described as a protective factor against the risk of isolation and the effects of trauma and hardship. Suppression and distraction are adaptive coping strategies, although not generally recognized as healthy in the long-term. Meaning making and re-interpreting trauma are also coping strategies that illustrate active and adaptive coping as a process rather than a trait. The theme emerging hopeful represents resilience in the face of adversity and significant trauma. Goodman recommends framing this population by their strengths rather than deficits.
In contrast, Hodes and colleagues (2008) conducted an analysis of risk factors among asylum seeking adolescents compared with accompanied refugee children, unaccompanied asylum seeking adolescents were at increased risk for experiencing high posttraumatic stress symptoms (PTSS). Predictors for PTSS included low-support living arrangements, traumatic events, female gender, and increased age. This study focused primarily on the risk factors that unaccompanied adolescents face. This focus on risks and deficits is consistent with research conducted by Bean and colleagues (2007).

Resilience, whether defined in terms of strengths or deficits, is not simply an internal static mechanism. Resilience, meaning the positive adaptation to risk or adversity, is “…influenced by a child’s environment, and [the] interaction between individuals and their social ecologies will determine the degree of positive outcomes experienced” (Ungar, 2008, p. 220). Consequently, in spite of the similarity of trauma or adversity across culture, significant variations exist in how children cope. The challenge becomes understanding how ‘success’ or ‘positive outcomes’ are defined in order to comprehend the process youth undergo from varying cultural contexts to be resilient, and what helps them do so. For example, Kline and Mone (2003) found that adolescents in Sierra Leone had experienced substantial ongoing trauma. Three characteristics were discovered to mitigate the serious risks: (a) maintaining a sense of purpose; (b) controlling traumatic memories; and (c) seeking social collectivism. These coping strategies and protective factors demonstrate the interaction between child and environment described by Ungar (2008). While important research has been conducted on coping and adaptation through a risk and resilience lens on URM s, a more complete understanding is still needed about how success or positive outcomes are defined by the
youth themselves, and what theory explains their resilience in the new cultural context of the U.S.

In the following sections, three relevant perspectives—legal, psychological/medical and social work—are reviewed. The legal perspective is particularly challenging to summarize, due to the strict definitions and adherence to policy rather than values; but given its prominence in the literature, it seems an important perspective to consider. Next, contributions of the psychological/medical perspective are explored. Finally, the social work perspective is reviewed, and a case made for more research from a social work perspective.

Policy Development and Legal Perspective

The legal perspective is most relevant to those adolescents who entered the URM program by first seeking asylum, and eventually being granted refugee status. The legal perspective associated with URMs follows the central definition of refugee as outlined by Article 1 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees: “a person who is outside his/her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution” (UNHCR, 2002). This took effect in the U.S. with the legislation of the Refugee Act of 1980. Although this legislation has been enacted for more than 30 years, clear definitions of important concepts remain absent, resulting in significant implications for children seeking asylum.

As Singh (2008) points out, “to qualify for asylum under U.S. law, an asylum-seeker must establish not only the harm he or she has suffered or fears amounts to
persecution but also that this persecution is ‘on account of’ one of the five grounds enumerated in the refugee definition” (p. 5). No clear definition is provided about what qualifies as ‘persecution’, nor is there a clear understanding of each of the categories. Singh (2008) argues that, although asylum seekers can plead their case before an immigration court, their only defense is claiming abuse or abandonment, or being victims of human trafficking, and proving it. This would qualify them for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS or J visa), under a provision in the Immigration Act of 1990. The SIJS provides for residence and eventually citizenship, but is narrowly defined and rarely designated. Finally, Singh (2008) argues that protection of URMs and asylum seekers has had a politicized history that is outdated; he advocates moving toward a human rights framework that would recognize economic rights to basic essential human needs.

The legal system in the U.S. is a punitive one. In 2002, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was formed along with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), dissolving the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Where the INS had jurisdiction over punitive as well as advocacy responsibilities, ICE took over enforcement, and the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) took over care and advocacy responsibilities of unaccompanied asylum seekers. This has improved the circumstances and has begun to result in differential treatment of children and adults. However, one glaring gap in this system is the lack of legal representation provided to youth in immigration proceedings (as opposed to domestic proceedings where council is provided). Young and McKenna (2010) point out that “without counsel, the children are unlikely to understand the procedures they face and the options and remedies that may be available to them under the law” (p. 5). Further, they report that children with
representation win their cases at a rate three times greater than those without. There is currently a partnership between the ORR and the Vera Institute of Justice, which provides pro bono legal representation to as many children as possible.

Derluyn and Broekaert (2008) discuss the tendency for the legal perspective to categorize these children using specific definitions, forgetting they are first and foremost, children. Engebritsen (2003) explored the bureaucratic procedures that essentially objectify a child, resulting in best interest determinations that tend to favor the state rather than the best interest of the child. In short, the legal perspective seems punitive and bureaucratic, intending to act in the best interest of the child, but often excluding important contextual and humanizing characteristics. Many improvements have occurred, such as the Unaccompanied Alien Child Protection Act of 2005, which in addition to providing protection, also provides for the appointment of a guardian ad litem. Still, more work is needed in order to bring the legal perspective more in line with the psychological or social work perspective.

Pathology/Medical Perspective

Psychology brings an important focus on the study of mental processes and behaviors. Though there are many subcategories of psychology, such as developmental, comparative, cognitive, personality, social, cultural, etc, two central themes seem to represent the psychological perspective, as it pertains to the literature on URMs: (a) the study of mental processes and behaviors tends to focus on individuals as the base unit of analysis; and (b) the tendency of the medical model to focus on symptomology and pathology. Although neither of these themes completely represents the psychological perspective or medical model as a whole, they seem to hold true generally for this
literature in its current state. As with any scientific pursuit, definitions to key terms are central to the ability to describe or explain a phenomenon. As opposed to the legal definition, Derluyn and Broekaert (2008) give a definition of URMs that includes asylum seekers. This inclusive perspective of the term refugee shifts the power of identifying a refugee to the researcher rather than the court. Additionally, while legal definitions of adolescents versus adult are chronological, the psychological perspective is more interested in developmental processes than specific age. If the legal perspective asks ‘do you meet the minimum requirements?’ then the psychological perspective might ask ‘what is inhibiting your well-being?’

Studies of mental processes can be found in research that seeks to understand a URM’s sense of internal well-being (Tartakovsky, 2009). Psychosocial well-being is a term that is commonly used in place of a more stigmatized terminology of mental health (Ahearn, 2000). In this way, well-being or mental health is a measure of an individual’s level of functioning. Directly observing and measuring mental processes is not possible, so behavior is used to make inferences about the mental processes. Some of these behaviors are associated with higher and lower levels of functioning. Generally, Tempany (2009) found that most quantitative studies have found high levels of pathology such as PTSD and depression among URMs, while many mixed methods or qualitative studies have frequently found that in spite of symptomology, overall functioning was not necessarily reduced.

Within the mental health literature on URMs, a biopsychosocial framework is often utilized from a deficit based, symptom/pathology oriented approach. Derluyn and colleagues (2009) and Bean and colleagues (2007) (often writing together), seek to
outline the common pathologies of URMs and make recommendations for improved
treatment. This is a valuable asset to the service provision and development of
interventions. Longitudinal research also studied the presence of PTSD in children
following massive war trauma, but found that PTSD was not necessarily associated with
major functioning impairments (Sack, Him, & Dickason, 1999; Sack et al, 1992). This
contribution from the psychological perspective on URMs is invaluable.

In keeping with the study of mental processes and behavior, several articles have
focused on trauma as a predictor of impaired functioning. One of the measures of
impaired functioning is behavior problems assumed to stem from previously experienced
trauma (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2007; Geltman, et al, 2005; Loughry & Flouri, 2000;
Sourander, 1998). This research consistently points to trauma as a risk factor, but when
observing functioning, behavior problems do not seem to be connected to pathology,
rather to issues related to acculturation.

As described in previous sections, acculturation is fertile territory for
psychological inquiry, and offers insight into the psychological perspective. When
Gibson (2001) said that “acculturation is the process of culture change and adaptation
that occurs when individuals with different cultures come into contact” (p. 19), she
demonstrates the tendency to focus on the individual as the base unit of analysis. In
Rudmin’s (2003) critique of acculturation psychology, he points to the role of
acculturation theory in psychology as predominantly predicting either pathology or well-
being of individuals. This example, then, illustrates the two central components to the
psychological perspective and the medical model, as it has been developed in the
literature on URMs: (a) individuals as base unit of analysis and (b) focus on
symptomology and pathology. This is an area of research that is providing valuable solutions to complex issues, and should continue in full force, but requires additional breadth of perspective in order to have meaningful impact on future research, policy, and practice.

**Social Work and Strengths Perspectives**

In the preamble of the National Association of Social Workers’ Code of Ethics (2008), the mission of the profession includes a focus on individual well-being in context of societal well-being with “…attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living.” The social work perspective is tied to professional values and associated ethical guidelines. These values include service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. Because of these longstanding professional values, the social work perspective tends to be reflected in the selection and implementation of theories, frameworks, and approaches, even when those heuristics come from other disciplines. Consider Garcia’s (2009) list of conceptual and theoretical approaches to social work with immigrants and refugees, along with the associated professional value: (a) empowerment theory--social justice, (b) cultural competence--competence, (c) strength-based--dignity and worth of the person, (d) ecosystems and family systems theory--importance of human relationships and person-in-environment, and (e) self-awareness--integrity. Although some of these concepts, theories, frameworks and approaches are borrowed from other disciplines, they engender the values of the profession in their implementation.
Social workers have been closely involved with refugee issues since the beginning of the profession. Park (2008) describes the reaction of many social workers during the 20th century who “…persistently and prolifically opposed problematized constructions of refugees” (p. 771), despite knowledge about the emergence of the refugee population being scattered, misunderstood, or non-existent. Park (2006) advocates for informed discourse, particularly within the field of social work, which has a rich history of advocating for forced migrants long before the legal term “refugee” existed.

Within the URM literature, Lacroix (2006) has taken a firm stance that social work with asylum seekers in Canada is a social justice issue. Lacroix uses Mullaly (2002) to frame her argument that the challenge for social workers is to understand the “social structures, processes and practices that have caused oppression while advocating for the rights and opportunities of oppressed groups” (p. 20). She suggests that social workers need to make the link between the international and local. This practice of personal challenges having a basis in political problems is native to social work. Kohli (2005) has been an advocate for rethinking how social workers approach practice with asylum-seeking children. While critical of those who oversimplify the complexity of the circumstances around asylum-seeking children, Kohli (2006) also advocates for the recognition of strengths and resources within individuals and their context.

Where the medical model figures prominently in the relevant psychological literature, the recovery model is central to the social work perspective. The recovery model consists of a holistic way to approach personal challenges and social issues (Hardiman & Hodges, 2008). This model is often demonstrated in the risk and resilience
literature. Risk is considered, but only as one element of a larger phenomenon that also includes personal strengths, community resources, political structures, and cultural context (Goodman, 2004; Hopkins & Malcolm, 2010; Lustig et al, 2004; Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010; Ungar, 2008; Yohani, 2010). This research goes to great lengths to situate the person within the broader environment.

If the legal perspective consists of implementing policy, and the psychological perspective consists of describing and treating mental processes and behaviors, then the social work perspective is carried out by starting where a client is and moving from the personal to the political in addressing individual problems, advocating for group needs, and effecting relevant policy change. This does not all have to be done by one person at one time, but the social work perspective must consider each of these stages of study and intervention, as consistent with the professional values and ethics that it represents. For this reason, asking what refugee youth consider success and what they do to achieve it, is a question that can be uniquely answered through the social work perspective. Subsequently, I present a methodological approach that fits the question that is being asked with maximum functionality and feasibility.
Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter outlines the qualitative methodology selected to address the research questions at hand. The particular methodology that best fits the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the question is a traditional grounded theory (TGT) as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990; 1998; & 2008).

Grounded Theory Methodology

Grounded theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as an alternative to the dominant reductionist methods of theory development of their time. Eventually, Glaser and Strauss developed two somewhat unique approaches to conducting grounded theory research. Strauss and Corbin (1990) provide significant structure to the process, while Glaser (1992) strongly argues that their work (referring to Strauss and Corbin) was no longer ‘grounded theory’. Later, Charmaz (2000) posited that, based on a unique epistemology, constructivist grounded theory was something wholly unique, interpretive, and subjective. Glaser, Strauss, and Corbin, on the other hand, share similar epistemological assumptions associated with functionalism and positivism (Greckhamer & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005). The main differences between the Glaser methodology and the Strauss and Corbin methodology are apparent in the coding strategies. Glaser (1992) is much more rigid in the application of a constant comparison method, while Strauss and Corbin (2008) suggest, in addition to constant comparison, theoretical comparisons and asking questions of the data, and are more focused on a systematic approach and validation in identifying concepts and discovering the related properties and dimensions (Walker & Myrick, 2006). For the purpose of developing theoretical propositions around
my topic, Traditional Grounded Theory from Strauss and Corbin (1990; 1998; & 2008) has been selected.

The purpose of this grounded theory study is to generate further understanding about strategies utilized by URMs in defining and achieving successful outcomes in the U.S. This purpose is consistent with the functionalist paradigm as outlined by Burrell and Morgan (1979), and assumes an objective reality, deterministic human nature, positivist epistemology, and realist ontology. The intent in this paradigm is to maximize the objectivity of the research process while helping to describe and capture the ‘status quo’. The selection of the Strauss and Corbin (1990; 1998) methodology is consistent with these paradigmatic assumptions. While objectivity is the paradigmatic ideal—researcher completely insulated from subjective interpretation of the data—practical concessions are required when collecting and analyzing qualitative data. Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest that there is an important interplay between data and observer where objectivity ceases to be completely achievable. They state the following:

Interplay, by its very nature, means that a researcher is actively reacting to and working with data. We believe that although a researcher can try to be as objective as possible, in a practical sense, this is not entirely possible. Thus, it is preferable to self-consciously bring disciplinary and research experience into the analysis but to do so in ways that enhance the creative aspects of analysis rather than drive analysis. (pp. 58-59)

The concept of self-conscious objectivity can be challenging for a new researcher. For this purpose, I have included the use of an outside reviewer, a social work PhD candidate and colleague Linda Love, who has experience with qualitative analysis and knowledge
about subjectivity versus objectivity. One of her tasks was to review my analysis and coding strategies and question my interpretation of several levels of analysis in order to increase my consciousness of personal bias and provide feedback.

**Justification for TGT**

The TGT methodology is appropriate approach for this area because very little research has been done on defining the influence of culture, development, and capability to access resources related to well-being or success in the URM population. While much of the literature has investigated other aspects of URM’s, TGT is a good fit because it is one of the first steps in discovering interrelated concepts that can better inform and make sense of what is known and unknown about URM’s and well-being. The focus of TGT in this study is to develop understanding which will serve as a theoretical jumping off point for subsequent theory testing, and serve to fill a gap in the understanding that guides policy and practice related to URM’s. A TGT methodology is also appropriate because of the conceptual linkages between existing—though currently underutilized—theoretical frameworks and approaches mentioned previously (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, while TGT is a rigorous approach in its guiding principles, it is feasible to conduct this study with a relatively small number of URM’s. Another benefit of TGT methodology is that the contextual components affecting the central phenomenon are important to the theory under development. The focus does not remain only on the psychological processes of URMs, but accounts for the emergent environmental characteristics and political issues at play as well.

This research design is consistent with a strengths perspective. TGT allows for giving equal voice to all sources of data, then organizing the information gathered around
central phenomena. The research questions could not be answered without the voice of the former URM’s, so a qualitative approach was necessary. Strauss and Corbin (1998) allow for creativity and serendipity in the data collection and analysis process, however, sufficient methodological structure and the goal of self-conscious objectivity allow for complex conceptual relationships to emerge and develop into a generalizable mid-range theory.

**Traditional Grounded Theory Design**

The TGT methodology prescribes a cycle of theoretical sampling, data gathering, and data analysis, then returning to theoretical sampling every few interviews. The purpose of this TGT study is to develop a set of interrelated theoretical propositions based on concepts rooted in properties and dimensions derived from the data. The initial step involves theoretical sampling, a method of selecting participants mindfully based on concepts and themes derived from the data in order to discover further concepts, and eventually, relationships between concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 2008, p. 143).

Apart from theoretical sampling, the design consists of iterative data collection, analysis through open coding, further developing probing questions based on emerging categories. Axial coding interrelates the categories and concepts and builds a story that combines concepts into theoretical interrelationships. This cycle ends when theoretical saturation is achieved and results in a narrative discourse and diagram on the theoretical propositions around the central phenomenon. Saturation is typically reached when the categories and concepts are consistently supported through subsequent interviews (Creswell, 2007).
A central component of the research design and process is that of memoing and diagramming (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Memos are the notes taken throughout the process which gives rise to what is “known” by the researcher at a conceptual level of abstraction and integrated understanding. Memoing serves to capture and analyze the researcher’s ‘conceptual understanding’, keep track of emerging categories and processes, conceptual relationships, and theoretical propositions. Memos are a key part of the analytic process, and therefore are considered data.

The findings of this TGT resulted in a set of interrelated propositions around a central phenomenon generated from the data about each participant’s experience, rather than a more subjective account of the meaning of each individual’s experience.

**Dimensions of the study**

Strauss and Corbin (1998) indicate that use of the literature is important in developing conceptual areas of initial inquiry. These areas that emerge from the literature guide the development of broad, open-ended questions and probes in the first wave of interviews, but later, the probes will be derived from the analysis of the data. Four conceptual areas of inquiry were identified based on three theoretical frameworks or approaches (Acculturation Framework, Capability Approach, Resilience Across Cultures) and informed by prior ethnography. They were intended to broadly outline areas for this inquiry without restricting the general emergence of theoretical propositions, while still indicating the direction of inquiry sufficiently to ensure human subjects protection oversight and review. The four conceptual areas include:

1. **Defining Success.** This conceptual area includes competing values, sources of input and direction, and cultural constructs around the meaning of success.
2. **Overcoming Challenges.** This conceptual area includes challenges related to difficulties or stresses related to prior or pre-existing situations, cultural adaptation, physical or mental health issues, placement and/or living situation, and access to services.

3. **Sources of Support.** This conceptual area includes previous sources of support, social or professional support, and community support broadly defined.

4. **Capability.** This conceptual area includes motivation toward success, ability to achieve valuable functioning, and sources of oppression.

These conceptual areas served as a starting point for data collection and the design of the semi-structured interview protocol. During data collection, other topics emerged that guided changes in interview prompts. The conceptual areas listed above reflect important theoretical concepts in the literature and served as a starting point.

**Access**

In this mid-Atlantic state, one single provider, a PFBO is responsible for the service provision of URMs. Given my interest in this population, I interviewed the regional director of this program at the state level. Part of my prior ethnography included background information of the services that she provided. She also introduced me to the director of services at the PFBO. Initially I listened and expressed some general interest in conducting research, assessing the possibility of a research partnership. The director at the PFBO was amiable to the idea, and brought many ideas for potential research projects to the table. We continued meeting and maintaining email contact since March 1, 2010.

