

Handbook of Research on Communication Strategies for Taboo Topics

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Chapter 6

Race and Cultural Taboo: Refugee Disaster Vulnerability and Resilience

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the refugee community's perceptions of disasters and crises and how the perceptions affect refugee populations' crisis communication and their emergency preparedness and response. Through in-depth interviews with refugees in the United States, this research identifies the institutional, social, and individual dimensions regarding refugees' crisis communication and disaster preparedness. It aims to re-conceptualize the refugee identity and their social vulnerability and discuss the effective way to integrate cultural understanding and dimension into crisis communication and disaster reduction.

INTRODUCTION

In the field of emergency management and crisis communication, disaster preparedness has been a critical component. Multi-hazard Mitigation Council estimated that six dollars are saved in disaster repairs for every dollar spent on prevention and mitigation (Gall & Friedland, 2020). In this research, disasters include weather-related disasters such as tornados, flooding, and other types of disasters, including the current pandemic COVID-19. Disasters of various types and complexities demand that preparedness professionals reach out to all citizens. The Federal Emergency Management Agency conducts annual national household surveys to track progress in disaster preparedness for individuals and communities. However, immigrants and refugees are typically thought of as being more vulnerable to disasters. By definition, a refugee is “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a

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particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHCR, 2010, p.3). Because of the cultural and language barriers, refugee communities may be treated as social outcasts and hard to reach for disaster planners, managers, and responders (Warner & Engel, 2014). Also, due to the language barriers and limited access to information technology, there is still a significant gap in understanding the refugee populations’ crisis communication, risk perception, and disaster preparedness at the local level. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) claimed that the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of resettled refugees remains unknown, and it is imperative to meet refugees’ healthcare and everyday needs (CDC, 2020).

Within a specific community, cultural values, norms, and taboos influence and shape community practices, resources, and interactions, selecting, rearranging, or rejecting different types of information. A community that copes with disasters and crises depends on cultural understandings, community structure, and economic interests. Beliefs, persuasions, customs, norms, or taboos might prevent people from cooperating in actions that seem beneficial from an outsider’s view during natural disasters or public health crises (World Disasters Report, 2014). For instance, during a public health crisis, refugee populations’ interpretation of illness and well-being might differ from biomedical explanations. The lack of understanding of the cultural differences might lead to the vulnerable or marginalized groups missing out on emergency preparedness planning and response assistance.

Also, refugee identity has been a worldwide race taboo. In Europe, the refugee crisis is associated with social turbulence. In 2015, Europe saw a sharp rise in the number of refugees from war-affected countries. Media portrayed refugees as invaders and threats to the host countries’ physical, economic, and cultural well-being (Krzyżanowski et al., 2018; Zunes, 2017). Also, the word “refugee” has been a controversy that emerged in the U.S. public sphere. Refugees were described as homeless, aimless, with little material possessions. The term “refugee” is directly related to a sense of vulnerability and powerlessness that contradicted the value of self-sufficiency and prosperity of the United States (Masquelier, 2006). They are always viewed as others in the host country. Thus, it is vital to understand how race and cultural taboos are perceived and communicated and impact crisis communication and disaster preparedness. The purposes of this research are: (1) to understand the risk perception and the culturally specific needs of refugee communities in response to disaster threats; (2) to understand their survival networks and the associated cultures among themselves; (3) to provide and improve the future crisis communication and emergency management policy-making; (4) to enrich the academic literature on social vulnerability and community resilience in crisis communication and emergency management research.

BACKGROUND

Literature has shown that people are disproportionately impacted by natural and human-made disasters (Donner & Rodríguez, 2008; Gaillard, 2010; Hansson et al., 2020). Generally speaking, the social vulnerability paradigm examines how people are differently vulnerable, how the vulnerability is related to complex systems of stratification, the unique coping capacities of people within communities, and how the unequal social, economic, and political relations influence, create, worsen, or potentially reduce hazards and vulnerabilities (Fordham et al., 2013;). Numerous empirical studies have reported evidence of race, age, and gender discrimination, and differentiation in the effects of disasters throughout all phases of disasters (Aldrich, 2012; Eisenman et al., 2007; Kim & Bostwick, 2020; Spialek et al., 2021; Taylor-Clark et al., 2010; Thomas et al., 2013). Because of refugees’ unique backgrounds and experi-

ences, they are almost always more vulnerable compared to other populations in the host countries. Also, scholars have identified vulnerable populations' remarkable recovery, adaptability, and resilience to disasters and discussed strategies to improve refugees' coping mechanisms for disasters (Aldunate et al., 2019; Alencar, 2018; Uekusa & Matthewman, 2017). Uekusa (2017) argued that some socially vulnerable groups might be more resilient because they have dealt with social inequalities and earned strength before disasters. His research identified the nonlinearity, complexity, and contextuality of social vulnerabilities in disasters and suggested that refugee populations were active agents in disasters rather than powerless help seekers (Uekusa, 2017). Their cultural values and attitudes of supporting each other can be valuable community resources to mobilize for disaster reduction planning.

Refugee Identity as a Taboo

Social identity theory suggests that individuals categorize themselves as members of different social groups. The cognitive process provides a sense of belonging and self-esteem for individuals. It also creates differences between groups and similarities among the group members (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Based on social identity theory, scholars have explored the adverse outcomes stemming from intergroup differences and outgroup prejudice and the interaction between social context and identity shifting (AbuJarour et al., 2018; Oppedal et al., 2017; Şafak-Ayvazoğlu et al., 2021).

Compared to other types of cultural or race identities, the diasporic identity of the refugee has more political, legal, and social meanings. From a legal perspective, the refugee's identity is granted by the host country and is related to the eligibility of receiving government assistance and other benefits. When governmental agencies set up criteria regarding refugees' eligibility, there is an inherent suspicion, even denial about these individuals' motives and honesty. A news report by USA Today stated that more Americans believed that many people who apply for refugee status or asylum were simply taking advantage of generous U.S. laws to sneak into the country (Gomez, 2018). Also, refugee identity is more like a category and label from others rather than a self-construction. The identity has been linked with negative narratives and framing. For example, the term "refugee crisis," which can be easily found in political, media, and everyday discourse, describes refugees as a burden of the host country (Gale, 2004; Maneri, 2021). Refugees are always connected to the presumption of loss of human rights and dignity, dependence on social benefits, and economic inactivity (Ostrand, 2015). In addition, media discourse, increasingly social media, has played a critical role in constructing social identity and influencing human attitudes and behaviors (Lido et al., 2021). Scholars claimed that refugees were always described as powerless and trauma victims and linked to social unrest, violence, looting, and lack of social responsibility, which caused ambivalent even hostile public attitudes towards refugee populations (Leudar et al., 2008; Martin, 2016).

Because of the hostile environment and negative images, refugees have been an invisible and silent group in the host society, lacking the opportunities to express themselves and get their voices being heard. Their identity becomes a type of taboo that hinders their resettlement and integration into the host country. Accordingly, Lido et al. (2021) suggested that if refugees can be framed as future citizens and resilient humans doing necessary jobs and as a vital part of the national economic growth, they would be associated with positive attitudes and outcomes. In addition, with the development of information technology, scholars have started paying attention to the role of social media in promoting refugees' positive images and self-representation (Alencar, 2018; Godin & Doná, 2016).