In order to maintain more frequent contact with the PFBO, and to further develop my understanding of the agency and this population, I volunteered as a mentor to two
adolescents who were receiving services in the URM program. As my relationship continued with the PFBO, I was invited on several occasions to give a three hour in-service training, and a three hour pre-service training on attachment theory to foster parents. I have made an effort to engage in a collaborative relationship that is mutually beneficial, taking care to maintain equilibrium of power. As a result, the director of the program at the PFBO was engaged in the process and supportive of this research. Her role in access was to disseminate my letters of recruitment to potential study participants through her social work staff. This process helped recruit participants and ensured privacy and confidentiality. One member of the staff was particularly helpful in recruiting participants because of her years of experience and relationships that she maintains with former URM’s. Though this was helpful in recruiting, it potentially resulted in some limitations based on selection bias. The URM’s with whom she maintained contact tended to be successful, out of the program longer, and still living locally. Additional limitations will be discussed later in this chapter.

Sample

Though Strauss and Corbin (2008) suggest a theoretical sampling strategy, they also recognize that “…researchers have to be practical” (p. 145). The sample population consists of 15 former URM’s who are over 18 years of age, no longer receiving services from the PFBO, and whom the agency could contact. The director and social workers at the PFBO made initial contact with several potential participants who met the basic sample criteria using an IRB approved script which described the purpose of the study and requested permission for the researcher to contact them (the former URM’s). I scheduled interviews with as much flexibility as possible as soon as I received their
contact information and permission from the PFBO worker. The interviews took place at
one of the following three locations of their choosing: their home, in a university office,
or in a public location such as a park or café. Although the initial goal was to conduct a
theoretical sample—“sampling on the basis of emerging concepts” (Strauss & Corbin,
1998, p. 73)—this was impractical due to a limited number of potential and reachable
participants and scheduling difficulty. Instead, I interviewed whomever the social worker
referred as soon as possible in order to accommodate their schedules, more closely
resembling a convenience sampling strategy that resulted in maximum variation. I was
able, however, to adjust the interview probes to get at the conceptual topics that emerged
from previous interviews.

Particular attention was given to issues of confidentiality, full disclosure, and
informed consent. The interviews took place in English as most participants have lived
in the U.S. for several years and have sufficient English competence.

**Data collection, coding and analysis**

At the beginning of each interview, I took a conversational approach, describing
the study and obtaining informed consent verbally and gave them a copy of the
document, consistent with my IRB approved informed consent protocol. Part of this
rapport building was intended to gather some basic descriptive data, which included age,
country of origin, age leaving home, age entering U.S., mode of entering the URM
program, length of involvement with the URM program, reason for leaving services, and
highest year of education attained. I did not audio record the interviews because this
would have slowed the process of concurrent data collection and preliminary analysis and
seemed awkward when the interviews were conducted in a public place where recording
may have caused additional stress or apprehension to the participants. Instead, I took field notes during the interview, focusing on recording themes, key concepts, and direct quotations where possible. I wrote extended field notes (as explained by Rodwell, 1998) and memos immediately following each interview regarding the emergence of categories and ideas about concepts and relationships between concepts.

The first few interviews adhered to the conceptual areas and probing questions as a guide for asking questions in a semi-structured interview format. I used the IRB approved interview protocol with set questions and variable probes. Preliminary data analysis began immediately during the interview process. Based on this preliminary analysis, extended field notes and memos, interview probes were adjusted in order to ask about emerging conceptual areas. For example, the first few participants discussed their desire for education at great length. In subsequent interviews, I asked probing questions related to their attitudes toward education pre and post migration. Though no formal data analysis was taking place, the emergence of potential categories from the data informed the interview protocol and further data collection.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) indicate that memoing is a central component to the data gathering and analysis as categories emerge and relationships between concepts become apparent. Theoretical memos serve to keep serendipitous ideas and initial and ongoing reactions to the central phenomenon organized in way that allows the researcher to manage the complexity while continuing to simplify the key components. In addition to memoing, ongoing diagramming and mapping were used of conceptual relationships to continue to drive the discovery process. These memos and diagrams were useful as a means to organize and interpret the data.
Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest using microanalysis and theoretical comparison during data analysis. Microanalysis is the “detailed line-by-line analysis necessary at the beginning of a study to generate initial categories… and to suggest relationships among categories” (p. 57). Groups of conceptually similar incidents were formed, uncovering more and more properties and dimensions of the category. Theoretical comparison, however, is needed when the significance of an incident is not readily understood by the researcher. Rather than grouping according to conceptual similarity to other incidents, the properties and dimensions are examined in order to appropriately group an incident using theoretical comparison. Microanalysis and theoretical comparisons took place throughout the data collection (and subsequently data analysis) process.

For practical purposes, I limited my data analysis during the collection phase to listening for and memoing about broad themes that seemed to be conceptually similar. These initial concept groups guided my subsequent interview probes and analysis. When I began to see conceptually similar responses to my interview questions and probes, I suspected that I was nearing saturation. Saturation is “when no new information seems to emerge during coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 136). Conceptual saturation is also described as “the process of acquiring sufficient data to develop each category/theme fully in terms of its properties and dimensions and to account for variation” (Strauss & Corbin, 2008, p. 195). Despite some challenges with access to this population, due to a limited number of URM’s who met the criteria and who were still in contact with staff, sufficient saturation was reached after 15 interviews and the next level of coding began.
Although Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest data collection and analysis occur simultaneously (p. 136), I only engaged in preliminary analysis during data collection to identify categories, and waited to begin my formal analysis and coding until after all data were collected. This was a practical choice as well as advice given by my dissertation committee so that the interviews could take place as expeditiously as possible while access to this population was available.

During open coding, I looked for “…salient categories of information supported by the text” (Creswell, 2007, p. 160). Strauss and Corbin (1998) define open coding as “the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data” (p. 101). Properties are “characteristics of a category” (Strauss & Corbin, p. 101) and dimensions are “the range along which general properties of a category vary” (p. 101). Categories are more abstract groupings of similar concepts. Concepts are labeled phenomenon. The analytic task of open coding is to name concepts and define categories according to their properties and dimensions, organizing them with increasing levels of abstraction (Strauss & Corbin, p. 103).

Microanalysis and theoretical comparison are the tools that allowed copious word data from multiple interviews, field notes, and memos, to be broken into blocks of raw data that were then grouped according to their properties and dimensions into concepts then categories. Categories “…have analytic power because they have the potential to explain and predict” (Strauss & Corbin, p. 113).

Axial coding and open coding typically occur concurrently. Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe axial coding as “the process of relating categories to their subcategories, termed ‘axial’ because coding occurs around the axis of a category, linking categories at
the level of properties and dimensions” (p. 123). Axial coding focuses on causal conditions, strategies, context and consequences, relating to the central phenomenon. In axial coding, relationships between categories and subcategories began to emerge. Subcategories “answer questions about the phenomenon such as when, where, why, who, how, and with what consequences” (p. 125). This is the source of the explanatory power of the analysis. A theoretical model began to form from which propositions were developed that interrelated the conceptual categories with subcategories. This took the shape of a preliminary conceptual map and the narrative explanation discussed in later chapters.

Selective coding, like axial and open coding, did not necessarily occur sequentially. Selective coding is “the process of integrating and refining the theory” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 143). That is to say, rather than simply presenting themes, the analysis of this data resulted in a set of interrelated concepts that can be used to explain what is going on in a general way. Selective coding, then, resulted in the selection of a central category; concisely answering the question ‘what is this research all about?’

Validation

Rigor in positivist research typically includes an assessment of reliability and validity. Creswell (2007) suggests that reliability focuses on consistency of coding. Strauss and Corbin (1998) state validating means that “…the theory emerged from data, but by the time of integration, it represents an abstract rendition of that raw data” (p. 159). They continue to explain that one way to validate this process is “…to go back and compare the scheme against the raw data, doing a type of high-level comparative
analysis. The theoretical scheme should be able to explain most of the cases” (p. 159).

In order to increase the objectivity of this validation approach, I recruited Linda Love, a colleague and someone with qualitative methods experience, to act as an outside reviewer. She reviewed my coding strategy after the initial phase of coding, and then reviewed the theoretical scheme and concept map side by side with my raw data and found it to be logical and consistent. Strauss and Corbin (1990) as cited in Creswell (2007), advance the following six criteria to judge the empirical grounding of a study:

1. Are concepts generated?
2. Are the concepts systematically related?
3. Are there many conceptual linkages, and are the categories well developed?
4. Is much variation built into the theory?
5. Are the broader conditions built into its explanation?
6. Has process been taken into account?

The validity of this grounded theory study was assessed using these criteria, first by me, then by my peer reviewer. Rather than a process—as in other qualitative forms of research—peer review “…represent(s) benchmarks for assessing the quality of a study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 217). The peer reviewer provided feedback. Ultimately, the validity of this theory requires subsequent testing in future research. Reliability was also assessed as it related to consistency of coding and interpretation of the data.

**Ethical Considerations**

The URM population has been shown to be both vulnerable and resilient. While this research seeks to learn about those characteristics, the intention was not to cause further trauma or stigmatization. Thomas and Byford (2003) remind us that ethic
standards and guidelines should not be viewed as barriers, but as safeguards, “…ensuring good quality results while maintaining the safety and wellbeing of young people” (p. 1402). Smith (2009) additionally suggests best practices of ethical research with refugees, including cultural competence (or cross-cultural efficacy), which is not just good research tact, but also an ethical responsibility. In this study, I strictly adhered to ethical standards of the university, but more importantly, to the core values and ethics of the social work profession.

**Products**

This study resulted in two products. The first is a conceptual model represented in diagram form. The second is a narrative that linguistically demonstrates the interrelationships of emergent concepts. While these products differ in their medium, the goal for each was to incorporate enough complexity so as to be accurate, but parsimonious enough to be accessible.

**Limitations**

The first limitation had to do with recruitment of participants. Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest a theoretical sampling strategy where participants could be selected based on characteristics that would add depth or breadth to the data based on initial analysis. In this study, however, due to limited access to participants, a recruitment strategy based on maximum variation was used. Recruitment with a vulnerable population also presented limitations. This study relied on a few gatekeepers to make personal contacts with former URM who had no official involvement with the program. The former URM who maintained contact with these professionals were probably more engaged in the program and involved in their community, making the sample of former URM more
likely to be successful. Another potential limitation related to recruitment was that the
majority of those interviewed came from one country of origin (Sudan). This is because
at any given time in the URM program larger numbers of refugees are coming from
wherever there has been a war or natural disaster. Since this study sought former URM
with whom the gatekeepers still maintained contact, the majority were from the same
place since many came as a cohort from Sudan. Therefore, many of the findings are
likely more relevant to Sudanese URM due to the similarity of culture of origin.

In addition to limitations around recruitment, sample size was also a limitation.
Difficulty with access to participants resulted in conducting the minimum number of
proposed interviews and stopping data collection at the first signs of saturation. A few
more interviews may have confirmed more significant saturation of categories and sub-
categories. In addition to small sample size, cultural background of the interviewer was
distinct from the former URM. It is possible that language of the interviews (English)
resulted in more simplistic terms than if the interviews had taken place in their native
languages, though this may also be considered a strength of the study, as the participants
had developed proficiency and relevant vocabulary. These limitations were unavoidable
but important to recognize so that results are not overstated.
Chapter 4

Findings

A Conceptual Model

This model evolved throughout the process of data collection and analysis, and represents the interworking relationships between the emergent concepts. While initial concept maps were created based on ideas from the literature, there was an expectation that they would change and increase in abstraction, complexity, and sophistication throughout the process. The result is a conceptual model that is ready for further quantitative testing, and is used to more clearly illustrate the initial emergence of a theory that demonstrates the relationship between the central concepts. This conceptual model is expected to facilitate the development of further testable hypotheses.

A Narrative Representation

In addition to a pictorial conceptual model, this study produced a narrative representation of the conceptual relationships. This narrative contains the same level of complexity as the conceptual model, but has considerably more latitude in its representativeness of the raw data. This served to demonstrate the grounding of the theory in the data, and provided a venue for direct quotations from research participants, a powerful component and a compelling story.

Though a conceptual model and a narrative differ in form and purpose, the combination of the two together constitutes a more complete picture of the emergent theory. In combination, these two products serve as the basis for developing further hypotheses to be tested through a more quantitative methodology. Additionally, these results will be disseminated to the PFBO administration and social work employees to
help inform future training and improve the responsiveness of service to URMs and foster families; this is discussed further in the practice implications section.

Results

The purpose of this study is to answer the following questions:

1) How do former unaccompanied refugee minors define “success”?

2) How does their perspective on “success” change over time?

3) What strategies are most helpful—from the perspective of unaccompanied refugee minors—to achieve “success” in the U.S.?

These questions served as a starting place and came from my curiosity as an outside observer. The interviews that took place with former URMs and I was guided by a semi-structured interview protocol with questions that remained consistent between interviewees, but with probes that changed as I gathered more knowledge about the emergent concepts. The interview questions included the following:

1) Will you please describe your experience of coming to the United States?

2) Will you please describe your time involved with the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor program?

3) We are interested in learning about what helps URMs successfully manage this life experience. To you, what does it mean to be successful?

4) What do you believe would help young people just entering the URM program be more successful?

Each question was accompanied by probes as needed. At the beginning of the interview process these probes included questions such as “What strengths did you gain during your time in the refugee camp?” and “What challenges were you met with during your
time fleeing from your home?” and “What resources did you find useful in meeting your needs?” As I began to become more educated about the experience of the URM, I was able to ask more specific probing questions: “Was a strong focus on education a helpful resource during your time in the refugee camp?” and “Will you tell me about the social ties that you had during your flight from your home country?” and “Can you think of any examples of how your trust in adults was strengthened or weakened during your time in your home country?” These probing questions became more intelligent based on the stories and recollections of previous interviewees, but the basic interview structure remained consistent.

Although I set out to answer the research questions identified above, the responses to the interview questions were not restricted to answering only those questions. Since interviewees were able to respond freely to open ended questions, some of the most important findings do not directly relate to the research questions that I posed. This demonstrates, to some degree, the authenticity of these outcomes and the organic nature of the theory discovery process. The purpose of this study was to answer the research questions, but many of the key findings emerged as relevant details and experiences, though not as specific answers to the original questions.

With 15 people interviewed, this was a small study, but a useful one in uncovering some important conceptual relationships and sparking more and better informed research questions. The results from this sample are intended to generalize to the larger URM population, though further theory testing is recommended. This chapter first describes the sample population based on demographic data collected at the time of the interview. Next, I present a conceptual model of the findings integrated with the
existing theoretical frameworks described in previous chapters. Following the conceptual model, I present a narrative of the findings intended to tell the analytical story of this population, much of which was taken from quotations from the interviews with URMs. Finally, I present a summary of the findings. Chapter five of this dissertation presents conclusions, limitations and implications of this project.

Description of Sample

During each of the 15 interviews, the following demographic information was collected:

- Gender
- Country of origin
- Number of countries lived in prior to placement in the U.S.
- Current age
- Age upon arrival into the U.S.
- Length of time displaced prior to coming to the U.S.
- Length of time receiving services from a U.S. based agency after arrival
- Highest grade completed
- Countries lived in prior to arrival into the U.S.
- Reason for terminating services from U.S. agency.

All participants entered the URM program in a mid-Atlantic state and were interviewed in the city where they had been placed originally. Thirteen of the participants arrived in the U.S. between 2001 and 2007, with two participants arriving during the early 1990’s. Thirteen of the 15 were men and two were women. This sample had lived in between one and three countries prior to coming to the U.S., 12 having lived in two or more
countries. Current ages of the participants ranged from 21 to 37 with an average current age of 26.4. The ages upon arrival into the U.S. ranged from 11 years old to 18 years old with an average of 15.5 years old. The length of time displaced prior to arrival in the U.S. ranged from 0 to 13 years, 7.67 years on average. The length of time receiving services from the U.S. agency (URMs are legally authorized to receive services until age 21) ranged from three to 10 years, five years on average. The highest grade completed ranged from high school or GED to some graduate school with an average of two years of college, many currently enrolled and planning to continue. The countries in which they lived prior to the U.S. included Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Haiti, Guinea, Liberia, and Egypt. Most (12 of the 15) received services from the U.S. agency until they aged out of the program at 21 years old; however, three participants left the program prior to age 21. In each of these cases, they left the program in order to get married or live with a partner, which disqualifies them from receiving continued services. In all three cases, the participants were over 18 years of age.
Table of Former URM Sample Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview number</th>
<th>gender</th>
<th>number of countries lived in prior to placement</th>
<th>current age (years)</th>
<th>age on arrival (years)</th>
<th>Length of time displaced prior to resettlement (years)</th>
<th>age on arrival receiving services (years)</th>
<th>highest grade completed</th>
<th>what countries lived in prior to emigrating</th>
<th>why no more services</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>m</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Sudan, Ethiopia</td>
<td>aged out at 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya</td>
<td>aged out at 21</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>aged out at 21</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Haiti</td>
<td>got married at 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Haiti</td>
<td>got married at 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>13</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya</td>
<td>aged out at 21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean: 26.4 15.5 7.67 5 14

According to state records for this particular geographic location, between the beginning of 2008 and 2011, the URM population came mainly from Africa (65-80%) with the remaining coming from South/East Asia and some from the Middle East. During these years, 54-65% was male and the typical age was between 15-19 years old.
This demonstrates some key parameters of the population. The results of this project based on the selected sample should not be seen as generalizable back to this larger population, since the sampling strategy was not aimed at achieving a representative group. These population parameters help to demonstrate that my sample contains maximum variation based on age on arrival to the U.S., gender, time spent receiving agency service, and length of time displaced prior to entering the URM program.

Although this project contains data from a relatively few participants, theoretical saturation was achieved and important shared themes emerged. These themes interrelate to form a conceptual model based on key findings from the data. Narrative findings punctuate the relationship of the themes within the conceptual model, as demonstrated in the following sections.

**Emergence of Categories**

Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest that data analysis results in an explanation of relationships between variables at increasing levels of abstraction. This occurred through theoretical and constant comparison of all data collected during open, axial and selective coding, and resulted in the identification of four central categories with multiple subcategories. The four categories include: (a) The Meaning of Success; (b) Changing Perspectives over Time; (c) Challenges and Barriers; and (d) Mechanisms for Overcoming Challenges and Barriers. Each category contains subcategories, the properties and dimensions of which emerged throughout the interview and data analysis process. A brief report on each category follows.

**The meaning of success**
This research project proposed to answer the following question: How do former URM\(_{s}\) define success? Through the interview and data analysis process, four subcategories emerged that shed light onto some possible meanings: (a) having basic needs met; (b) having autonomy in making decisions; (c) being future oriented; and (d) giving back. Each of these subcategories contains properties and dimensions that provide greater insight into how URM\(_{s}\) define success, a brief overview follows.