Refugees' Social Vulnerability

The social vulnerability approach emphasizes historical context and social structure as well as “social processes contribute directly to the creation of risk” (Fordham et al., 2013, p.12). Scholars recognized the impact of social factors on disaster management and have established a comprehensive framework of social vulnerability index that can be used to measure and quantify vulnerability among diverse populations and places (Adger, 2006; Cutter et al., 2003; Spielman et al., 2020). The index consists of many dimensions— sensitivity, exposure, and adaptive capacity (Adger, 2006). Its purpose is to describe a macro-level of characteristics of a community and provide a generalized and objective tool for policy-makers and service providers regarding hazard planning and management. However, Spielman et al. (2020) have criticized that many dimensions and indexes cannot be directly and objectively measured). For example, the quantified index might not capture the reasons why some people did not take protective actions during disasters. Especially for vulnerable populations, the micro-level of individuals' vulnerability is significantly impacted by their cultural background, experience, and social contexts. Specifically, compared to the native-born population, immigrants and refugees are affected more by disasters because of the structural inequalities prior to disasters (Donner & Rodríguez, 2008; Lemyre et al., 2009; Scurfield, 2008; Uekusa, 2017). Therefore, this research adopts the social vulnerability paradigm as a context-based framework to examine individuals and communities' experiences and interactions with society. This framework focuses on all the social, cultural, political, and economic factors that impact individuals and communities' capacity to cope with disasters and risks. It is an appropriate framework to explore the culturally specific needs of refugees and their perceptions.

Linguicism

The language barriers and cultural differences are all factors that might hinder their abilities for disaster preparedness. For example, language barriers and institutionalized “linguicism” are typical structural and the most noticeable disadvantages (Uekusa, 2019). Linguicism emphasizes language-based structural discrimination, which could happen in interpersonal communications, economic activities, and governmental services. Linguistic minorities always face political, economic, cultural, and social disadvantages in the host country. Especially during disasters, linguicism creates barriers for mass communication and interpersonal communication. Previous research has suggested that some disaster warning systems lacked multi-language outlets (Senkbeil et al., 2014).

Language is critical for refugee individuals, and linguistic minorities might have difficulties understanding the key disaster terms and critical information in dominant languages. Donner and Rodriguez (2008) pointed out that language barriers might lead to misunderstanding hazard warnings and create difficulties in seeking and applying for assistance. Also, language barriers can hinder linguistic minorities from expressing and communicating their feelings and navigating and negotiating the resources and support such as governmental disaster relief aids and insurance reimbursement. Some scholars have explored the strategies of information seeking for minority populations. Convergence theory focuses on how individuals make sense of competing information by collecting and contemplating information from different sources and discussing this information with family, friends, and neighbors (Anthony et al., 2013; Sellnow et al., 2019).

Cultural Isolation

Berry's (1997) acculturation model suggests that both the cultures of refugees' country of origin and the host country determine whether they will integrate, assimilate, separate, or marginalize in the host country. Specifically, an individual's level of cultural adaptation depends partly on two independent processes: the degree to which native identity is maintained and the degree of contact with the host culture and micro-cultural groups (Berry et al., 1987). First, assimilation involves attempts not to maintain an identity with his/her native culture but to adapt to the host culture and actively participate in the dominant society. The second outcome, integration, occurs when some people balance their identity with their native culture and the interaction with the host culture. That is, "the individual develops a kind of bicultural orientation that successfully blends and synthesizes cultural dimensions from both groups while maintaining an identity in each group" (Neuliep, 2015, p.440). When people have low levels of contact with the host culture while keeping a close interaction with, and reaffirmation of their native culture, the outcome of acculturation is called separation; that is, separated subjects interact almost exclusively with their group while avoiding a close connection with members of the host culture. Finally, marginalization occurs when the individuals choose not to bond with their native culture or host culture. According to Neuliep (2015), these floating lives "experience alienation from both cultures. Often, they feel a sense of abandonment" (p. 441).

During the acculturation process, refugees might face identity conflict, instability, and confusion, accompanied by feelings of invisibility, marginalization, and alienation (Tandon, 2016). Because of the discontinuity of their lives, and identity loss, reconstruction is a never-ending process for them. For example, they have difficulties establishing trust and reciprocal relationships with local resources and services (Strang & Quinn, 2021). In addition, the acculturation process impacts not only refugees' cultural identity but also how they perceive and conceptualize risk differently (Lindell & Perry, 2004). Mitchem (2003) studied tornado warnings and found that African Americans could not understand the differences between watches and warnings and therefore did not fully comprehend the magnitude of risk. Uekusa (2019) found that refugees might lack the confidence or are hindered by their cultural norms to ask for help during a disaster. Regarding the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, refugees have had misconceptions that the virus test and vaccine required insurance or social security information.