Having basic needs met includes feeling safe and secure both physically and emotionally. Stability and predictability are dimensions or metrics of how safe and secure URM\(_{s}\) feel. Other basic needs include food, shelter and clothing. Education was also identified as a basic need. The topic of education was a common theme throughout the interview process. Education was frequently identified as a means as well as an end. Education was described as a means of achieving financial security, respect, and the capacity to serve others. Education was also described as an end in itself, as a representation of an achieved goal. In this way, education was both a pathway to success, as well as a demonstration of achieved success. Education, it seems, has two distinct categorical implications: (a) a measure of success; and (b) a subcategory of mechanisms for overcoming challenges. The second item is discussed under the appropriate category heading below. In summary, having basic needs met is one important element to URM\(_{s}\) definition of success.

Having autonomy to make important life decisions, or at least having input on those decisions when they are made on behalf of one’s self is a key subcategory in defining success. The properties and dimensions of autonomy include living independently and self-reliantly. This means that less self-reliance can translate to less
perceived success by URMs. Opportunity to choose from various life paths is also a dimension of autonomy, as is the availability of resources that are meaningful to URMs’ well-being. Autonomy contributes to URMs’ definition of success.

Being future oriented was identified as an important subcategory in URMs’ definition of success. The properties and dimensions of a future orientation include being able to set and achieve meaningful goals with internal motivation and external support. Also, maintaining a sense of hope—both internally and with social support—contributes to the importance of maintaining a perspective on the future in defining what success means to URMs.

Finally, giving back was a common theme that related to what success means to URMs. The properties and dimensions of this subcategory span motivation and subject. Motivations included gratitude, duty, and responsibility. Former URMs identified giving back to their U.S. community out of gratitude for the services and support given to them as a demonstration of success. Another dimension of success through giving back included sharing with their family and community of origin out of duty. A final dimension included a sense of responsibility to alleviate human suffering in more general ways as an indication of their success. Giving back was a subcategory of what it means to former URMs to be successful.

The meaning of success was discussed by every former URM that participated in this study. Though answers varied with regard to detail and passion, these subcategories permeated their responses consistently. Many indicated that success could not be defined or sought after unless the very basic needs were met. I found it significant that their wording was not typically focused on inherent human rights or entitlements, but rather
included a word like ‘need’. This is no doubt born out of their pre-migration experience, as was their focus on basic survival necessities. Education is mentioned as a property and dimension of basic needs in defining success, but also as a subcategory of mechanisms for overcoming challenges. This demonstrates the commitment and central role that education is seen to play by URMs in their capacity to achieve success.

**Changing perspectives over time**

The second research question proposed in this study was as follows: How does former URMs’ understanding of success change over time? There are four central components to the answer to this question: (a) acculturation strategies over time; (b) commitment to community of origin; (c) commitment to culture of origin; and (d) commitment to education. The answer to this question includes an element of time passing, indicating that changes occur through a process. There are far too many variables that may influence why views change over time; however, a description of the theoretical relationships between concepts within that process is possible. This process is divided into three segments which include pre-migration, process-migration, and post-program. Each of the four identified components is important in illustrating the process of URMs’ changing definition of success.

Acculturation strategies, as identified by Berry (1997), give structure to this descriptive response. During the pre-migration period, URMs reported having a sense of commitment to their community of origin, culture of origin, and to their education. Upon arrival in the U.S., these commitments remained intact, but caused the URMs to be culturally segregated or marginalized. Over time, URMs adopted the dominant language and many of the values and beliefs of the dominant culture, entering a period of
assimilation where they placed much less emphasis on cultural maintenance and connection to community and family of origin. As they left the program and entered independent living situations, there was a renewed interest and focus on reviving their culture of origin and connection to their communities and families of origin as marked by an acculturation strategy of integration. One of the few constants during this process was the central role and value on education. At the beginning of the process, education was typically public high school; however, most URMs had or were currently attending college during this period of cultural integration.

During the interviews, former URMs discussed how their understanding of what success meant changed over time. Although their commitment to their culture of origin and their community and family of origin initially marginalized them from the dominant culture, a period of assimilation eventually lead to a balance between new and old cultures and a renewed commitment to their former social supports—integration. Their time in high school and college played a key role in this process. Rather than identify specific metrics of success, navigating the process of acculturation that lead to integration was what eventually led to success.

Culture was a common topic among all interviewees. Some important elements of culture included values taught by parents, values learned through shared experience, traditions, culture shock, cultural identity, culture keeping, and the future of culture. Culture was a theme that permeated each interview as participants discussed shared values and beliefs throughout the migration process. Many participants described their personal experience with education as a cultural value; or their commitment to their future as a cultural value. The multiple dimensions of this category help give breadth and
depth to the concept of culture, how it is viewed over time, and what relevance it has in determining and achieving success. How does former URM’s’ understanding of success change over time? Culture, community and education are central components in answering this research question, but they are also key subcategories under the mechanisms for overcoming challenges that lead to success.

**Challenges and barriers**

The next two sections represent categories that together answer the third research question: What strategies/supports are most helpful in overcoming challenges to achieve success? This category is comprised of the challenges and contextual elements that URM’s identified during the interviews and the subcategories that emerged during data analysis. The challenges and context was organized into three periods as identified by the URM’s: (a) during pre-migration period; (b) during program participation; and (c) following program participation. Each of these subcategories consists of multiple properties and dimensions that identify barriers to achieving the successful outcomes they described. In the following section, mechanisms for overcoming these challenges are discussed.

During pre-migration, URM’s identified several facets of their context that may have a lasting influence on their lives. This includes severe and prolonged trauma and significant loss, anxiety—including anxiety about coming to the U.S.—and mixed messages about what life would be like in a new country. Many also discussed conflicting motives for coming to the U.S. such as not wanting to leave family, but feeling a duty to go since so few refugees are allowed into the U.S., and experiencing pressure from family, peers and professionals. These properties and dimensions were
experienced along a continuum, and their influence on URMs is mitigated with large variation in responses from one individual to another.

During URMs’ participation in the program (typically from their arrival until they turn 21 or voluntarily leave the program) new challenges arise against the backdrop of a new context as they immigrate to the U.S. The properties and dimensions of this subcategory include relationship conflict—both with peers and professionals (including foster families)—often including culture shock and intolerance. During participation in the program, access to meaningful resources was a significant challenge. Resources like counseling and therapy were available; however, most URMs reported that this was not a meaningful or useful resource given their cultural background and problem solving styles. Many URMs also talked about experiencing cultural insensitivity from peers and foster families. Other conflicts were identified with respect to program or foster home rules such as curfews and overly structured free-time; however other URMs talked about the support they received from peers and professionals. Although the context was new and the challenges different, there were still barriers to achieving success during the period of program participation.

During the post-program period, challenges and context continued to change. Issues with legal status, employment, independent living, and continuing education were new barriers to success. The context of being in the U.S. was becoming more familiar to the URMs, though the challenges evolved. With new challenges, URMs had to develop new strategies to overcome them and develop the capacity to access new meaningful resources in order to achieve success. In the following section, mechanisms for overcoming these challenges are discussed.
**Mechanisms for overcoming challenges and barriers**

What strategies and supports are useful for URMs in pursuing success? Although many challenges stand between URMs and their desired outcomes, five subcategories emerged from the data analysis as factors that were helpful in overcoming those challenges and achieving success. (a) individual identity development; (b) cultural identity development; (c) coping skills; (d) social supports; and (e) education. Each subcategory contains various properties and dimensions. One finding was that each subcategory contained dimensions of old and new; past and present; origin and contemporary. Former URMs used comparisons between past and present to illustrate either their consistency or difference in attitudes. These subcategories with their properties and dimensions combine to form an answer to the final research question.

Individual identity development was a subcategory discussed by former URMs in several contexts. First, former URMs expressed questions that they had asked themselves prior to emigrating, during program participation and also about the future. These questions often related to who they were, where they belonged, and what was expected of them. The development took place along the dimensions of the past self, present self, and the future self. The development takes place in the context of a refugee camp, orphanage, or environment where their basic needs are not being met. Further identity development takes place throughout the process of living in the U.S. in a new culture and multiple social settings. Finally, further identity development takes place as they enter independent living situations and seek their own support systems within the community. Though identity development occurs in stages over time marked by internal conflict and adaptation (Erickson, 1968), the socio-cultural context was discussed by former URMs as
having a vital role in overcoming challenges and working toward successful outcomes. This line of self-questioning and introspection bled into related questions about their cultural identity.

Cultural identity development—a subcategory of mechanisms for overcoming challenges—was organized around Berry’s (1997) acculturation framework. Former URM s were faced with a difficult challenge as they left their culture of origin and entered the new U.S. culture: How will I balance the two? The dimensions of this subcategory include cultural maintenance along one continuum, and adoption of the new culture along another continuum. As was true in Berry’s (1997) framework, former URM s explained that a balance must be struck between the two in order to overcome the challenges that stood as barriers to success; that is to say, cultural maintenance and cultural adaptation were both important approaches to achieving successful outcomes. Often the mixing of old and new cultures created new and useful coping skills.

Coping skills, as Ungar’s (2010) Resilience Across Cultures approach suggests, serve to manage the negative effects of overwhelming environmental stressors. The properties and dimensions of these coping skills are contained within the individual and also the environmental context in which they are located. Former URM s identified a range of coping skills and experiences they had prior to leaving their culture of origin that had served them during integration into a new cultural context. Internal and environmental sources of coping were also discovered and developed upon arrival. Both internal adaptation and the ability of the new environment to connect former URM s with culturally relevant meaningful resources (Sen & Nussbaum, 1993) served to overcome
challenges in their pursuit of success. The resources available in the environment also contained social support systems.

Social supports emerged early as a common theme. Perhaps the most notable finding was that peer relationships where extremely important between refugees, the shared refugee experience being more important than similarity of cultural background or age. Some of the properties and dimensions of this subcategory include past community, family and peer relationships, program period peer and family relationships, post-program peer and family relationships, professional relationships, and sources of spiritual strength. The properties and dimensions of this category occurred throughout the migration process. For example, leaving the familiar was not just a one-time event, but a process that represents not only leaving the country of origin, but in some cases leaving a foster home or a group home, then leaving the support of the program to independent living, then entering the university—another unfamiliar experience. The expectation of support also contains multiple dimensions and properties that become evident across time. Though conflict in relationships across time is a challenge, meaningful, responsive, culturally relevant and meaningful peer, family, professional and spiritual relationships help to overcome those challenges and support former URMs’ goals. One location in particular that facilitated these important relationships was school.

Education was a central theme discussed by former URMs throughout the interview process. This particular subcategory included the following properties and dimensions: importance of education as taught by parents; focus on education at refugee camps, political unrest in home country due to lack of education, anticipation of education in the U.S. as a motivation to emigrate; focus on education by professional
support systems (social worker, foster/group home care provider, religious leaders in the U.S.); personal interest in education; education as a tool for income, respect, and ability to ‘give back’; and a source of socialization and a venue for developing important formal and informal social support systems. The concept of education evolved over time, ranging from pre-migration to post-migration and beyond. Conceptually, education is a ‘means’ and an ‘end’; a process and a product. Although educational achievement within the sample population ranged from GED to graduate school, education was viewed universally as a means for overcoming challenges in the pursuit of success.

Throughout the process of the interviews, these categories and subcategories emerged as common themes and were followed up with more interview probes. The properties and dimensions of each category were explored (open coding); the relationship between the categories and subcategories were explored (axial coding); the categories were related one with another and the theory refined (selective coding). From this process, a conceptual model was developed that demonstrates these categorical relationships in the following section. Subsequently, these findings are presented through a narrative report.

**Conceptual Model**

Four categories have been identified, subcategories represent the properties and dimensions have been discussed, and a few brief examples have been given in order to demonstrate the relationships. In this section, I present these findings in a conceptual model intended to add complexity and depth to the relationships of the categories while maintaining some level of parsimony. Subsequently, a narrative presentation of the findings is presented in order to bring further richness and a sense of humanity to these
findings through the analytic story. Finally, a brief summary of this chapter concludes the presentation of study findings.

According to Strauss and Corbin (2008), diagrams “…are conceptual visualizations of data, and…help to raise the researcher’s thinking out of the level of facts… enable researchers to organize their data, keep a record of their concepts and the relationships between them, and to integrate their ideas” (pp. 124-125). A conceptual model or framework allows for a complex representation of both structure and process—conditions $\rightarrow$ actions/interactions $\rightarrow$ consequences—and demonstrates these relationships pictorially; a “…map of the territory…” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 20). Based on several iterations of data analysis focusing on how these concepts interrelate, I developed the following conceptual model to help illustrates these relationships. The model demonstrates the evolving perspective of URMs with regard to the concept success, and a brief description of the model follows.
Process and Structural Conditions: Developmental and Environmental Factors Contributing to an Evolving Conceptualization of URM Success

Pre-Migration (Culture of Origin)

Program Participation

Post-Program

Developmental

Environmental

Conceptualizing Success over Time:
(Influenced by acculturation pressure from the environment)

Period of Marginalization/Segmentation

Period of Assimilation

Period of Integration

Coping

Challenges and Barriers

Resource
Description of the Conceptual Model

This conceptual model conveys relational associations between the central concepts of the theory, and illustrates the process and structural conditions under which these associations exist. The central themes identified from the data have been raised to increasing levels of abstraction through the analysis process suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998), resulting in a set of interrelated concepts that describe a compelling story about URM success. Several theories have been helpful in guiding the development of this conceptual model. Berry’s (1997) Acculturation Framework contributes to the process aspect of this theory. Sen and Nussbaum’s (1993) Capability Approach contributes to the conceptualization of success. Ungar’s (2010) Resilience Across Cultures contributes to the conditions that organize the interplay between individual and his/her environment. Just as each of these theories contributes to the development of this conceptual model, this conceptual model extends each of these theories, and is confirmed by consistency and compatibility.

This conceptual model asserts causal relationships between some concepts and associational relationships between others. Causal relationships that are most apparent include the following:

- Assimilation to U.S. culture causes a reduction in access to culturally relevant sources of social support.
- A reduction in access to culturally relevant sources of social support causes URM to rely on individual coping strategies (both old and new).

Associational relationships between concepts include the following:
• Developmental and environmental factors are associated with URMs’ capacity to overcome challenges and barriers.

• The conceptualization of success over time is associated with acculturation pressure from the environment.

• Leaving the program is associated with increased interaction with culture of origin as a source of social support.

• Transitional periods are associated with unanticipated challenges and barriers.

• Post-program integration is associated with giving back as a measure of success.

Further demonstration of these relationships is provided with the associated grounding in the data in the following section.

This theory posits that success is an evolving concept and is a function of development and environment. Individual, cultural, and ethnic identity are key properties of development and are influenced by the environment. Transitioning between acculturation strategies is a property of development and environment. A URMs ability to overcome challenges and barriers to success is associated with the availability of culturally relevant resources and their individual coping mechanisms, which are also culturally relative. This process and context is made more complicated through the presence of transitional periods, marked first by emigrating to the U.S., and second, by leaving the program. URMs are exposed to pressure to assimilate by professionals and peers, and go through a brief period of marginalization or segregation as a result of their inexperience with the dominant culture. As they learn the cultural norms and values, their conceptualization of success becomes more individualized rather than community
oriented. As they leave the program and the pressure to assimilate is reduced, integration becomes a more common acculturation strategy as they reconnect with their cultures and communities of origin. This period is also associated with the concept of giving back as a measure of success. The following section demonstrates the grounding of these relationships in the data.

**Narrative Findings**

This section of the results is presented in a narrative format. The goal of this presentation is to bring the important concepts to life through telling the analytic and theoretical story (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 250) by guiding the audience on a tour of the relationships between key concepts and demonstrating the process and structural conditions under which this theory applies and is grounded in the data. This is accomplished through an intimate use of field notes and extended field notes gathered during face to face interviews with former URMs. In many cases, direct quotations or close approximations of statements from the interviews illustrate the relationships between concepts and the respective properties and dimensions. Throughout this section, the variability between participants is also demonstrated through the use of quotations. Citations can be found throughout which refer to specific thematic codes and a line number that traces back to the field notes and extended field notes in order to demonstrate that these findings are grounded in the data. The voice of this narrative can best be thought of as the narrator of a story documenting the commonalities and the variability among participants’ experiences. In this case, the story is about a journey, a process that occurs across time and culture and is experienced uniquely by each individual.
This narrative is intended to answer several questions: Under what circumstances did these people begin their journeys that led to resettlement in the U.S.? What challenges did they face as adolescents and throughout their journeys? What and who helped them on their way? What role did culture and identity play in this process? And how were successful outcomes determined and achieved by these people throughout their journey? These questions extend the original research questions of this study (what is success? How does the perspective on success change over the resettlement process? And what strategies and supports best help former URM s overcome challenges in their pursuit of successful outcomes?). In order to answer these questions, the following sections use the categories that emerged through data analysis as an organizational guide. The headings contain subheadings associated with subcategories, and are further organized into a narrative description of the properties and dimensions of these variables.

1. Changing Perspectives over Time
2. Challenges and Barriers
3. Mechanisms for Overcoming Challenges and Barriers
4. The Meaning of Success

Before presenting these findings, a section is dedicated to providing some context for their experiences. This includes the variety of events, experiences, feelings and emotions that were involved through the pre-migration process and the first few months of resettlement. This also includes what they had been told and what they expected from their new home in the U.S., along with some experiences that were very different from what they anticipated.
Although no quantitative analysis would be appropriate—given the research method and small number of participants—it is important to know which experiences were common to all or most participants and which represent the breadth of experiences or maximum variation. Rather than using specific numbers and percentages, words are used: ‘most’ when referring to experiences shared by more than 10 of the 15 participants; ‘several’ or ‘many’ when referring to experiences shared by about five-nine; and ‘a few’ when referring to experiences shared by around four or fewer. Using this type of descriptors helps the narrative flow while still providing sufficient information about the depth and breadth of the answers to the research questions. Before focusing on the particular categories, subcategories, and properties and dimensions of the research question, the first portion describes the context of the URMs’ forced migration, anticipation of resettlement, and the unexpected experiences of the first few months living in the U.S.

**Experiencing forced migration—context**

“I was taken to a refugee camp in Ethiopia” (0-2). Most people I interviewed had similar experience. They were “taken” almost sounds like they were put on a nice charter bus and shuttled across borders to safety, but this is not what they meant.

I saw big groups of people walking. They were thinking that they had to walk to the camp in Ethiopia, but they didn’t know how far it was or anything. It would be like starting to walk toward California from the east coast, no idea about where we would be. (0-16)
“I was sent away to live with other people” (0-30). Being “taken” or “sent” was not a result of personal choice. In most of the interviews, they had experiences more like the following:

In 1989, Sudan had a civil war where they made all of the boys be soldiers and fight or they were killed. My older brother and I with an uncle walked to Ethiopia. It took months and was a journey of about 500 miles. (0-139)

In one case, a person said that “in 1987, I was kidnapped and enslaved. I escaped to Khartoum then Egypt” (0, 7a-747). These experiences were not a matter of simply leaving home because of political unrest; there were very real and personal experiences that made this journey extremely traumatic. Young boys saw family members killed in front of them or heard their mothers screaming, taken from their village and never heard from again (7a, 10-8). However, at the opposite end of the continuum, a few people talked about living with their parents who simply could not take care of them because of severe poverty (3a, 8a-485).

Though the journey was more difficult for some than others, being forced from loved ones, home, and community presented several challenges. “We walked back to Sudan, but it was no different, so we kept walking until we got to Kenya. We stayed there in a UN refugee camp (0-153). Another shared this: “I traveled with a group of boys. We walked from Sudan to Ethiopia, back to Sudan and on to Kenya. We were chased out of Sudan” (0, 7a-634). Forced from home into a new country, these people were powerless and oppressed by the same governments that they relied on for their survival. In some cases, people were born into challenging circumstances:
I was born in Ethiopia, when I was two I moved to Kenya when the Ethiopian government became corrupt. My mom had died and my dad disappeared, so I went with my brother (about 11 years old) and sister (about 7) when I was two. We lived in a refugee camp with about 97,000 people from all different races and ethnicities. (0, 10-880)

All of the people interviewed, as in the above example, passed through years of challenges—some lifelong.

Most, though not all, lived in refugee camps prior to coming to the U.S. Once they left or were forced from their homes and entered the refugee camps, their challenges were not over:

In the refugee camp, it wasn’t easy. You ate once per day at 3pm, it was like a prison. I ended up in Kenya because the north attracted our villages in the south. We were the lost boys because lots of the boys left. It was hard to adjust to not having parents to tell you what to do. (0, 7a, 10-512)

Life in camp was tenuous and subject to the politics of the host country:

There is no comparison here in the U.S. to what camp is like. Sometimes you just get one meal per day. In 1991, there was a civil war in Ethiopia. Since we had come from Sudan by invitation of the former regime, we were seen as enemies by the new regime, so we were chased out of Ethiopia. (0, 7a-145)

The very most basic needs were barely filled due to the sheer numbers of displaced people. It might have been easy to lose sight of the individuals going through these experiences in such massive numbers, but the UN partnered with several host countries to try and make a difference for some.
The UN started interviewing adolescents who did not have an able adult caregiver to see who would be placed in a different country permanently. After the story of the Lost Boys of Sudan was covered widely in the media, the U.S. agreed to grant a limited number of refugee visas to teens and contracted with faith-based organizations to oversee their care. “I was living in Liberia until seven when I went to the refugee camp in Guinea. I came through the Catholic Church and UNHCR—my sister was about 30 and I was 14 when we came” (0-576). “We were interviewed by the UN. The U.S. accepted the lost boys of Sudan as a group and then distributed us across the U.S.” (0, 5b-637). The process was more challenging for some than others. “My older cousin was a lost boy of Sudan and added us to his form on the UN paper work. The UN came and said I would do well here” (0, 5a-696). Though the original criteria were technically supposed to include teens with no caregiver, some of those interviewed said they did have family, either in their home country or elsewhere: “We are divided as a family. My sister is in Vermont, brother in Canada, mom in Australia and my dad is in Sudan: (0, 696). Not every case was as clear cut, as in the following example:

I came to the U.S. after my mom came. When she came, we had no other family here and I stayed with my grandmother. When I had the chance, I followed my mother here. When I arrived, I found out that my mom didn’t have the income to support anyone else, so I started in the URM program. I was placed in foster care. (0-308)

Though circumstances in their home countries varied, coming to the U.S. presented a unique set of challenges and benefits—some that were anticipated and others that were not.
**Anticipating life in the U.S.**

*Excitement*

During the interviews, most participants shared something about what they expected life to be like in the U.S. Many expressed excitement:

I anticipated that in the U.S. I could have opportunity. You hear all this good stuff so it was not easy to get here. There might only be one person chosen from a family or community. When you’re the chosen one, you’re chosen to survive by God—to survive death and starvation. (1a, 5c-769)

Their reasons for feeling excited varied from being ‘chosen by God’ to describing their motivation in this way: “If you have no food, you don’t think about girls, fun, or anything. I came to the U.S. thinking I’d rather die eating than hungry. (1a, 7a-787)

Though the reasons for excitement varied, all of the people who were interviewed shared something similar to this statement “I wanted to come to the U.S. for a better future” (1a-168). They believed they could not have a secure future wherever they were in their countries of origin or displaced in refugee camps.

Some of the excitement came from what they had heard about the U.S. “Many people talk about the U.S. being like heaven, so they are excited to come—I was excited to come” (1a-567; 1a-570). Another person stated that “the thought of coming to the U.S. was exciting, because there were some Sudanese people who had been to the US and come back, telling us how great it was” (1a-159). One quotation in particular highlights what was so exiting about the prospect of coming to the U.S.:

People told us that the U.S. was going to be heaven. They said that your skin will turn lighter and your complexion will be good, and your hair will grow long.
They said you won’t have to work and that there is no dust. They also told us that there is free education and transportation, and lots of opportunities. (0, 5a-696)

Although feeling excited in anticipation of coming to the U.S. was a very common theme, it was not the only emotion that was described.

**Fear and anxiety**

All of the people who were interviewed had dealt with serious challenges, often for many years; however, anticipating their placement in the U.S. evoked feelings of fear and anxiety that outweighed those of excitement for some of the participants.

It was hard to come to the U.S. because I was afraid. I thought it was very dangerous ‘if my life isn’t good here, why would it be good there?’ I was scared. They had to get my friend that I grew up with to come too so I would come. (1b, 7b-45)

People expressed fear and anxiety for a variety of reasons. For some, they feared that their hard work in school would go to waste:

I was very afraid that I would have to start all over, that was one of my main fears, that I would not be able to complete high school and go to college because I would have to start over. (1b, 3b-75)

For others, it was more difficult to express exactly what was overwhelming:

I remember worrying about everything. I spoke good English in the camp, but that’s different than speaking here. I worried and was afraid of everything before I came, and during my trip. (1b-124)

Even though all of the participants expressed feeling both excitement and fear, for a few, this fear was the dominant emotion they experienced as they were resettled in the U.S.
The fear and anxiety they experienced was brought on by different things for each individual. Some worried about their future, about their hard work going to waste, or about fitting in and leaving behind everything that was familiar. In one particular case, the person who was being interviewed had had a particularly challenging pre-migration period. When they had the chance to go to the U.S., this is what they felt:

In my country, they told us that the U.S. was not safe, that in the U.S. you can die anytime. They told us that how the U.S. has been portrayed isn’t true. I didn’t speak English or understand, so I just went along with what I heard. When I got here, I didn’t go outside alone because they had warned me about how dangerous it was. I didn’t open my window or door because I thought people would try to kill me. Guns are in America, in black neighborhoods, they will kill you—that’s what they told me. I was afraid. When I started going out, I saw some young black kids, and I feared they were going to kill me. I always went with others whenever I was out, and never alone. After a year, I started to pick up English. I was restrained and always kept to myself. I came from a fearful community and intimidation—it became a mindset I had in America too. (1b-776)

Although that is an extreme case within the context of this study, all of the people interviewed went through the experience of anticipating, then finding out for themselves what their new lives would be like. The first several months in the U.S. were a period of realization.

**Finding out the Reality of U.S. Resettlement**

Whether they anticipated resettling in the U.S. with excitement, fear, anxiety or (more likely) a mix of them all, there were many surprises as they began their new lives
here. For most of the people interviewed who were largely excited to come to the U.S., there were some unanticipated challenges.

I thought coming here would be easier than it was. I thought that because I always had food to eat and clothes to wear that I wouldn’t have any other problems. As soon as I got to my foster home there was arguing. I didn’t do it, but the parents blamed me. (2,4-284)

For others, particularly for the adolescents who were younger when they arrived, homesickness overshadowed their excitement soon after their arrival. “When I first came to the U.S., I was 12. If you had asked me when I first arrived, I would have taken a one way ticket back” (2, 4, 6c-730). In another interview:

When I was about to come to the U.S., I was excited, scared, nervous. People outside this country speak so highly of it, but the second I got here, the excitement went away. I was a kid back then. I left my mom, dad, brothers and sisters and came with my cousins. Reality hit and the excitement went away. (1a,b,c, 2-671)

Entering a new country and culture was not the only challenge; missing the one that was left behind also left some feeling discouraged. There were also surprises for those who arrived as older adolescents. For most of these people interviewed, relationships presented the biggest challenges. “I never lived a teenage life. When you live with other people, some are nice and some are not… you have to do things to survive” (2, 4-584). Yet for another, he found that “in the U.S., it was tough, but I never got the things I was afraid of from before I came. (2-57)

The U.S. is portrayed as a land of opportunities, but just how to take advantage of those opportunities presented unexpected challenges for some. As one person reflected;
“even though there are lots of opportunities here, you can easily screw them up. I see people who had lots of opportunities, some of the lost boys, who became drunks because they couldn’t stay focused on the goals” (2, 7c-280). One person had this to say:

There are problems everywhere, not just Sudan. I thought the U.S. was going to be perfect and easy. It’s true that there are lots of opportunities here, many more than in my country, but there are obstacles everywhere, just different ones. (2, 4-275)

Upon arrival to the U.S., some unanticipated challenges were discovered about how to take advantage of the opportunities they anticipated. This was discouraging to some, as in the following quotation that might just have easily come from a description of pre-migration challenges: “I feel like I’m just surviving, like I want to give up because all I can do is keep waiting” (2, 9-359). Although their experiences varied, the common theme that emerged from all of the people interviewed was that they had many unanticipated challenges once they arrived in the U.S. There are three components to the context or background of this population: the experience of forced migration; the preparation and anticipation of resettlement in the U.S.; and the reality of resettlement in the U.S.

**Changing perspectives over time**

As illustrated in figure 1.1 (meaning of success change over time), former URMs described feeling a commitment to their community and culture of origin, which may contribute to a period of segregation/marginalization. Then they seemed to go through a period where they learned and adopted varying degrees of U.S. culture. Finally, as they left the programs that provided services and transitioned to independent living, there are
several examples that illustrate a renewed interest in the maintenance of their culture and community of origin, although they also maintain their associations with the U.S. culture, representing an integration of the two. The constant appears to be a strong commitment to education throughout the entire process.

Challenges and Barriers:

Former URMs described challenges and barriers during three periods: pre-migration, during their time in a program receiving services for resettlement, and post-program. Challenges and barriers faced by former URMs varied along many dimensions, but clustered around a few important themes. Each of these themes is outlined according to the chronological period with which it coincided.

Pre-migration

During the pre-migration period, most former URMs describe their experiences involving trauma, loss, anxiety, and misconceptions about the U.S. (much of this period was covered in the above section about the context of their forced migration). The trauma and loss they experienced ranged from loss of close loved ones, loss of culture, identity, home and country, freedom and more. They witness violence and carnage, many as very young people. Most, though not all, were exposed to extreme trauma and loss.

One former URM described the challenging journey from their homeland, to a refugee camp, then on to a different refugee camp. Many of those interviewed described the same scene: I saw terrible things on the road, like bodies they left there” (7a-20). Another said “we had to cross a river where many young boys drowned because they could not swim” (7a, 10-150). Others shared similar experiences: “I’ve seen a lot of
people and kids die, my uncle” (4, 7a, 9, 10-549). Many of those interviewed lost family members, or did not know where a family member was: “I was with my sister because I haven’t seen my mom since I was seven and my dad died in the war” (10-573). One person described their experience as follows:

I was living in Sudan when the war broke out. My dad was a military man, so he left, and I was just with my mom. One day a group of soldiers came to my village and grabbed me and held me like they were going to take me, but a picture of my father fell out of my pocket. For some reason, the soldier saw it and made me go with a lady right then. I never saw my mother again. (7a, 10-8)

Others shared similar experiences:

I was born in Ethiopia, when I was two I moved to Kenya when the Ethiopian government became corrupt. My mom had died and my dad disappeared, so I went with my brother (about 11 years old) and sister (about 7) when I was two. We lived in a refugee camp with about 97,000 people from all different races and ethnicities. (0, 10-880)

Trauma and loss was a central experience for those who were interviewed, though the particular experiences varied somewhat.

Other trauma and loss was related to the circumstances of their care when they were forced to leave home. Many walked hundreds of miles through dangerous places without any adults (0, 7a, 10-512).

When I was four I was bitten by a poisonous snake. The family I lived with didn’t know what they were doing, so to cure me, they put my hand in an electric current. I still have the scares. I was sent to a hospital and stayed there for about
6 months. When I came back, the community was angry with the family because they shouldn’t have let me go where I was when I was bitten by the snake. (7a-24)

For others, their experience was described as follows:

In the camp in Kenya, there were 20,000 lost boys. Parents and relatives were home in Sudan, so even though I left at age 4, it always felt like we were somewhere else temporarily. I always say “home” as Sudan. (8a, 10-164)

One former URM had a unique experience living in Egypt on the streets. His experience there was unique from living in a refugee camp, but included significant trauma and loss, as illustrated by the following:

In Egypt, you could be killed anytime. If you work for a month, they would throw you from a building so they don’t have to pay you. My relative died in this way, they threw her from the 7th floor—no police—no one held accountable.

There is no future there. There, success is day to day survival. (7a-762)

There were feelings of being trapped and afraid—“escaping to another country was too dangerous too” (7a-767). For one former URM, the difficulty talking about his experiences years earlier was so great, he said “I don’t want to tell my whole life story, I want to skip this part” (10-35). All of the former URMs experienced challenges during the pre-migration period even though they varied for each individual. As each of the former URMs was resettled in the U.S., they entered the next period of the migration process.

**Process-migration**
During the period following the arrival to the U.S., URMs participate in a program sponsored by the federal government in partnership with faith-based organizations that provide direct services until the URM is no longer eligible. Unaccompanied refugee minors typically participate in the program receiving services until they are 21 years of age, however, some of those interviewed for this study left the program earlier than that due to getting married. The major challenges that they faced can be categorized into three themes: relationship conflict (with peers, professionals, and foster families), a lack of meaningful resources, and exposure to cultural insensitivity.

Entering a new country with a different language, culture, and even weather can be challenging enough, but many URMs explained that conflict arose in social settings quickly, and often was prolonged throughout their time participating in the program. One person stated:

I lived in a foster home with two other boys from Sudan who were a year younger than me. There was also a foster boy from Vietnam who was much younger. There were younger biological kids in the home too. I was an outsider at first, and problems started right away. There was a lot of chaos and arguing between the kids, and the parents would always side with their own kids. Later, the other foster kids and I figured we were all in the same boat, and began to get along better. The foster parents encouraged the idea that we (the foster kids) were the bad kids, and that there were no problems before I came, but I found out later that this was not the case. It was more troubling for the younger foster kids because they would argue and argue about something not being fair. I was older, and
quickly learned that the parents were always against me, and I wouldn’t win in an argument. (4, 5a, 7b-186)

This was an extreme example, even within the context of the 15 interviews conducted for this study; but others had similar experiences as well.

I just wanted to be a good big brother to the others in our house. That was my job. The biggest problems occurred when the parents got involved. We were kids, but could take care of the typical kid arguments, but bigger issues always came up when the parents tried to solve the problem. (7b-260)

According to another person:

I lived with my adult cousin for a little while, then my cousin my age and I went to live in a foster home. I didn’t like the people I was with. They had assumptions about who we were. We were there three years and fought all the time. They had three kids of their own, then other foster kids too—we got along with the other foster kids. My cousin and I shared a room. We were being treated unfairly and differently from their own kids. They were very condescending toward us. The program is good, but the family was very difficult to live with. (7b-679)

One person reported that “at one point, I was always disagreeing with my foster parents, so they sent me to the psychiatrist, but I didn’t want to go—I wasn’t crazy and didn’t have any issues” (7b, 689). This statement, although only mentioned by one participant, may be an important point about the way foster parents and professionals perceive URM, as opposed to how URM see themselves and the services they need. Most of the
former URMs reported having only a few challenges, and not always with foster families as in the following statement:

Every step has been different. In the group home, we had rules, but we also had food, guidance and support. Some of the rules were hard, like having to go when they said to go, or changing rooms when they said, sometimes in the middle of the night. Some things about the group home are crazy, but most of it is good. (5b, 7b-115)

Some of the challenges came when program rules got in the way of bigger plans.

The program was very helpful, but it was hard on us too. We were boyfriend and girlfriend, and I remember they really discouraged that. We couldn’t get married in the program, and you can only work part time—you can’t earn more than a certain amount—that’s a program rule. So we left the program early, started working and got married. (5b, 7b-389)

The relationships with professionals presented some unique challenges for many of the former URMs during their time participating in the program, but those were not the only sources of social strife that they identified.

Although many of the challenges identified by URMs focused on professional relationships as a source of problems, most URMs spoke highly of their placements and foster families (described under the following section). Some of the other challenges, such as peer relationships, were mitigated by positive professional ones:

My foster mom taught English as a second language at the community college, so she worked with me. I got teased a lot as a kid because I didn’t speak English, and I had a funny accent, but I adjusted quickly. The climate was really different
too—it was hard to go from hot all the time in Kenya to having four seasons, I hate the cold. (5b, 7b, 8c-895)

The weather was mentioned a handful of times, as in “I stepped foot off the plane into snow, the weather didn’t help my transition at all” (7b-701), however, challenges with school peers and cultural insensitivity were common among all participants. These experiences ranged from minor issues, such as experiencing new things—“lived in the city all of my life. It was what I was used to. My foster family lived in the country. They had no TV or anything like that. I had a foster brother who was from Kosovo” (7b, 8b-348), to more pervasive experiences of intolerance:

> At school, I also felt alienated. I was teased and made fun of, but I dealt with it because I was mature. There was one time that I almost fought with a boy over him teasing me. I received in-house suspension, and decided that I would not get into any more trouble. That is the last time I was ever in trouble. I learned I had to be mature. (4, 7b, 9-206)

One person made a poignant comparison between the challenges of pre-migration life and those experienced during program participation: “When you’re hungry, it’s hard to study, and it’s hard to study when you’re stressed and having conflict at home here” (7a,b-252). Their point seems to be that no matter what, challenges will exist. For some of the former URM, however, the fear of these challenges was greater than what they actually experienced:

> I worked at a furniture store, fast food, and learned that black people and white people were nice. Although once one lady was mean and threatened me with her
boyfriend. I had had to walk home a different way and was really afraid because
of my history. (7a,b-793)

During the same interview, this person also made the following statement:

At the community college I didn’t like to eat in the cafeteria because I was
worried they would laugh at me. I went to class and then would run away. I
thought I would be beaten up. I tried to pretend I was comfortable and tough, and
the security guard uniform helped me with that. I worked there for 6 years. (7b-
803)

Cultural insensitivity or fear of being excluded socially presented a very real challenge to
most of the research participants; but what of the resources available to them?