Social Marginalization and Exclusion

In addition to language barriers and cultural differences, immigration and foreign policies, media, and the power relations in the host society also create social marginalization and exclusion, leading to refugees' negative coping mechanisms. As a displaced population, refugees have been marginalized in the host countries in many different ways. For example, UNHCR reported that 70% of refugees live in countries with restricted right to work; 66% of refugees live in countries with restricted freedom of movement; and 47% of refugees live in countries with restricted access to bank accounts (UNHCR, 2021).

In the United States, the Trump administration significantly cut the number of refugees allowed in by more than 80% (Snow & Watson, 2020). Then-President Trump issued a series of executive orders to narrow the eligibility, restrict work permits for refugees, delay their employment authorizations, and cancel assistance programs. These executive orders connect refugees with the geopolitical issues of border security and public safety as well as the term such as "America first." The negative sentiment implicitly alienates refugees as others even threaten and increases refugees' vulnerability. Because of

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these restrictions, many refugees have to work in the informal economy. When disasters like the COVID-19 pandemic happened, the informal economy was significantly impacted, and socio-economic consequences, such as loss of income, evictions, school closure, denial of access to health and social services, and rise xenophobia, likely to lead to loss of livelihood and poverty.

One main point of the social vulnerability paradigm is that all the vulnerable factors of a particular group or community are not new phenomena during disasters. Instead, linguistic, cultural isolation, and social marginalization all exist as a consistent framework and social structure before disaster strikes. The label “refugee” has been naturally connected to a negative image and a stigma of vulnerability. Because of the lack of resources, refugees are viewed as passive people waiting for assistance and lacking preparation, coordination, and initiative. It is crucial for emergency and disaster management professionals to incorporate the socio-economic dimensions and the vulnerable factors in hazard planning, preparation, mitigation, and response practices. Effective communication and refugee empowerment need to understand the refugees’ situation and continuous emotional engagement.

Race, Culture, and Effective Crisis Communication

The social vulnerability framework emphasizes refugee communities’ empowerment and capacity building. Individuals and communities’ vulnerability factors and resilience capacity shape how they access, understand, and act on information before, during, and after disasters. It has to be noted that an individual or a community can be vulnerable and resilient simultaneously (Uekusa & Matthewman, 2017). On the one hand, some refugees’ vulnerabilities might be compounded and exacerbated in disasters. On the other hand, the recognition of their vulnerabilities can be an approach to increase their resilience. In this process, communication can either increase or decrease people’s vulnerability to disasters (Hansson et al., 2020). Communication and information management is essential component for disaster preparedness (Keeney, 2004). Communication between service providers and communities is crucial to facilitate coordination and address emerging issues. On-time communication provides necessary information for community members regarding the current situation, available resources, and the immediate actions they need to take.

Communication is a meaning-making process constituting societies, cultures, and identities (Hansson et al., 2020). The community and connection building in disasters carries a part about emotion and feelings helpful in raising risk awareness and strengthening preparedness (Wendling et al., 2013). Lemyre & O’Sullivan (2013) asserted that the interaction between the individuals and the social environment influences individuals’ risk perception and disaster preparedness. Because of their cultural and linguistic diversity, refugees often have limited knowledge and trust in disaster management agencies (Ogie et al., 2018). Yong et al. (2020) did comparative research between immigrants and Canadian-born individuals and found that social trust, interaction with friends, and neighborhood contact affected certain preparedness behaviors.