The URMs were provided refugee legal status, a foster or group home, basic
needs and help to get an education. Nearly all participants expressed gratitude and
satisfaction with the way resources were provided during the program, however, a few
key challenges were pointed out:

I lived by myself, on my own, taking care of myself a lot in the camp. It felt
similar being at a group home in the U.S. because I saw it like I had a place to
live, but I still had to take care of myself. (4, 7b-53)

Several expressed that same attitude in similar ways, feeling alone with overwhelming
responsible. For some, the help and support they expected was not available when
they arrived, as with the following experience:

It was hard to come to the U.S. because I was afraid. I thought it was very
dangerous “if my life isn’t good here, why would it be good there?” I was scared.
They had to get my friend that I grew up with to come too so I would come. My
friend was separated from me in the airport when we got to the U.S. and he was sent to Michigan. (1b, 7b-45)

Many of the participants also explained that the mental health services (it was a requirement that they have weekly meetings with a therapist) felt like a waste of time, and unnecessary. One participant made this point by articulating that he “…wasn’t crazy and didn’t have any issues” (7b, 689) when he was taken to see a mental health specialist.

Challenges former URMs faced during the process of participating in the program included themes relating to relationships, cultural insensitivity, and lack of resources that were appropriate for their culturally unique needs. As these URMs left the program, the challenges they faced evolved.

**Post-program**

As former URMs age out of the program, or leave for other reasons, the challenges they face seem to change. Rather than relationship conflict, lack of resources, and cultural insensitivity—challenges faced during program participation—issues like legal status, employment, transitional living skills, and continuing education were the common themes that were identified during the post-program period. One person made a statement that summarizes the feelings of many around the post-program challenges: “They say the program is like your family, but your family is still around to support and help you after you turn 21” (7c-128).

Though fewer than five of those interviewed were still struggling with challenges around their legal status, the issue was central to their interview responses. One person stated the following:
They really helped me out a lot. I started high school and began working with my social worker to get my green card. For some reason, my green card was delayed, and I was assigned a new social worker. Somehow, my green card was lost track of. I turned 21 so I couldn’t have help from the agency anymore; I was on my own. (5b, 7c-313)

This person went on:

When you turn 21, everything just ends; I wasn’t prepared for that. My green card continued to be delayed. My grandmother in my home country died, as well as my best friend there, but I wasn’t able to go and visit because of my citizenship issues. I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to come back to the U.S. (7c-318)

The challenges affect more than work also, relationships are also impacted when someone is dealing with legal status as well.

I was trying to travel to Texas one time, but I couldn’t. All of my friends were going on this trip, but I had to stay in the state because of my green card issues. I was embarrassed, so I just told them I had a conflict and couldn’t go. (7c-355)

Issues with legal status bled into challenges with higher education as well.

I have missed out on a lot of opportunities because I don’t have my green card.

It’s not too late to get my citizenship and go to college, but I am getting older and my situation continues to be very unstable. (7c, 9-335)

Most of those who were interviewed identified higher education as something that was very important to them when they came. These feelings and frustrations that were shared by many were expressed by one person in this way: “In high school, I was thinking I would get an education, a job, wife, kids, but without an education, you have to work
24/7 to survive and have no time for life (3b, 7c-372). At times, challenges with independent living, employment and education all combine, as in the following experience.

I had an apartment that I paid for myself in high school, but I lost my job and got discouraged. If you don’t have enough support, you will get discouraged and quit school like I did. (5, 7c-662)

These attitudes continued to change over time.

When we first came, we had high expectations—that we would be taken care of (smile). They said that we would go to school, graduate, go to college, pick a career, but it’s really up to the person how much success they have. It’s an individual choice. After 5 or 6 years, it gets much harder. (6a, 7c-640)

Most of the former URMs who were interviewed identified many strengths of the program (as explained in the next several sections), however, as one person put it, “even though they do wonderful work, at age 21, you’re basically done” (7c-331).

In summary, the post-program period was challenging for former URMs in the areas of legal status, employment, transitional living skills, and continuing education.

For all of the former URMs who were interviewed, goals played a key role in overcoming these challenges. One person summed this up with the following statement: “Even though there are lots of opportunities here, you can easily screw them up. I see people who had lots of opportunities, some of the lost boys, who became drunks because they couldn’t stay focused on the goals” (2, 7c-280).

The challenges and barriers that former URMs faced changed throughout their lives. During pre-migration, trauma, loss, anxiety, and conflicting expectations about life
in the U.S. challenged their basic survival. During their participation in the program as they emigrated to the U.S., challenges changed somewhat. The challenges tended to occur within relationships, included cultural insensitivity by their new schools and communities, and were perpetuated by a lack of meaningful resources available to them. Following their participation in the program, many faced challenges relating to legal status, employment, transitional living skills, and continuing education. How were these challenges overcome in order to promote successful outcomes? The next section identifies the mechanisms for overcoming challenges and barriers that former URMs identified during the interview process.

**Mechanisms for overcoming challenges and barriers**

Former URMs faced many challenges and barriers during their immigration experience. This section describes five areas that were organized from interviews with former URMs. These areas seem to serve as mechanisms for overcoming challenges and barriers and include 1) individual identity development; 2) cultural identity development; 3) coping skills; 4) social supports; and 5) education.

**Individual identity development**

“I’m from Sudan” (8a, 9-714) one person told me—although they had only lived there a couple of years before being forced from their home country to live in various refugee camps. Another personal said “I’m Sudanese, but have never lived in Sudan” (8a, 9-885). This occurred over and over, interview after interview and demonstrates the link between individual and cultural identity development. People based a big part of their identity on their membership in a group, a community of origin. Some were so young when they left that this part of their identity was developed by those around them:
“I don’t remember most of this, but these stories have been told to me” (9-143). Almost all of the participants had a somewhat fluid perspective of who they were, as illustrated in the following example:

I don’t know how old I am, but when I came to the camp they made me put my hand over my head and try to reach my opposite ear-- they said that I was about 4 based on my reach. I don’t know how old I actually am, because I have always based my age on that estimation. (9-4)

Many of the participants had an assigned birthday of January 1st, and then an estimate of the year they were born. Most of the people interviewed seemed satisfied with some of the details of their individual identity being vague, but when it came to their heritage, they were clear about who they were. This included the roles that individuals should play, and in many cases, that helped former URMs overcome challenges and barriers as illustrated by this person:

I had learned to restrain myself. I was more mature and older than the others. In Sudan, the older person takes care of the others. This is what my brother did for me, and I knew it was what I had to do for the others in our foster home. That is just the role of the older person. If there was an argument over a video game, I would take a back seat and give up my turn because that is what the older kid is supposed to do to take care of the others. I had to become an adult at a young age. At age 15, I was an adult. (4, 8a, 9-199)

The roles and expectations came from a combination of who they were in the past, and who they would be in the future. This development took place in response to challenges and barriers they faced both prior to emigrating, and during their resettlement in the U.S.
Most of the participants made a statement similar to the following one: “My experiences in my home country were with war and seeing hard things. I learned that I am strong, and no one can do it for me” (4, 9-546). This combination of taking past experiences and translating it into a part of their individual identity was also explained in this way: “I’ve seen a lot of people and kids die, my uncle—these experiences shaped me to do better things” (4, 7a, 9, 10-549). For some, a combination of pre-migration and post-migration experiences shaped their individual identity development:

I used to worry about getting all ‘A’s but now I think getting the content is more important. Don’t focus on what everyone else can see, focus on being a better person. Learning never stops. I think people should look at life positively and you’ll succeed. I once saw a girl in Haiti that was eating mud cookies just to have something in her belly, and it made me appreciate everything I have, just like my experiences in the refugee camp. If the UN food ran out, we’d be hungry—that’s not a problem for so many people, so it made me appreciate everything so much. (3b, 4, 9-957)

The following statement was made by one URM and relates to an ethnic identity, but this attitude was shared by most, though not all came from Sudan like this person:

I’m not just a Sudanese immigrant, I’m a part of America and I’m part of those that want to make a better America for tomorrow. Every generation in America has had a struggle. I’m part of this one. And I have my perspective from living outside of here. I see the world differently. (4, 8a, 9-868)

This added depth of perspective comes from a past ‘self’ and influences a future ‘self’ through an important period of individual identity development where past experiences
translate into a stronger more mature view of the ‘self’, capable of overcoming barriers to success. Individual identity development was a key, but not the only mechanism for overcoming challenges and barriers.

**Cultural identity development**

The role of cultural identity as a mechanism for overcoming challenges and barriers is divided into two areas: 1) cultural maintenance; and 2) cultural adaptation. Former URMs had experiences prior to resettlement in the U.S. with their cultures of origin that help them deal with the challenges they face here. One big question they all have to ask themselves is how to balance keeping their culture of origin with adopting the culture of the place where they are resettled. Although this was a challenge in itself, the balance that most of these former URMs had struck served to overcome what could have been barriers to their success.

Even though cultural maintenance and cultural adaptation occurred along a continuum for each former URM, both were important to all interviewees. One person put it this way: “I have not changed my culture; I still try to be the same person I was in Africa. Although I am a U.S. citizen, I am still who I always was” (8a-621). Another person said “some people in the program told us not to get married, but in my country, I’m not afraid to work hard, that is more common” (8a-415). And “I haven’t changed much—I have always kept my goals the same, although some things have delayed me, but I have the same goals” (8a-593). For many, a combination of their culture of origin and exposure to a new culture resulted in a powerful combination:

I was a teenager when I got to the U.S. They taught us how to clean and cook, how to be independent and how to give respect. Even though we didn’t have
money, our parents taught us well—back home, we can survive. If we have a
leaf, we can make a meal and be satisfied. If you have big money and lost it, it’s
not everything. (8a,c-475)

Culture keeping or cultural maintenance can be seen in the experience shared by several
of the participants, but put into words by one person in this way:

In the camp in Kenya, there were 20,000 lost boys. Parents and relatives were
home in Sudan, so even though I left at age 4, it always felt like we were
somewhere else temporarily. I always say “home” as Sudan. (8a, 10-164)

The maintenance of a cultural identity includes characteristics of a culture that one
wishes to preserve. In one example, “success is also to earn the respect of your
community and be respectful of others. In my culture, you must be respectful of anyone
older than you. I want to earn respect by being responsible” (6c, 8a-265). And “if I
respect others, I expect to be respected by others” (8a-447). Besides respect, attitudes
toward money was a theme that several people discussed, as represented by the
following:

My first job didn’t pay what I wanted to make, but I decided to be happy with it. I
decided that rather than putting money first, I would try to put people first. We
have a saying, money can’t burry you. (8a-452)

Former URMs had several things to say about ‘American culture’ as well:

Success, I think its universal, like the American dream, to have all your needs
met. In America, success is how many cars you have, I haven’t bought into that
because of where I come from. (6a, 8a-692)
They are quick to distance themselves from a culture that centers on money and wealth as a measure of success, preferring to maintain connections to their own culture, even if some believe they have become ‘Americanized’:

As much as I like to think I’m not, people tell me that I am Americanized. I lived with people but tried to keep my culture. I speak my language, I go to those events, but all of the memories are from the refugee camp—but I am still Sudanese, and I want to keep my culture. I like globalism, but some cultures should stay intact. (8a,b-706)

One person said “people buy into America, and soon all the cultures will disappear. Overseas, America is on TV, but they don’t know that’s not really America” (2, 8a-711), pointing out that ‘American culture’ is not well understood.

There is support for culture keeping among former URMs. One person said “I tease my friend who still keeps up with his foster family. I say “hey man, you got adopted” but he says “no man, I’m still me” (5b, 8a-734). The statement “I’m still me” is an excellent example of how many of the former URMs view themselves: part of a culture of origin AND part of a new culture of resettlement. Cultural maintenance is a social occurrence—it cannot be done alone: “When I finally saw another guy from Sudan in my high school, I said to myself “I need to hang with him” (5a, 8a-667). Even with the integration of past and present cultures, approximately half of those interviewed agreed that, given the right opportunities: “I want to go back to my country” (8a-718).

Cultural maintenance is only one part of the cultural identity development mechanism for overcoming challenges and barriers; the other is cultural adoption or adaptation.
I tried to wear American clothes and tried to fit in and belong to something. I listened to American music loud in my car. I got more friends and I would say “What’s up?” so that I would fit in better. I felt confident. I went to the university to speak English and to fit in. (8b-811)

This was one example that illustrates many similar statements made by former URMs that relates to adapting attitudes and behaviors to fit in better. These were not just skills they picked up in the U.S. For most, like in the following statement, multiculturalism had been a way of life:

In Kenya, in the refugee camp, there were people from all over, lots of different races and ethnicities. The schools were terrible, so we played soccer in the streets together, and I got to know people from other cultures. (5a, 8b-887)

Having been exposed to people different from themselves, adapting to life in the U.S. was not described as challenging for most. In fact, many easily identified aspects of their new culture that appealed to them, as illustrated by the following:

People in the U.S. have respect for the rules; they obey the law. I learned that through an incident when I was in high school. A person started a fight with me. I was over 18 and he was 17. I had to go to court, but the case was dismissed because the other kid didn’t show up. This taught me to respect the law. Now I just walk away, I follow the rules, I work hard, I go to my home. (8b-377)

Another put it this way:

There in Sudan, Democracy is a word—they don’t implement it—the leaders were fighting to enrich themselves. In African politics, you can’t separate the individual from the group, so whatever tribe they come from, they can’t work
with the others without their own people getting upset. When we implement what we’ve seen here in South Sudan, it will make a world of difference because we act as individuals, not as tribes. (6b, 8b-737)

Even though some former URMs found themselves in trouble occasionally, they expressed respect for a legal system that was enforced.

Another common theme was identified in this way: “I have come to respect and value some of the culture in the U.S., like nobody touches women here, women have power. That is not the case in my country” (8b-377). In a different interview, a former URM explained that many services he helped bring to other refugees focused on women:

Women are still facing serious issues of discrimination. The people that come to the academy can Skype, text etc. They are more intelligent than me, they have found their own community on FaceBook. I was so impressed by what these women can do. They were taught to treat their husband and that’s it. But now, they take kids to the doctor themselves, all this from 2008-2011, and in another few years, they will change the world. (6b, 8b-842)

One former URM who was interviewed expressed a more macro perspective on how adopting elements of U.S. culture has impacted his worldview:

I believe in the constitution and the core values. We should take this model to Sudan to access equality, especially for women. In Sudan, they are man issues, not done by women. That is why Africa isn’t getting ahead. The founding fathers were ingenious. They put the people first. (8b-860)

He continued:
The solution for Africa? Bring democracy. The leaders there are oppressive and want to maintain the dictatorship. Negotiating with those in power will just prolong it. Powers all over are keeping leaders in power for their own interests. The expanding ideologies against America are the problem. America needs to recruit people to share these ideals globally. (8b-873)

Although differences existed between former URMs, it was evident that all had to balance cultural maintenance with cultural adaptation.

Nearly all of those interviewed were able to point out major differences between their culture of origin and the culture they observed in the U.S. The following are a series of quotations that illustrate the differences that former URMs had to face as they tried to balance old and new cultures:

In my country, I’m the one working while my wife takes care of the children, but the culture here is very different. I think probably 85% of the women in my country don’t work. Only the rich drive there, but it’s different here. I used to walk to school five or six miles, but the bus just picks you up and takes you everywhere here. (8c-367); In school in my country, you have to know the book from top to bottom, you have to learn everything in your head. Here it is different. (8c-490); Parents in my country are very serious about discipline and respect for adults and the value of education. The teachers in my country are more like parents. (8c-493); When I came, there were cultural differences that were brand new to me. We used to hold hands, like with our roommate or brother, it was just normal. Here, that means something different, here it means you’re gay. (8c-506); In our culture, when I’m with my family, I couldn’t cook
because I’m male. (8c-510); As a teenager in Africa, for the most part, you obey your parents. If they ask you to get them a glass of water, you do it. You kneel down and greet them when you come home from school. You don’t tell them ‘no’. There are not many parties and no fun. They push you a lot on education and they are more involved in your social life. Like if you want to have a boyfriend or a girlfriend, they will meet them first, meet the parents. (8c-611); I’m the first of the Dinka to get and education. In Khartoum, they got education for themselves, not for the country. (8c-825); I called Eric Cantor’s office. I gave him a message. Two days later I got an email from the house majority leader in response to my question. I wouldn’t call the police department in Sudan. (8c-856); Also, in Kenya, family was so important, it was everything; here, it is all so focused on the individual. Also in Kenya, you don’t have to know somebody to just go talk to them, but here you have to know them. (8c-904)

**Coping skills**

For former URMs, coping skills played an important role in overcoming challenges and barriers to success. Some of the coping skills they identified came from their experiences they had before coming to the U.S.; other coping skills were identified and developed through experiences they had in the U.S. Some of these quotations have been used elsewhere in this narrative as well, but also serve to illustrate the importance of coping skills in overcoming challenges and barriers to success.

For the coping skills that were developed as a result of experiences prior to emigrating to the U.S., one statement illustrates the nature of former URMs’ ability to transform struggles into strengths: “My experiences in my home country were with war
and seeing hard things. I learned that I am strong, and no one can do it for me” (4, 9-546). Though others said it in different words, this theme was shared by most participants. That is, challenges they faced before coming to the U.S. helped prepare them for life’s difficulties in a new place. Another person explained “I came through tragedy and it clarified how I see the world. If it doesn’t kill you it has built me up to feel like we can change the world. I’m empowered’” (4, 7a-865). Though the some experiences were difficult, it made the challenges they faced in the U.S. manageable, as described here:

I never lived a teenage life. When you live with other people, some are nice and some are not… you have to do things to survive. I learned a lot from those experiences. I was responsible, I had to be an adult very young—I learned a lot of things that make life in the U.S. easier, so when I came, nothing was too hard for me. (2, 4-584)

During another example, this concept was further explained:

I had learned to restrain myself. I was more mature and older than the others. In Sudan, the older person takes care of the others. This is what my brother did for me, and I knew it was what I had to do for the others in our foster home. That is just the role of the older person. (4, 8a, 9-199)

In some cases, exposure to other cultures helped former URMs cope with the variety of cultures they were exposed to when they arrived in the U.S.:

I think that getting along with other cultures while I was in Kenya made me have an easier time here; I was able to approach people and be outgoing. On the other
hand, some people don’t want to be approached, so those were social skills I had
to learn too. (4-900)

The coping skills identified here that former URMs were able to carry over from their
past and apply to their present is not an exhaustive list; however, these examples
demonstrate the importance and value of their lived experience as it relates to
overcoming new and ongoing challenges and barriers to success.

In addition to coping skills that were learned prior to emigrating, into the U.S.,
subsequent experiences in the U.S. have lead to the development of new coping skills.
As one former URM explained: “Sometimes fear is good. Fear about the future is good. It
keeps you humble, and makes you come up with another solution to your problems” (4-
100). This new perspective on the usefulness of fear was shared by others as well, and
illustrates the development of a new coping skill: using fear to motivate problem solving.
For others, challenges in the U.S. lead to new ways of coping with problems. Problems
with relationships were also a source of coping skill development, as in the following
example. During that same interview, this person stated the following:

    There are problems everywhere, not just Sudan. I thought the US was going to be
    perfect and easy. It’s true that there are lots of opportunities here, many more
    than in my country, but there are obstacles everywhere, just different ones. I just
    had to keep my mind focused on being successful. (2, 4-275)

New experiences elicited new ways of coping. Although these coping skills seem to
emerge from experiences in the U.S., other factors must be in place in order for them to
develop; for example, some level of maturity must already exist in order for former
URMs to use ignoring as a coping skill for argumentative relationships. In other words,
while the origin of coping skills is not always clear, the role of coping skills as a mechanism for overcoming challenges and barriers to success emerged as an important theme for most of these young people. In addition to coping skills, social supports were also central to one’s success.

**Social supports**

**Peer and family support**

Individual and cultural identity, along with old and new coping skills, served former URMs well throughout the immigration process; however, social supports that were put into place helped them to overcome challenges and barriers. Social supports hung together in three subcategories: peer and family, professional, and spiritual.

Peer and family sources of social support were especially important to former URMs as they negotiated the difficult transition to life in the U.S. In some cases, close friends from their home country became like family: “I was taken care of by an older ‘lost boy’ and his brother. His brother and I were close friends” (5a-32). For one participant, the people he came with became his family:

I came with two boys older than me. The U.S. government paid and we had I94 visas. While in the program, I applied for a green card and went for citizenship. I lived with the older people that I came with. (5a,b-523)

One former URM gave this advice to other URMs just entering the program: “Keep in touch with your family, even just phone calls, you don’t know what you’re missing—I wish I knew my mother” (5b, 6b, 11-948). For others, their family of origin, though they were not living together, served as a very important form of support, which they were able to transform into peer support for others:
At the agency, they called me and asked me to do some speeches, but it won’t make a difference because my success comes from who I have always been—my family is successful and got an education. My mom is the reason we all have been successful. If it is not intrinsic, it won’t happen, if it’s extrinsic, you will stop when no one is watching. (3a,b, 5a-725)

Family and community of origin were very important to most of the former URMs. As illustrated in the following example, the lessons learned from former caregivers frequently served as sources of social support:

When I got bit by the snake, and the community blamed that family I was with, I went to live with a man and his brother, who was my age. In 1995, that man died, but before he did, he called us in one by one to talk to us. He told me “you’re a good student; you need to stay in school.” I didn’t know then that he would die, but he did that night. We were too young to bury his body, but later, as an adult, I got to go back. I looked for his bones, but I never could find them. I buried a tree trunk as if it were him, so I could do that for him. Because of what he told me, I have always worked hard in school. (3a, 5a, 10-82)

Though not always blood relatives, families and caregivers were important sources of social support, especially during the program participation period.

While most of these former URMs had only a few stories about their families of origin to help sustain them, all noted peer support played an important role in their overcoming challenges and barriers. School activities were a source of peer support for many: “I didn’t want to go to a new school and adapt all over again. I was involved in soccer and had friends, so I figured I could handle a bad home situation as long as I had
those supports” (5a-301). In some cases, having a peer from their same country of origin was important. Another person said “I met a few people from Sudan when I was here” (5a-65) when they were asked about who helped them when they were facing challenges. A shared cultural background was important to most participants, however, in spite of being from different places, most also expressed the importance of having peer supports that were in similar circumstances.

Sharing an experience can bring people together. For former URMs, most mentioned in one form or another that having peers who were new to the U.S. also was an important source of peer social support as in the following example:

During the program I lived with another foster child. It didn’t make any difference where they were from, you just felt more comfortable with someone in a similar situation as you. Living in the foster home with other white kids was hard at times, because they know all the rules and culture, but it helped me learn English. (4, 5a-480)

Experiencing a major cultural change was easier when that experience was shared with others. Several former URMs mentioned that they “…were all good students, and easily made friends” (5a-245). Nearly all former URMs also mentioned feeling supported by peers who shared similar experiences as in this statement: “I went to ESL classes, met people, made friends from other countries and learned to communicate in other ways, like through body language” (5b, 8b-790), and from another; “I remember that during the program, we always got together with other foster kids, it helped not feel so isolated” (5a,b-420). Many of the former URMs shared the following sentiments:
It was helpful to be in a place with other foster kids. It was nice to have some people from Sudan, but the biggest help was to know that we were in the same boat as foster kids from other countries. It didn’t matter where we were from. I became like a brother with the foster kid from Vietnam. It wasn’t our culture and background; it was that we were now in a similar circumstance as foster kids. We could relate and support each other. (4, 5b-289)

He continued:

My Vietnamese foster brother and I would talk and learn about each other for hours. Sometimes the foster parents would come turn out our lights, and even the main power so we couldn’t turn our lights back on. But we became close through it all. (5b, 297)

This was not just during the program period either. One former URM “…went to the university and felt more confident because there were more immigrants around from all over” (4, 5a, 9-808). And “When we came here, I didn’t have anything. I still keep in touch with people from the program” (5a,b-405). When one former URM was facing challenges related to racial prejudice, “a black co-worker helped me know that I should keep my head up, I’m safe” (4, 5a-797). Peer support did not just come from being around culturally similar peers, but the shared experience of being an immigrant and refugee provided avenues of social support.

Having family and peer support was a central theme that former URMs identified as a mechanism for overcoming challenges and barriers to success. In some cases, they had family that was still alive and supporting them from their country of origin and elsewhere, while for others, it was the stories and motivation given to them by their
families and communities of origin that helped them persevere. Peer support was central to all participants. Having a shared cultural background was helpful to many through peers, but an important new finding was that the shared experience between peers of being an immigrant and/or refugee in a new place was also a strong source of social support. In addition to family and peer support, professionals were important to former URM as well.

Professional supports

This section was by far the most widely discussed mechanism for overcoming challenges and barriers to success. Former URM generally identified professional sources of social support in four categories: social workers, program and agency services, foster and group homes, and educational and religious professionals.

For most former URM, their social worker was an important source of support. As one explained, “I got to [the city in the U.S.], still scared, and I saw my social worker there with a sign with my name” (5b-50). This was true for most—their social worker was the first person they saw who would be a consistent part of their lives over several years. Many continue to maintain a relationship with their social workers: “I appreciate the agency. I developed a good relationship with my social worker and still keep in touch with her” (5b-686). Someone else stated that “the agency helped me out a lot though when I first came. I still keep in touch with one of the social workers there and she helps when she can” (5b-328). Another former URM stated “I always listened to my social worker, even now. My mentor was helpful too; he ended up being the best man in my wedding” (5b-412). Many former URM already had established some goals they wanted to accomplish while in the U.S. Many shared similar attitudes as in the
following: “This goal was supported by [the program]. My social worker would always talk about my goals with me. They never had to push me, because I had the same goals, but they would talk about it and support me” (5b, 8a-241). Social workers played an important role as a source of support to most former URMs. Social workers directed services to former URMs through the agency and program.

Program and agency services were identified by nearly all former URMs as an important source of support. One former URM put it this way:

The URM program is not going to be there for you forever, so you have to get everything you can out of it so you can make it on your own. If you were to come here with no URM program, you would struggle, you would have no English, no place to live, no help, no school, no friends. No matter how friendly you are, you will not find a friend in one day who can take you to the doctor, or help you find a place to live or get into school. Just having a place to stay, a lot comes with a place to live. (5b-103)

Nearly all study participants explained that the program that provided services for them upon their arrival into the U.S. was a positive source of support in teaching independent living skills and helping to develop life goals. One person put it this way: “It was good to have the URM program for support in giving me a place to live, help with paperwork for school, and making doctor’s appointments, stuff like that” (5b-59). Another said “I learned independent living skills, got a driver license, learned how to write a check and manage my money. If people leave that program messed up, it’s their own problem” (5b, 6a-449). For another former URM “The program helped pay the rent and with school and things. Learning to drive was a difficult transition, it was frightening experience and
I was scared. Now I can drive, cook, clean, everything” (5b, 6c-527). One person made the following statement:

When I came to the U.S., the program helped a lot—they gave us everything - clothes to wear, food to eat, a place to live, medical benefits. If you need to go to the hospital, they take you. They help you get into school and help with transportation. (5b-617)

For nearly all former URMs interviewed, the program was viewed as a source of support related to developing independent living skills.

Others also saw the program as a source of support for setting and working toward goals. “In the program, they help you figure out goals then help you achieve your goals. As a teenager, you are not thinking the same as when you’re 30—I still think about some of those goals” (5b-394). One person said that “learning to set and achieve goals was a big help” (5b, 6c-461); and also stated that “It was a great program, I was able to learn English and get an education. Now I’m a nursing assistant. That was a big thing for us, to get an education and a better job” (3b, 5b-458). One former URM spoke for many who shared similar advice to the following: “Use the help of the agency and the government while it’s there” (5b, 11-375). Sources of social support include social workers and the program through which they serve former URMs; another way these services reach the target population is through foster and group home placements.

Although some examples of challenges stem from foster and group home placements, for most, they serve as a source of social support as described by this former URM:
The most helpful thing in the U.S. was my foster family. When I first came I lived with my 21-year-old brother and 17-year-old sister. My sister went to the church and asked if I could live somewhere else since my brother couldn’t take care of me—he was still trying to get used to it himself so I was a burden on him. I was taking English classes from this lady, and since her kids were off in college, she said I could live with her. I went through [the agency] and she was my foster mom. They were wonderful parents, I still call them ‘mom’ and ‘dad’ and I live with them now. (5b-908)

On the other hand, another URM pointed out that there were also difficulties with placements:

Every step has been different. In the group home, we had rules, but we also had food, guidance and support. Some of the rules were hard, like having to go when they said to go, or changing rooms when they said, sometimes in the middle of the night. Some things about the group home are crazy, but most of it is good. (5b, 7b-115)

And for some, difficulties gave way to positive support systems: “They gave me a little money in my pocket, helped by giving me a foster home. The foster home was difficult at first; I didn’t speak any English, but after a while, I loved them like my own family” (5b-344). Former URMs were aware of the differences between placements, as in this statement: “I teased my friend who still keeps up with his foster family. I say ‘hey man, you got adopted’ but he says ‘no man, I’m still me’” (5b, 8a-734), but almost all had some positive things to say about where they were placed. For some, they found that the structure provided was a source of support:
Once, my foster parents and I had a disagreement—I was a teenager and got grounded, and teenagers don’t like that restriction, so my social worker came and helped us sort it out. I saw my social worker from time to time, but I didn’t ever need counseling, so that wasn’t a big focus or a need. (5b-921)

For others, the autonomy in their placement was more helpful: “I stayed in a group home, then a foster home. I had no problems because my foster parents treated me like an adult. My social worker, house parents, foster parents—everyone was very helpful” (5b-645).

And for some, mentorship was important:

In the U.S. it is much easier because I had foster parents that helped me a lot; they still help me, no matter what mistakes I make. They give advice, help me with school, taught me how to read and write, helped me get more opportunities and get involved in different activities. They pray for me. They pray with me. (5b,c-596)

While for others, their placements were a source of skill development:

Most everything I learned about culture in America came from my foster parents. I went to the elementary school when I was 11 and the kids were mostly well behaved, so I had a great life. If I had gone somewhere else to live, it would have turned out differently, but I had a great upbringing. (5b-916)

Foster and group home experiences varied widely among former URMs, but nearly all were described as sources of social support. Other forms of professional social support came through educational and religious sources.
Educational and religious professionals often interacted with former URMs on a first hand basis. For some, education was a dream and an important goal, but they needed a supportive environment and professionals to realize that goal:

It took me a while to figure out how to be a student. My family had no clue about education. I’m the first ever in my family to read or write. I didn’t take the journey on purpose—it was because of circumstances. (3a, 5b-821)

Teachers were frequently mentioned as long-term sources of support; for example: “I studied an ESL class for one year and passed. The teacher that helped me in high school and I still keep in touch and they are a great help to me” (5b-560). In another’s experience, this former URM credits a teacher in large part for his long-term success:

I was commuting for about two weeks back to the same school where I had gone. My French teacher thought there was something wrong, so talked to me one day. She talked with my social worker, and eventually took me in so I could finish school there. I was on the soccer team and had close friends there, so I didn’t want to make that transition again. The soccer team was important to me. I ended up finishing high school early and going to the university where I eventually graduated with a double major in economics and international relations. (5b-232)

University professionals were also cited as a source of professional support with long-term effects:

I had a friend at [the university] who asked my major. I was pretending to be a student for two years, then this lady helped me get my schedule together so I was taking classes other than ESL ones. I only had 15 credits and didn’t know there
was more to it than that. My advisor sat down every day and helped me choose my major. I speak Arabic, so I choose to study homeland security to defend America. (5b-815)

Teachers, coaches, college advisors, and other educational professionals were identified as important sources of social support by many former URMs. Another source of social support was churches.

Religious and faith-based organizations frequently provide service and support to former URMs. This support is differentiated from spiritual support, which is discussed in the following section. One person reported that they did not come through the same federally sponsored program as most of the other former URMs. This person said “I came through a religious organization to the U.S., but they weren’t responsible for me. Once I got here, a church sponsored me and took care of me” (5b-744), a different church than the religious organization they mentioned first. They explained further about how the latter church mentioned provided support:

I hooked up with the UN and did my interviews and came to the U.S. with four others at the same time. For more than six months, they paid our rent, bought our clothes, took us to Kings Dominion, visited historical sites—all done by the church members. They helped us find jobs, learn English at the community center. (5b-749)

A few URMs shared similar experiences with churches providing social support and sponsoring events, as in the following: “In [this city], there was a church, but I am not really religious. I go when they have an event” (5b-703). Though only a few former URMs mentioned religious organizations as important sources of social support, for those
few, the following statement captures their experiences: “It was kind of difficult, but the church was what helped me” (5b-774). For some, spirituality was identified as an important source of social support.

**Spiritual supports**

Social support comes in the form of peers, family, social workers, foster parents, teachers, and for some, spirituality. Though only a few former URMs mentioned spirituality specifically, many made passing mention of attending religious organizations and finding support therein. For one former URM in particular, “my number one support is God” (5c-496). Another person talked about support through prayer:

> In the U.S. it is much easier because I had foster parents that helped me a lot, they still help me, no matter what mistakes I make. They give advice, help me with school, taught me how to read and write, helped me get more opportunities and get involved in different activities. They pray for me. They pray with me. (5b,c-596)

One former URM articulated an attitude that several people mentioned in passing during the interviews. The feeling of being ‘chosen by God’ was not explored in-depth during these interviews; however, former URMs may have more to say about this source of support.

Social supports that former URMs identified were organized according to peer and family, professional, and spiritual sources. Though each former URM faced unique challenges and barriers, the sources of social support that were most useful clustered around these subcategories. Each of these subcategories contains key properties and
dimensions that serve as the mechanisms for overcoming challenges and barriers to success.

**Education**

*Pre-migration perspective*

Former URMs were eager to share their stories about how education has helped them to overcome challenges and barriers. All interviewees mentioned that education was important, and for most, this was an attitude that they held prior to coming to the U.S. One person said “I was like a senior in high school when I was in the camp. My main goal was to graduate from high school” (3a-62). This sentiment was common personally but also known to be important to former URMs that some of them knew: “Education was a big deal. Most wanted to come for school” (3a-162). Although most referred generally to ‘education’, many of those interviewed spoke specifically about their attitude toward higher education as well; for example: “I always knew I would go to college” (3a-247), and “in the camp, the road stopped at high school. Here, the road is endless” (3a,b-256). Attitudes toward education clearly originated prior to emigrating to the U.S.

The value placed on education was instilled at an early age by influential people in their lives. For another person, it was parents who could not care for them: “In my country, my parents did the best they could, but couldn’t go any further in helping me, so they taught me that education should be my number one priority” (3a, 8a-485). Another person articulated it this way:

School was so important to everyone in the camp. It didn’t matter if you were five or 30, everyone would get as much education as they could. When I was
young, I remember having people in my class there were twice my age, but we all had the same goal: to improve life. (3a-177)

Education was described as a community-wide goal that most everyone shared. An attitude that defined education as an empowering tool was shared widely in the communities where many of the former URMs were raised. One participant described it this way:

Since I can remember, education was always important. The civil war in Sudan occurred because when one power left, most of the government positions were taken by educated people in the north, while the less educated people in the south were powerless. We always knew education was the key. We talked about it while we played games and we talked about it while we played soccer. We left Sudan because of politics; it was our daily lives at the time. I knew I had to learn new skills to improve the future of Sudan. (3a, 6b-170)

As URMs left that environment, they noticed some differences: “Going to school was very exciting when I came to the U.S. In my country, the class rooms were very small with lots of people” (3a-631). All who were interviewed discussed education as one of the central motives for coming to the U.S. Most discussed the source of that motivation for education as coming from various experiences in their countries of origin. As they entered the U.S., attitudes and beliefs about education were put to the test.

Post-migration perspective

In the face of many challenges and barriers, former URMs identified education as a central motive for coming to the U.S. and as a tool of empowerment. For some, maintaining their motivation to get an education was met with unexpected challenges.
When kids teased me, I would think ‘you are better than this’. I kept to myself and did not argue, and followed the rules at home and at school. I restrained myself in my foster home because I wanted to finish high school. I had a chance to leave during my junior year, but I decided to stay, even though the family was not good, in order to finish high school there. (3b, 7b-211)

The commitment demonstrated by this person was not the only example of overcoming challenges to acquire an education. Another former URM stated:

In Ethiopia, I was doing good in school, and I loved to play basketball. I knew that if I did well in school, the UN would pay for me to go to college, so I was a good student. When I came here, I felt I had to fight hard to get my diploma. I was very afraid that I would have to start all over, that was one of my main fears, that I would not be able to complete high school and go to college because I would have to start over. They did put me in the 9th grade at first, but I took many many tests and worked hard, and now I’m in college. (1b, 3b-75)

Though getting an education sometimes presented challenges, most former URMs saw education as empowering.

Though education was important to these former URMs from before their time in the U.S., they were able to articulate why they persevered despite many difficulties they encountered: “In high school, I was thinking I would get an education, a job, wife, kids, but without an education, you have to work 24/7 to survive and have no time for life” (3b, 7c-372); “we would work all day then go take classes at night” (3b-754).

From this perspective, education was viewed as a tool to improve individual well-being, apparently shared by many. “We all had this in our minds. ‘We’ll finish high school and
then be on our own.’ It was motivating” (3b-217). For another: “Here in the U.S., it’s never too late to get an education. If you have a job, that’s good. But if you want a better job, you need more education” (3b-397). Others had personal experience with this principle: “… I was able to learn English and get an education. Now I’m a nursing assistant. That was a big thing for us, to get an education and a better job” (3b, 5b-458). Using that education to improve life was noted by each participants. One person explained: “In the U.S., they give you more opportunity. In my home country, you may finish school, but you still can’t find a job that pays enough to live, if you can find a job at all” (3b, 6a-463). In spite of some challenges, former URMs continued to value of education after their resettlement in the U.S.