Scholars also found that race and cultural backgrounds influenced people’s communicative behaviors. Social identities, including race and cultural backgrounds, impact individuals’ connection with the community and their cognitive capabilities and responses to information on risks. Studies on the 2005 Hurricane Katrina survivors found that African Americans relied on interpersonal networks and were less likely to use the Internet for information seeking (Hansson et al., 2020; Spence et al., 2007). In contrast, the Vietnamese community was less suffered from Hurricane Katrina than African Americans because of the community support (Airriess et al., 2008). A study on the 2008 Hurricane Ike in Texas

showed that the legal status among undocumented residents influenced their evacuation behavior (Wilson & Tiefenbacher, 2012).

Effective communication must be based on the adequate competence of all the involved communicators. In the 1990s, researchers assessed disaster research in the United States and recommended several ideas to transform the circumstances of socially vulnerable populations: adopt a participatory view that involves stakeholders; address social equity issues; consider economic vitality by including the full range of businesses of all socio-economic levels; recognize local stakeholders' quality-of-life issues; retain and enhance environmental quality (Mileti, 1999). Disasters require empowering vulnerable populations such as refugees so that they can express their opinions and have their voices be heard (Todorova, 2019). From the activist perspective, giving voices to refugees, providing access to media, and acknowledging the power structure of the host society can arguably promote a more inclusive environment (Seuferling, 2019). Nikunen (2019) explored how refugees have been viewed as voiceless in Finland and the importance of a space for recognition of refugees' voices. For example, social media activism can extend the discursive and visual space for refugees to express themselves, embody good citizenship, and strengthen their connection with the host country.

Overall, the existing literature has revealed the positions of marginalization and othering of refugees in the host countries. They were always reminded to be grateful for being in the host country (Dooley & Thangaperumal, 2011). Disaster reduction relies on raising awareness, increasing knowledge, improving preparedness, and creating resilient communities. A resilient community is based on effective communication and a comprehensive understanding of all community members' emergency management capacity, stigma, and empowerment. Due to the uniqueness of refugees' cultural and social identities, it is necessary for the host country and the service provider to explore their perceived knowledge and barriers to their ability to deal with disasters and discuss strategies of integrating cultural values into emergency management decision-making and practices. As Amrith (2014) suggested, the refugee phenomenon demands knowledge and insights from various fields of research, including "history, political theory, law, development studies, and environmental science" (p.1152).

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research was an exploratory study. After the Institutional Review Board approved the research design, the interview participants were recruited through purposive sampling and multiple sources: refugee communities, local emergency management offices, and voluntary organizations. Inclusion criteria for the research participants include government-assisted refugees aged 18-70 years old. Six refugee individuals from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, agreed to participate and consented, as shown in Table 1. They have been living in the United States for two to six years. Some of them have been granted refugee status, and others were in the process of obtaining asylum status. In addition, according to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security report, most refugees who arrived in the United States and were granted refugee status in 2017-2019 are from Africa, East Asia, and Central Asia (Baugh, 2020).

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Table 1. Demographic characteristics of research participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Languages Spoken	Length of stay in the US
RP01	Male	31	Mandarin English	2 years
RP02	Male	45	Swahili French English	6 years
RP03	Male	31	Arabic Kurdish English	5 years
RP04	Male	40	Lao English	4 years
RP05	Female	36	Lao English	4 years
RP06	Female	28	French English	3 years

It must be noted that the recruiting process did not go smoothly. Many refugee individuals were reluctant to participate in this research for various reasons. First, they were afraid that the publicized paper would negatively impact their legal status, especially for some of them still waiting for their green card. Second, some individuals expressed their concerns that they could not communicate well with the researcher or did not think they could contribute to this research. Therefore, the small sample of this study is reflective of the challenges faces refugees and will serve as pilot research which will continue and expand by recruiting more research participants from various backgrounds.

A set of open-ended interview questions were created prior to the interviews based on the review of literature. Interview questions focused on how particular individuals and their respective communities responded to disasters, what challenges they faced, their key issues of concern, and aspirations looking forward. Participants were interviewed in English. Although their English competence varied, the researcher was able to understand and communicate with them fully. All interviews were informal and open-ended, conducted by Zoom or in-person. The interviews ranged between 30 to 90 minutes, based on the length the participant wished to speak. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were used. The qualitative approach allowed the researcher to examine and explore what the individuals have experienced, coped with, and negotiated disasters. In-depth interviews were able to explore the experiences of vulnerable individuals in authentic ways.