Former URMs showed their commitment toward education; all of the interviewees had finished high school, and most had attended some college. Several talked about future educational goals. One person said “I’m working very hard to save for school and will study radiology this fall” (3b-563); another said “I want to do more school, I miss it, but I’ll be the old guy on campus” (3b-716). For one person, immigration status forced him to postpone his educational goals, but he maintains that “I want to get my green card so I can study in a university and get my degree” (3b-333). Those interviewed showed a continued commitment to education in the advice they would give to other URMs:

Here in the U.S. there are opportunities and jobs, a chance for a free education. At home in Africa, there are some schools but you have to pay and they are expensive. Any of us who come here to the U.S., I mean, if you get the opportunity for education, you need to take advantage of it. (3b-579)
Others shared similar ideas: “Focusing on school and their education is the most important advice I could give” (3b, 8a, 11-429); and “what helped the most? I think going to school was the most helpful” (3b-342). Even if educational goals were not met by some former URMs, they still talked about its value:

If you come over here, go to school, don’t get in trouble; follow the rules. Look at Sudan—it’s not well educated. Education is the key. People are discouraged, like how I feel discouraged now and don’t want to go back to school. (3b, 11-658)

Former URMs engaged in education in spite of challenges. Most also expressed their continued focus on education, and encouraged others to take the same path that they had taken.

For these former URMs, education was defined as a mechanism for overcoming challenges. The difficulties they faced in pursuing their educational goals varied, as did the level of education that each completed to date, but their view of education as an empowerment tool was consistent.

**The Meaning of Success**

Former URMs were asked to explain their understanding of the term *success*. All of those interviewed were able to respond and the data gathered were organized into categories, subcategories, and properties and dimensions according to the research method. Although former URMs varied across many factors (personal experiences, country of origin, age at time of displacement, resettlement setting, education, and many more), their responses were surprisingly consistent and are represented in the following four subcategories: (a) basic needs met; (b) autonomy; (c) future orientation; and (d) giving back. Not every person interviewed mentioned every single piece of this category,
but more consistency and saturation of responses occurred in this section than any other. For most, the primary indicator of success was having their basic needs met.

**Basic needs met**

As former URMs talked about their personal experiences with forced migration, resettlement, and independent living, the issue of having their basic needs met entered the conversation consistently. This was particularly true when they talked about the lack of safety and security, food and shelter, and education that they experienced prior to resettlement. Predictably, the lack of such basic needs during their younger years left an impression.

Safety and security were brought up on two levels: physical and emotional. Physical safety and security issues were experienced by everyone that was interviewed. One former URM described his experience in the following way:

> In Egypt, there was no success—the government and people didn’t provide anything. They don’t treat you like a human. They were rude and mean—it was hard. You could die anytime and no one would notice. (6a, 7a-756)

As was discussed in previous sections, this type of experience was not uncommon. For others, these experiences seemed to shape their ideas of success in terms of basic safety:

> For me, success is to have an education and a good job so you don’t have all the stress that comes with not having those things. You should be happy with life, its short. Before I came to the U.S., in my home country, you couldn’t go out and play. Here, you can work, study, buy things that you need and want. (6a,c-362)

Having physical and emotional safety apparently allows for ones attention to be focused on other needs and measures of success. Having the security of a home provided this
emotional security for one person: “I love to be home and have peace in my life” (6a-427). Another person put it this way: “Success is when you’re comfortable and safe and can think ‘what’s next’” (6a,c-760). Having safety and security was a basic measure of success, and allowed for attention to be placed on other priorities.

Survival needs, such as food, shelter, clothing, employment, and healthcare, were part of being successful for former URM. “We bought a house. Thank god we are doing good” (6a-418). According to another person:

For me, success is having a car, an apartment, food, things for basic living. You have to have a job to get those things, and you have to go to school to get a job to pay for gas, car insurance, rent. With these things, you’re not in a bad situation.

(6a-71)

In order to meet these basic needs, new skills were needed: “I learned independent living skills, got a driver license, learned how to write a check and manage my money” (5b, 6a-449). They go on to say “if we hadn’t learned how to manage money, we wouldn’t have been successful. Success is learning those basic life skills” (6a-469). Gaining the skills to meet their basic survival needs was a central theme in how former URM define success. For many, this came through peer and professional support and education.

Education was discussed in two somewhat distinct ways by former URM. On the one hand, as described earlier, education was a tool to overcome various challenges that they faced during resettlement and in life. “As for success, its education and being around people you love. It’s the feeling of being blessed. When you have an education, you have opportunities for jobs and more options about what you want to do” (6c-589). Education is perceived to increase opportunities in their country of origin: “For me,
success was to get an education and eventually go back to Sudan” (6b-239). “In my home country, you may finish school, but you still can’t find a job that pays enough to live, if you can find a job at all” (3b, 6a-463). On the other hand, education seemed to have inherent value; as one person put it, “even if I didn’t get a job, I just need the degree, it will make me feel good” (3b, 6c-90). From another: “I want to get a degree, that’s all” (3b, 6c-120). Acquiring an education was the goal—the measure of success—in and of itself on one level. For one person, the individual motivation for education was important:

> When we first came, we had high expectations—that we would be taken care of (smile). They said that we would go to school, graduate, go to college, pick a career, but it’s really up to the person how much success they have. It’s an individual choice. After five or six years, it gets much harder. (6a, 7c-640)

For another:

> To me, success means two things, education and helping others. My sister is the main reason we came to the US, and she had a big focus on education. She died in 2009 from breast cancer, so her education was cut short. Part of the reason I’m finishing my education is because it was a dream of hers. (3b, 6b-926)

For former URM’s, education is both a mechanism for overcoming challenges and barriers, and a measure of successful outcomes.

Another emergent theme associated with having basic needs met was only mentioned by a few former URM’s, but may be an important finding all the same. One person said “success is also about appreciating what you have, which is hard to do if you’ve never gone without” (6a-931).
The insight shared by this former URM seems to be the reason why having one’s basic needs met emerged as a common theme—they appreciate something they have gone without. Engaging with U.S. culture did not necessarily change their perspective. “Success, I think it’s universal, like the American dream, to have all your needs met. In America, success is how many cars you have, I haven’t bought into that because of where I come from” (6a, 8a-692). Another person recognized the difference between their view and their perception of U.S. attitudes when they said “in the U.S., success is about who you know and the job you have” (5a,b, 6a-556). The experiences former URMs had prior to resettlement in the U.S. shaped their perspective on what success means in lasting ways. In addition to having the skills to meet their basic needs, autonomy and self-determination were important indicators of success.

**Autonomy and future orientation**

Success for former URMs was described in several different ways within this subcategory, but was consistent along the themes of autonomy or self-determination and an orientation toward the future. This subcategory relates closely to having basic needs met at the level of property and dimension. For instance, having food and a home was mentioned under basic survival needs, but those independent living skills were also a way for former URMs to lay hold of more personal responsibility and choice. Likewise, education was an important metric of success as a basic need, but is closely related to setting and achieving of goals, an important property of keeping focus on the future.

Autonomy and self-determination were common themes that former URMs brought up when asked about the meaning of success, though those specific words are an abstraction of the themes. Interviewees spoke about goals, personal responsibility, and
independence. One person said “for me, success is also being responsible” (6c-258). For another, “success is also a mindset of trying to achieve a goal, even if you fail, just trying is success” (6c-934), and then said “do the best you can and go for your goals” (6c-965). The freedom to make and pursue their own goals, even if achieving the goal was not possible, constituted success. This realization came at different times for different former URMs. For one, it was when he was relatively young compared to other former URMs:

When I first came to the U.S. I was 12. If you had asked me when I first arrived, I would have taken a one way ticket back. But then as I got older and more mature, I realized that I would be grown no matter where I lived, and as a man, I had to do things for myself. (2, 4, 6c-730)

Regardless of the age former URMs entered the U.S., having the opportunity to make choices for themselves was an important aspect of experiencing success. For one former URM success involves:

The things that make me happy are doing the things I want to do, going where I want to go and where I feel like, making my own decisions. These choices are not risky ones. I can stay at home if I want to, I can go to work and stay if I want to, I can go to school and stay if I want to. All these are safe choices. (6c-110)

Having choices, autonomy, and self-determination is a successful outcome for former URMs. In addition to this freedom to choose, success also has something to do with maintaining a long-term perspective of the future.

Having a future orientation was described as a part of what success is in this way: “Success is when you’re comfortable and safe and can think ‘what’s next?’” (6a,c-760). Former URMs said it in many different ways: “One day I will have my own business”
“learning to set and achieve goals was a big help” (5b, 6c-461). Looking to the past often gave them a better perspective of the future. One person explained it poignantly:

Being successful in my language means heritage. You cannot be successful without your parents. You must do better than your dad ‘Yin Kor ba Wur Wor’.

There are lots of differences here from my country, but my goals are the same. I haven’t changed. I want to be more than my dad—he never ran from his duty.

He had two wives, it was his role, but he was not educated. (6c, 8a-531)

Because former URMs had gone through very challenging times during their lives, keeping their goals in perspective and constantly maintaining an orientation toward the future was a measure of success. For almost all of those interviewed, part of that future orientation had to do with giving back to their local and global communities.

**Giving back**

*Out of responsibility*

Giving back was a common theme among former URMs. The sense of responsibility to give back ranged from wanting to help because they were helped, to wanting to help to improve the future of their country. One person said “I’m the guy who is always willing to help because I was helped” (6b-443). To another, the thought was what counted: “I like the program and the agency. If I was rich, I would try to repay them for the many ways they helped me” (6b-339). And “I love to be generous. I love to give and help others. If god blesses you, you can bless others. That helps me not worry so much about money all of the time” (6b-402). For some, the responsibility was born
out of gratitude: “I’m so grateful for the help I got from the program. I am always looking for opportunities to give back” (5b, 6b-498). Again:

I feel like I have a responsibility to give back in any way I can. I want to give back to the agency, to my foster family—since I got a lot of help from them, I feel the need to help as much as I can. (6b-384)

While for others, their altruism born out of sympathy and shared experience: “came in 1999, so I was here before the lost boys, so I helped to establish an organization that would help them. I opened the church so they could talk and connect” (6b-831).

Although this quotation fits elsewhere in the narrative as well, it illustrates the range of giving back and motivation to do so:

Since I can remember, education was always important. The civil war in Sudan occurred because when one power left, most of the government positions were taken by educated people in the north, while the less educated people in the south were powerless. We always knew education was the key. We talked about it while were playing games and we talked about it while we played soccer. We left Sudan because of politics; it was our daily lives at the time. I knew I had to learn new skills to improve the future of Sudan. (3a, 6b-170)

Others felt a sense of responsibility through family ties: “My brother was working to send money back home at the time, and I knew I would do that too” (6b-249), and “I sent money to my brother in my home country so he could study, and he is now a mechanical engineer” (6b-537). The feelings of wanting to give back as a measure of success were also expressed in more general terms: “To succeed in school and be a good family man and to be able to help others” (3b, 6b-542). Giving back out of responsibility was in
important metric of success to many, but additionally, giving back as a means of alleviating human suffering was also the metric of success.

\textit{To alleviate human suffering}

This measure of success can best be illustrated by the following statement made by one former URM: “I have learned to give to the world I want to live in, not the world I do live in” (3b, 6b.c-853). The ways they help vary:

I have been able to manage everything I wanted to do in life. My focus now is on helping other people. I was helped by the doctor when I got bit by the snake, and my focus is to see how I can help others. A lot of people call me and ask for help, people I don’t even know, but they hear about me from one place or another. For some, I feel like I can help. You may not be able to help everyone, but I help those who I can help. Everything is in your heart. You can give advice, but if someone doesn’t have the answers in their heart, it will be tough. It is tough anyway. (6b-92)

Even when they were struggling themselves, helping others was a way to be successful:

I started the community college. While I was there, I collected school supplies and backpacks, raised money and I took them to students in the camp where I grew up. It was hard to go back—people who stay have no family or friends to send money back to them. (6b, 8a-519)

The sense that giving back to alleviate human suffering drove several former URMs to center their career goals on this metric: “Maybe I’ll get my dream job to be an international lawyer and work for with the UN” (6b-122).
For many, these were not idle words. Tremendous efforts had been made to accomplish this measure of success: “Success to me, I graduated in 2008 and went back to the community to start a Dinka church” (6b-828), and “I went back to Sudan in 2007 and found the same problems. I wanted to set up a school and show my experience as an example” (6b-839). He continued:

We are working to set up schools in Sudan. What America gave me was a desire and tools to give my success to others. “You can’t build a house and live in it alone” it is not about “me” it is about “us”. The system extends to all, in Sudan; the authority can oppress the minority. The U.S. cares about humanity and give to people they don’t even know. (6b-848)

This giving was not out of their surplus, but from their internal drive to succeed:

I don’t celebrate my birthday—I go to Haiti every year around my birthday and take care of disabled kids and build houses. That’s success to me: trying to accomplish something on behalf of another person. (6b-937)

Success through giving to alleviate human suffering seems to come from having suffered themselves. This is a powerful and personal measure of success shared by many of the former URMs who participated in this study.

Advice to the Next URMs

Former URMs were asked if they had any advice or wisdom to share with others who would follow behind them in the URM program. These bits of insight come from personal experience. One former URM said the following:

If I gave a piece of advice to a new teen now, I would say, first thing—stay focused on you education. Also, if you don’t respect yourself, no one will respect
you. Next, I’d tell them to listen to their social worker. Be a dependable person.

That will give you peace. (11-423)

They continued: “Respect has to be learned at home then supported at school” (11-441), “if you come out of the program with nothing, that’s your own fault” (11-445), and “a lot of people want to go faster and get money the easy way—Money is good, but it isn’t everything, and you have to get it in the right way” (11-472). For another person, they had learned that being kind helped to develop social support:

Be nice to everyone—it can get you a long way. Attitude, listen before you jump up and say that the other person is wrong. Be friends. Learn to share your problems and let others help. (11-552)

The above advice and wisdom were offered by a few URMs when specifically asked. More indirectly, other findings from this study may have implications of value to current and future URMs, as well as professionals.
Chapter 5:

Discussion and Implications

Discussion of Findings

This research study set out to answer three questions: (a) How do former URMs define success?; (b) How does their perspective on success change over time?; and (c) what strategies are most helpful to achieve success in the U.S.? A thorough review of the literature took place and three theories were identified that had potential to inform this study: Capability Approach (Sen & Nussbaum, 1993), Acculturation Framework (Berry, 1997), and Resilience Across Cultures (2010). By following a Strauss and Corbin (1998) grounded theory research design, 15 former URMs were interviewed through a recruitment strategy that included a local service provider. All of the former URMs were over 21 years of age, and had participated in the federal URM program. Each former URM gave consent to participate in the study and was interviewed for between 45 and 90 minutes, where the person conducting the interviews took field notes, then extended field notes of the discussion. Interviews were not recorded and transcribed, so the first phase of data analysis happened concurrently with data collection. Further analysis took place following Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) methodology of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The results of this process included one pictorial representation of related concepts that emerged, and a narrative about the properties and dimensions of each emergent category. This section includes a discussion about each of the four emergent categories.
Changing perspective over time

In order to answer the research question—how does the perspective of former URM s on success change over time?—they were asked to talk about their personal histories in an open-ended question. The most important finding from the responses, however, shed more light on what the acculturation process was like, and secondarily, how their view of success changed over time. According to Berry’s (1997) Acculturation Framework, “…the focus is on how individuals who have developed in one cultural context manage to adapt to new contexts that result from migration” (p. 6). Acculturation is used to describe the cultural changes that result from these group encounters. For Berry (1997) immigrants decide how committed they are to maintaining their culture of origin and how important it is to maintain relationships within their new society. As former URM s entered the U.S., they had varying levels of commitment to their communities and cultures of origin; therefore, the period described by Berry (1997) as segregated or marginalized acculturation varied in length between individuals. This period was marked by a stronger commitment to cultural maintenance and a limited ability to develop new relationships with their new society. As former URM s entered school and became more familiar with local customs and culture, they tended to enter a phase of assimilation, marked by a decrease in their cultural maintenance and an increased desire to develop relationships with their new society. This is a period known as assimilation. For many of those interviewed, they talked about a renewed interest in cultural maintenance and community of origin, but also an interest in maintaining their
relationships with the resettlement society. According to Berry (1997), this is a period known as integration.

This study uses Berry’s (1997) Acculturation Framework to help understand the process of changing acculturation strategies over time. Just as strategies change over time, the meaning of success can also shift. For many, coming to the U.S. was perceived as a great privilege with tremendous responsibility. They were selected when most everyone else they knew remained amid challenging circumstances in their home countries. Many expressed a desire to resist becoming ‘like’ the people in their new U.S. communities, often having misconceptions about the new culture. During this period, success seemed to focus on maintaining the values and attitudes of their culture of origin. However, the meaning of success apparently changed as they began to speak English, participate in school activities, and describe themselves and their goals in more individualistic terms. As they left school and the program and were responsible to maintain their own social support systems, most seem to revitalize their connections with their culture of origin. They did this through participating in community groups with other refugees, giving service to their cultures and communities of origin, and in many cases, visiting their home country for the first time since they left. Success, then, evolved in association with their ability to integrate their culture of origin with the culture of resettlement.

**Challenges and barriers to success**
Previous research has documented the trauma experienced by unaccompanied adolescents (Ajdukovic & Ajdukovic, 1993; Ehntholt & Yule, 2006). This study illustrates the relationship between trauma and pre-migration challenges and barriers to success. Loss, anxiety over resettlement, and misconceptions about the U.S. were also pre-migration challenges identified in this study. According to Karls and Wandrei (1992), relationships between people and their environments are bi-directional—people influence their environments and environments influence people. This study confirms that pre-migration experiences had an effect on former URMs; however, contrary to many of the current findings that depicted refugee adolescents as at-risk (Bean et al., 2007; Hodes et al., 2008; Rea, 2001; Sourander, 1998), pre-migration challenges often translated into mechanisms for overcoming barriers during later phases of the migration process.

As former URMs began the resettlement process and entered the U.S., further challenges and barriers became evident. Just as Luster (et al., 2009) found, this study confirms that relationship conflicts with both peers and professionals where initially a source of conflict, but were later resolved and transformed into a mechanism for overcoming other challenges and barriers. During the initial resettlement process, former URMs also discussed a lack of meaningful resources, or resources (such as mental health counseling) that were required but not perceived by URMs as helpful. This can be explained by Sen and Nussbaum’s (1993) Capability Approach where even an abundance of resources can leave people without social supports when they are unable to make
meaningful use of those resources due to distinct cultural values. Research conducted by Ellis et al. (2010) found that discrimination was prevalent during early periods of resettlement. Former URMs in this study confirm that finding.