This research aimed to explore and understand the lived experience of refugee individuals in dealing with disasters. Data analysis began with reading through the transcribed texts and generating a list of significant statements, that is, statements about how individual refugees experienced disasters. The two researchers read and reread the transcripts several times separately to immerse into the participants' experiences. Then the two researchers coded the data by identifying significant statements. After a list of significant statements had been made, the researchers worked together and sorted the relevant texts into repeating ideas and then combined repeating ideas across transcripts. Then, a master list of repeating ideas was compiled and grouped into coherent categories. After identifying themes and sub-themes, the researchers grouped the codes with themes related to either a textual description of "what" participants experienced or a structural description of "how" participants experienced it. Themes were then

described in detail using quotations from participants to reveal their experiences and give a detailed, thick description. Finally, a composite description of the phenomenon was proposed, or the essence, as Creswell (2014) labels.

FINDINGS

Overall, the findings revealed that the research participants had experienced various difficulties in dealing with disasters. A thematic analysis of the data built upon repeating ideas and concepts has developed four major themes; (1) lives with instability; (2) understanding crisis: information and misinformation; (3) institutional assistance: support and obstacles; (4) community and social support. Below we address each theme and explain the essential ideas.

Lives with Instability

The research participants have been in the United States for two to six years. However, they are still facing a lot of uncertainties and interruptions regarding employment and legal status.

RP01 arrived in the United States in September 2019 and submitted his asylum-seeking petition to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) in February 2020. When this research interview was conducted in July 2021, he was still waiting for the interview with the USCIS. The interview is a process for the U.S. immigration official to decide whether a person qualifies for the protection of the United States according to U.S. immigration and refugee law. He said,

I have been waiting too long and right now, what I can do is only to not think about it. I don't know whom I can ask for the information about my case status. I have heard from some people that they have waited for five years. Just for the interview. I am kind of desperate, and it is like I am floating in the air. I don't know when I can be on the ground. I even thought that someday I might be kicked out of the United States. If I am denied, I don't know where I can go. So, it is good that I don't have family here, just myself.

In addition to the tedious regulation, the research participants also experienced much instability in housing and employment. Especially when the COVID-19 happened, they were significantly impacted. RP02 has worked for a local food-processing plant on an hourly salary for several years before the COVID-19 pandemic. He does not have a car, and he shared the ride with his coworkers for commuting. He also lives in the same host family with his coworkers. In January 2021, one of his coworkers at the same house who had shared the ride with him tested positive for COVID-19. Suddenly, he had to stop working, although he tested negative. At first, the factory manager said that his position would be kept for him. He said, "I was hoping that I would be able to go back to work if the second time I still test negative. But I need to wait for two weeks to get the second test." However, right after he got his second test, the plant was closed because of the pandemic. In the past several months, he has not been able to find stable work. He states,

I have tried many jobs here, moving company, logistics factory. Some jobs I just could not do. Some are not safe. I don't have income now. I received the government's assistance for several months. But

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last month they stopped paying us the money. Right now, I need to work harder to find a job. I need to make a life on my own.

In 2016, the state of Texas refused to accept Syrian refugees and withdrew from the federal refugee resettlement program. In January 2020, the Governor of the state of Texas, Greg Abbott, announced that Texas would not accept refugees in the year 2020 (Fernandez, 2020). The state-wide anti-refugee policies also significantly influenced the political and social environment around refugee communities and individuals. RP06 said, “I was so shocked when I heard about the news. Sad, also. I guess maybe somebody here thinks we are threats? I don’t know.” She also mentioned that the increasing anti-refugee sentiment in the United States made her worried about her cousins who were waiting for resettlement in the United States. She said,

I am so grateful that I can be here now. But there are still a lot of people dying in my country. I really worry about my cousins. They have waited for many years to come to the United States. But now I don’t know can they still come; can we get together?

Understanding Crisis: Information and Misinformation

During crises and disasters, refugee communities and individuals’ perceptions and behaviors are impacted by diverse information resources. Sometimes the opposite information from different resources also caused confusion and hindered their action from following the authority’s guidance and instruction. It is difficult for refugee individuals who have limited language competence and cultural knowledge of the host country to navigate the numerous information sources and identify the correct and reliable ones. RP04 stated, “Sometimes I just don’t know the information is right or wrong. I feel like some information looks very true. But later on, I was told it was wrong. I don’t know what I can believe.” RP03 expressed a similar idea. He said, “To be honest, I don’t believe any news I saw on the Internet. If I saw something I am interested in, I always go to other places to check if it is true.”

During disasters, crisis communication and information flow aim to prevent or lessen the adverse outcomes resulting from a crisis, creating a rational understanding of the risk and encouraging the information receiver in taking actions such as preparedness planning, evacuation, and shelter seeking. Without credible information, individuals cannot change their behaviors and take action. RP01 commented on his experience during the COVID-19 pandemic,

I saw many crazy news on Twitter. Like people drank and injected disinfectants into their bodies to fight COVID. I don’t understand why Twitter allows this kind of information. And because of this, people are doing wrong things. For myself, I always check both information in English and Chinese. My friends in China always remind me to wear masks when I go everywhere. But here, I felt awkward sometimes because nobody wore masks.

Also related to the pandemic, RP03 felt that a lot of people, including himself, have relied too much on social media to get the perceived correct information, and he thought that social media had too much misguiding information. He said that he still did not know whether he should wear masks in the public space because of “all the conflicting information.” It is difficult for people who have limited knowledge

and access to the correct information to identify trustworthy and truthful information from false or misleading ones. RP01 even mentioned the anti-Asian sentiment on social media and how it impacted his life,

I don't know how it started. Maybe when Trump said that it is a Chinese virus. I saw a lot of news that Asian people are attacked. It made me and my Asian friends very nervous. Right now, if I go outside when somebody is near me, I feel nervous because I think that guy might attack me suddenly. So, most time I try to ask my friends to go somewhere with me together.

In contrast, RP02 mentioned the factual news information he received and useful tools on social media, such as Facebook Preventive Health. Facebook Preventive Health provided health-related suggestions, such as vaccines and health screenings based on geo-targeted locations, based on user's age and gender. RP02 stated, "I attended a health information workshop in my neighborhood. They told us Facebook has a new tool. It can remind us about health checks or something else. I just started using it, and I kind of like the personalized information on it." RP06 commented on the COVID-19 case map and expressed that the map was a valuable tool to let him know where he should avoid going. Some other research participants also expressed their appreciation for all the social media platforms they can use. RP03 said, "Before I came to the U.S., I did not have a cell phone, and there was no Wi-Fi in the [refugee] camp. Every day I was just hoping I could receive some information about when I could leave. I don't know what happened outside the camp."

Institutional Assistance: Barriers and Obstacles

In addition to the contradictory information flow, the research participants have experienced various difficulties during their resettlement process and have various understandings and perceptions about the emergency management and assistant system in the United States. Before individuals are classified as refugees, there is a long process for them to go through eligibility interviews, security checks, and medical exams. When refugees are granted the status and arrive in the United States, the resettlement programs from the U.S. government provide basic resources such as housing, a small amount of money for food and clothing, and some information orientation. With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of information from authorities has caused many issues for refugee populations to take action and to protect themselves. RP02 thought the COVID virus test required health insurance. Similarly, RP01 explained the reason why he did not get his COVID-19 vaccine until July. He said,

I don't know where I got the idea. Maybe because I know the medical service here is very expensive. I thought if we wanted to get the vaccine shot, we needed to have health insurance and social security number, which I did not have then. Right now, I am still waiting for the immigration interview. And I cannot afford the health insurance. Until July, a friend got his vaccine and told me that he did not show anything to get it. So, I immediately when to the place to get the vaccine.