During the post-program phase of resettlement, challenges and barriers to success included legal status, employment and continuing education. Though not experienced by all, a few of the URMs who were interviewed continued to struggle with legal status years after participating in the program. For these individuals, their status was a major theme—a central barrier to success. This study confirms the literature on contrasting views of the legal and psychological perspectives (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2008; Engebritsen, 2003). Particularly for those facing issues of legal status, employment and continuing educational pursuits were related challenges during the post-program phase.

Challenges and barriers to success were discussed by all former URMs, though not every person mentioned every theme. The sub-categories included issues that former URMs faced during pre-migration, process-migration (or program participation), and post-program. Although research in this area tends to have a strong focus on the negative effects of pre-migration trauma, this study found that challenges change over time depending on the phase of the migration process, so research ought to give equal attention to the process and post-program phases as well.

**Mechanisms for overcoming challenges**

In order to answer the research question posed by this study—what strategies are most helpful to achieve success in the U.S.?—former URMs were asked to talk about
ways they overcome challenges. Since the interviews followed a semi-structured interview protocol, much of the discussion that ended up forming this category was not strictly in response to the given interview question, but was organized into subcategories through the various stages of data analysis. This is important because some of the mechanisms for overcoming challenges were portrayed as successful outcomes by former URMs, but actually were means to achieving success. These sub-categories include individual identity development, cultural identity development, coping skills, social supports, and education.

Identity, in the literature, is divided between individual identity (Eide, 2007; Fantino & Cola, 2001; Gibson, 2010; McKinnon, 2008) and cultural or ethnic identity (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003; Gibson, 2001; Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind & Vedder, 2001). This study found that individual identity was often a new concept for former URMs who were interviewed. They were caught between their past self and future self. Reconciling the differences was a process of development and growth that allowed them to overcome the challenges of trauma and loss from their past and meet the new challenges with added personal strength. This confirms Raghallaigh and Gilligan’s (2010) findings that, although URMs are depicted as extremely vulnerable and at-risk, they often have developed powerful resilience to challenges.

Closely related to individual identity development, cultural identity has to do with shared values and beliefs within context. Berry’s (1997) Acculturation Framework helps organize this mechanism for overcoming challenges. According to this framework,
individuals balance cultural maintenance with cultural adaptation. Former URMs in this study identified how both maintaining elements of their cultural identity of origin and adaptation to the culture of resettlement were powerful tools for overcoming challenges. Berry (1997) calls this cultural integration and asserts that it is the healthiest strategy of acculturation. Balancing their culture of origin with their adaptation to a new culture is a mechanism for overcoming challenges, but is not the only coping skill they identified.

Ungar’s (2010) Resilience Across Cultures approach helps shed light onto the relationship between individual and cultural identity development and resilience. He summarizes resilience as “…the capacity of individuals to access resources that enhance their well-being and the capacity of their physical and social ecologies to make those resources available in meaningful ways…” (p. 1). Former URMs talked about their individual capacity in terms of coping skills, and elements of their social ecologies such as social supports, and physical ecologies such as school and education. This study confirms what other research has found (Goodman; 2004; Kline & Mone, 2003): former URMs show great resilience through making use of coping skills. In this study, these coping skills were frequently depicted as an application of something they learned during the pre-migration period. Arguments were solved by remembering that in their culture of origin, older children were responsible for maintaining peace among those younger than themselves, so self-restraint was an important coping skill in the U.S. also. Many former URMs talked about being emotionally strong as a coping skill first learned through hardship and trauma during pre-migration. Other coping skills they identified as coming
from their past included being independent and culturally humble. New coping skills were also developed. They included respecting fear as a motive for overcoming challenges, developing maturity to avoid social conflicts, and acceptance that obstacles to success are universal. These coping strategies reflect the value that Ungar (2010) places on an individual’s capacity to access resources that enhance their well-being.

In addition to an individual’s capacity for coping, Ungar (2010) places significant responsibility on the social and physical environment to provide meaningful resources. This study confirms other research that illustrates the central role of professional relationships (social workers, foster families, group home staff, mentors etc.) on URMs’ success (Kohli, 2006; Luster et al., 2009; Morland, Duncan, Hoebing, Kirschke & Schmidt, 2005; Pine & Drachman, 2005). This study also found that, for some, spirituality was helpful in overcoming challenges, though it did not play a central role as has been shown in other research (Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010). One coping skill identified by both Goodman (2004) and Raghalliagh and Gilligan (2010) was suppressing emotions and seeking distractions, but this was not talked about by anyone in the present study. One element of the social and physical ecology that former URM discussed that is not well developed in the literature is peer and family sources of support (Luster, Qin, Bates, Johnson & Rana, 2008). Many of the former URMs had family members with whom they kept in touch and who even sent money; they were identified as a source of support. Within the program, priority is often focused on placing URMs within culturally similar groups; however, this study begins to demonstrate that it is not the similarity of
culture that enhances peer support, but the similarity of experience with resettlement that is the most important factor. Further research is needed to explore the role of peer support.

Education was a central theme that all former URMs discussed during the interview process in this study. Education was explored on two levels: A mechanism for overcoming challenges, and a metric for measuring success. This study supports Luster’s (et al., 2010) findings that URMs stay focused on getting an education in order to overcome challenges and barriers to success. Former URMs talked about attitudes and goals related to education during pre-migration, and how those attitudes and goals were maintained and transformed throughout program participation and post-program. In this study, education was explained by former URMs as empowering. Lack of education was frequently cited as the reason their various countries of origin were exposed to circumstances that lead to their forced migration. Particularly for those who lived in refugee camps prior to emigrating, education (especially learning English) was promoted as the main reason to come to the U.S. When they arrived in the U.S., education was a central goal set for them by the URM program as well. Perhaps this is the reason that many of those who were interviewed still talked about the role of education in overcoming challenges, even when they had been out of school for several years. It seems that, just as Luster (et al., 2010) found, it is the focus on education that serves as a mechanism for overcoming challenges, and not necessarily what the education provides; however, in defining success, education is described according to the latter.
In summary, the mechanisms for overcoming challenges and barriers to success can be explained by Ungar’s (2010) Resilience Across Cultures framework. Individual and cultural identity development increases the capacity to make use of old and new ways of coping and accessing resources. The social and physical ecology of former URMs—professional, peer and family, spiritual, and educational—must provide resources in meaningful ways in order to promote well-being through resilience. As former URMs build their capacity, and environments increase culturally relevant resources, successful outcomes can be achieved. But what are these outcomes—how is success defined?

**Defining success**

In order to address the research question—how do former URMs define *success*?—they were asked to talk about what it means to them to be successful. What success means to former URMs is an area where scholarly literature does not exist. According to the Capability Approach, Sen and Nussbaum (1993), are critical of the typical measures of success or well-being which include income (access to goods and services) or happiness (desire fulfillment), favoring a more socially just view. Nussbaum (2003) in particular posits some fundamental entitlements that help organize the meaning of success discussed by former URMs. The purpose of this study has been to create a composite representation of these concepts based on the relationship between categories and subcategories that emerged through systematic analysis. The sub-categories that emerged included meeting basic needs, autonomy/self-determination and future orientation, and giving back.
When former URMs were first asked what it meant to be successful, they would often lean back in their chair, look up into the air, and appear to put some thought into their answers. This question came about mid-point through most interviews—after they had already had a chance to reflect on their pre-migration struggles and the challenges they experienced during resettlement—so their first response often focused on what they lacked prior to emigrating. Having the basic needs covered was often the answer. When probed further, safety and security—physical and emotional—ranked high. According to Nussbaum (2003), one of the 10 central human capabilities includes bodily integrity: “Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault…” (p. 41). And also emotional security: “Not having ones emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety” (p. 41) In addition to safety and security, former URMs identified survival needs (food, shelter, clothing, etc.). For Nussbaum (2003), this human capability is life: “Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living” (p. 41).

One of the very next responses was often education; however, in the context of a basic needs being met to represent success, the completion of some predetermined level was where education had value. It was different for most everyone. Just having a college degree meant success for some, while for others, the fact that they had not finished college translated into feeling unsuccessful. For others, continuing their education seemed to translate into a symbol of their commitment to their community of origin. According to Nussbaum (2003), a central human capability is that of senses, imagination,
and thought: "being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and to do these things in a 'truly human' way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education..." (p. 41). Education, along with safety and security and survival needs comprised the subcategory of success through having basic needs met. Typically, that is all former URMs had to say about the meaning of success; however, their responses throughout the interview shed some light on other ways they seem to identify success, and are supported by the Capability Approach.

Autonomy/self-determination along with an orientation toward the future, comprise the next sub-category for former URMs' meaning of success. Success meant having independent living skills, a choice of life paths, social affiliations, the ability to set their own goals, and a hope in the future. Transitioning to adulthood from a child welfare system is well covered in the literature (Avery, 2010; Boshier & Wademan, 2010; Collins, 2001; Keller, Cusick & Courtney, 2007; Scannapieco, Connel-Carrick & Painter, 2007; Stein, 2005); however, research that focuses specifically on URMs aging out of care is sparse. Former URMs in this study focused on how learning basic independent living skills (cooking, cleaning, driving, etc.) gave them autonomy and self-determination. This is associated with Nussbaum’s (2003) “control over one's environment” (p. 42). This study supports other research that recognizes a future orientation as an indicator of successful adjustment (Cohen, 2007). Former URMs also identified setting their own goals, explained by the human capability of practical reason:
“Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life” (p. 41).

Giving back was a common theme to all former URM s who were interviewed. This was not typically given as a specific definition of success, but the shared meaning corresponds to one of Nussbaum’s human capabilities: Affiliation is “…being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings…” (p. 41). Former URM s talked about giving back to the individuals with whom they had meaningful relationships, professionals, the local community, and also to their country and culture of origin. Giving back was described as both a responsibility and as a means to alleviate human suffering. Not only did many talk about giving back, several actively participated in or directed organizations that provided a range of services extending from helping other refugees in their community with settlement and educational issues, to fundraising and returning to their countries of origin to help provide basic humanitarian services. Giving back was identified by former URM s as a measure of success.

Even though little research has been conducted on defining successful outcomes with URM s, Sen and Nussbaum’s (1993) Capability Approach and Nussbaum’s (2003) Central Human Capabilities help to show that former URM s do not necessarily define success or well-being in the traditional western ways of income and happiness. Instead, their ideas about what it means to be successful are more closely associated with a social justice perspective. Success is about having basic needs met, having autonomy and self-
determination to pursue the future of their choosing, and to contribute to their new and old communities.

**Implications**

Limited research has begun to focus on URMs as a unique subsection of forced migrants. The current literature recognizes many risk factors that are relevant to URMs but few studies have expanded our understanding of the unique strengths they possess to overcome challenges. The social work profession in the U.S. is typically responsible for the implementation of practices and policies that have the most meaningful impact on URMs. In spite of this central role in providing services, relatively little research has come from the unique perspective that social work has to offer this population. Implications for research, social work practice and education, and policy are presented in this section.

**Implications for research**

As is frequently the case with qualitative research, more questions were unearthed than were answered. This study was able to begin to answer some important questions that included the following: How do former URMs define *success*?; How does their perspective on *success* change over time?; What strategies are most helpful to achieve *success* in the U.S.? Although this study contains important limitations, the findings are a jumping off point for further research in this area. Three theories were used to help explain these results and, in large measure, to contribute to the development of a theoretical framework for understanding the URM experience from a social work

The implications of this study on research are modest but bring up some important questions. Some of these questions have to do with attitudes related to development: Are attitudes about education, culture of origin, acculturation, history of trauma, etc. affected by developmental stage or age upon arrival? This question arose when analyzing the data in the current study–how do URMs differ according to age upon arrival? The findings of this study tend to demonstrate the positive outcomes of pre-migration trauma, but most of the participants entered the U.S. as older adolescents. More research is needed to explore the differential outcomes of URMs when controlled for age upon arrival if traumatic history is held constant.

A key finding of this study was that peer supports were a mechanism for overcoming challenges and barriers to success. The role of cultural similarity between social supports and URMs is still not well understood, though this study suggests that cultural similarity is less important than the shared experience of resettlement in predicting sources of meaningful peer supports. More research is needed to address these relationships. Additionally, this study identified mechanisms for overcoming challenges and barriers to success, but only identified those tools in broad strokes. Further research is needed to identify specific coping skills. Although this study was informative about
the process and role of culture throughout the migration and resettlement experience, more research is needed to portray the process of how URMs reconcile the past and future self during identity development.

The purpose of this research was to develop a deeper theoretical explanation of how URMs define and work toward success, including the process and structural conditions. Some initial steps were taken in filling these gaps, but these concepts need to be tested with a much larger and more diverse population. As noted in the discussion section, many findings from other research were confirmed by this study as well. Just as this study confirms and extends the larger body of research on URMs, future studies ought to test the validity and reliability of this study. Although future research should strive to gain greater access to larger populations through gatekeepers, bottom up research strategies may also prove valuable in maintaining a pragmatic research agenda that will translate to real improvements in URM well-being through additional policy and practice implications. The primary implication for research that came out of this study is that future research ought to consider both the person and the environment, which relates closely to implications for social work practice and education.

**Implications for social work practice and education**

Social work professionals who provide services to URMs have been largely left without empirical goalposts to guide their practice. This study contains four important implications for social work practice and one for social work education. For social work practice, this study offers these insights: (a) This is a social justice issue; (b)
Acculturation strategies vary not only with each individual, but also according to resettlement phase and are impacted by professional and placement pressure focused on assimilation; (c) Mechanisms for overcoming challenges and barriers are a combination of individual capacity and social ecology; and (d) Measures of success from the perspective of URMs may differ greatly from program measures of success. Implications for social work education relate to the importance of training future social workers about the differences between immigrant and refugee populations.

Just as the participants in this study indicated that this is a social justice issue, the profession of social work must recognize the social justice implications as they encounter the basic human rights of URMs. Those who enter the URM program have been deprived of basic human rights, often for years. The measure of success should not simply focus on having an education and a job; social justice requires that measures of success include the basic human capabilities outlined in the discussion section of this dissertation. That means providing an environment where meaningful resources are offered in culturally relevant ways.

Acculturation strategies change over time. Frequently, social work professionals are involved with URMs only until they become ineligible for services. It is at this point—as URMs leave the program with all of its benefits and social supports—that a renewed interest in their community and cultures of origin emerges. Many URMs describe this as a challenging period. Perhaps social work professionals could do more to maintain the cultural connections throughout the period of program participation so that
those support systems are already in place as URMs age out of the program. Professionals may also help prepare foster parents and newly entering URMs for this potential experience. While social workers cannot possibly become experts on the cultures of origin of every URM, greater understanding of the complexity of culture will help them be better prepared for this work. Although cultural competence is a commonly accepted term, social work practitioners may find cross-cultural efficacy (Núñez, 2000) a more appropriate approach when working with such a variety of distinct cultures.

Mechanisms for overcoming challenges and barriers contain both internal and environmental tools. Social work professionals ought to continue to make connections between URMs and resources in the environment. However, an implication for social work practice is to maintain a strengths-based approach in helping to empower and build URMs’ capacity to access meaningful and culturally relevant resources within their social and physical ecologies. Simply offering (or requiring) mental health services may not translate into a meaningful resource without first building URMs’ capacity to make such services useful. Another potentially useful implication is that URMs seem to come with many potent coping skills that helped them survive trauma and loss prior to resettlement; rather than encourage URMs to forget the past and focus on the future, social work professionals ought to (and in many cases already do) encourage URMs to explore and make use of those skills. In some cases, these skills are devalued, misunderstood and even pathologized at times by helping professionals and community members. For many social workers, these implications are simply reminders of the values and ethics that are
already in place; for others this may be an important new lens through which to view
URMs.

Measures of success, according to this study, include having basic needs met
(including education), autonomy/self-determination and future orientation, and giving
back. Some of the conventional measures of success include completion of education,
employment, and independent living; however, this study clarifies and expands these
measures. For social work practice, one important implication is the expansion of
‘independent living’ into a broader concept of autonomy and self-determination. Not only
do URMs consider living independently a measure of success, but also, social work
practitioners ought to ask whether they are given the resources and capacity to choose
between various life paths. Are their goals assigned to them by the program, or do they
have real input into developing a future orientation and hope? Are their efforts supported
when they want to contribute to their community of resettlement as well as their
community and culture of origin? These questions could help guide social work practice
in supporting a broader definition of what success means and how it is measured.

Another measure of success was a desire to give back to their communities here in
the U.S., as well as those communities of origin. This study shows that URMs pass
through a period where most social forces pressure them to assimilate. Following this
assimilation period, URMs show an interest in helping their communities of origin.
Social work practitioners should work to support the ongoing maintenance of these
connections between all URMs who show an interest in their heritage and their communities and cultures of origin.

For social work education, the most important implication is that the experience of refugees can be very different from that of other immigrant populations, however, the two are frequently taught without understanding and acknowledging this important distinction. Students are also exposed to education related to cultural competence, humility or cross-cultural efficacy; these concepts are particularly vital to this population and underscore the importance of that curriculum. Social work education also trains future social workers to view the client within the broader context of their environment. This study demonstrates the continued need to emphasize the combination of individual and environmental relationships. Future practitioners need to understand their potential to impact a teen refugee’s environment; such impact can be the source for culturally relevant resources or social supports. In summary, this study serves as a reminder to social work practitioners and educators of the importance of client centered services, strengths, and a person-in-environment perspective.

**Implications for policy**

As more research expands this area of inquiry, it will have important implications on policy. Within the advocacy arena, the legal system has a long way to go in treating adolescents differently from adults related to immigrant and refugee populations. This research suggests that some URMs still struggle with citizenship years after they were invited to the U.S. The road to citizenship is too often overcomplicated and some people
remain underrepresented without the means to provide adequate legal counsel on their own. This research may be helpful in the hands of existing advocacy groups as a means to inform them of the continued challenges faced by URMs. At the macro level, forced migration is always going to exist. Resettling forced migrants into the U.S. cannot be the primary reaction to this global issue, however, the U.S. also should be among the most prominent and outspoken defenders of human rights violations. As a matter of policy, the U.S. currently accepts URMs who will likely be successful. This research confirms that this sample population meets the traditional measures of success; however, these URMs are not the most vulnerable. Perhaps the U.S. ought to accept equal numbers of those likely to succeed balanced with those who are most vulnerable and in need of services. Additionally, at the agency level, this research may be helpful in providing goals toward establishing best possible practices, particularly around foster-care parent training policies.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the findings and implications of this study are drawn from the data collected from former URMs. Although 15 participants is a small sample size, the categories that emerged around the central theme of defining *success* tell a compelling story: resettlement is an acculturation process, challenges and barriers are often consistent, mechanisms for overcoming challenges and barriers are both internal and environmental, and success is viewed in terms of basic human rights. The field of social work is well positioned to help meet the research, practice and policy needs of this
population. A continued commitment by the social work professionals is needed in each of these areas. As social workers, we have a responsibility to support URMs in their pursuit of success, extending our influence to the lives they will touch as they learn to navigate in a new world and bridge the gap to their old one.
References


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