Another obstacle for refugees to receive governmental assistance is a general mindset in the United States that refugees have received too many benefits as well as financial and social assistance from the government. When the Governor of Texas issued the anti-refugee announcement, he said that "I am putting my citizens first. We have challenges in the state of Texas that these very same nonprofit organizations must address" ("Why Texas Is Saying 'no' to All New Refugees," 2020). The statement

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explicitly distinguishes refugees as outsiders of the United States, threats, and economic drains. The restrictive refugee policy and the environmental pressure make refugee individuals hesitant to speak out their opinions and feelings in public. RP03 stated, “Right now, I can legally stay in the U.S., but I think I will not become an American and [will not] belong here forever.” The political and social context influences refugees’ perceptions and experiences, and consequently, their behaviors in crisis communication and in dealing with disasters.

Community and Social Support

Although there are many institutional barriers, refugee individuals have their social network and support during crises and disasters. Local organizations and communities have played a critical role in refugees’ integration into the host society. Both RP02 and RP03 mentioned the programs organized by the local nonprofit organizations several years ago. RP03 said,

I remember about four years ago when I just arrived here. A local organization gave me a lot of help. They provided me with a place for a short-term stay. They helped me to buy cheap furniture. And I attended their job training meetings. But since last year, probably because of the virus, everything has been gone.

However, the growing political hostility toward refugees impacts refugee populations, the community, and local organizations that are serving refugees. Some organizations had to end their many year-long refugee resettlement programs because of the government’s lack of resources and support. The researchers’ connection with the local nonprofit organizations indicated their hope to reform the governmental resettlement service infrastructure during the research process. The connections with families and co-ethnic groups have been the most critical resources for refugee individuals’ resettlement and integration. RP06 had the experience of getting support from people of the same country of origin. She stated, “When I just came to the U.S., I got the most help from a friend who came from the same country with me. He taught me a lot of things. I learned English with him.” RP02 got support from his family. He said,

I have a sister who has been here for six years. I think she and her family is the most important support for me. When I lost my job, I could not afford the house rent anymore. My sister picked me up and I have stayed with her since March. Without her, I really don’t know where I can go and stay.

The connection with home culture and co-ethnic groups can also hinder refugees’ actions during disasters. Because of the different perceptions of community support and asking for help, refugee populations might be reluctant to seek assistance when disaster happens. RP02 stated,

In my home country, when some bad things happen, we don’t have the organizations like here to help us. We, most time, rely on our families. I remember there was a flood in my village. My family was stuck on the top of our home for two days. Nobody came to help us. Finally, my uncle and his sons came and helped us. And when we have some difficulties, we always ask for help from the family members first. We have a saying that the shame of a family cannot be shared with other people. Something like that. And asking for help looks like you are weak and a loser. So, I took a long time to feel comfortable about talking about my feelings and the difficulties with people that I didn’t know before.

The above statements demonstrate that both the family and co-ethnic networks' supportive function and the related conflicting values within the group influence refugee individuals' perception and behaviors during disasters as well as their engagement with the host country and society.

DISCUSSION

This research has revealed various challenges and obstacles that refugee populations have experienced regarding their crisis communication and disaster management. The research findings highlight the existing institutional and social gaps regarding the assistance and service needed by refugee communities.

Institutional Barriers

Citizenship and legal status are the foundation for refugee individuals to engage with the host society. The research findings indicate that unstable immigration policies, political environment, and nationalist sentiment have significantly impacted refugee populations' well-being and lives in the United States. Some politicians' statements have mischaracterized refugees in the host country. Refugees are viewed as outsiders and threats rather than people who can contribute to the host country's social and economic development.

The political environment also creates a gap between the governmental agencies and local organizations serving refugees. Many local nonprofit organizations have faced unprecedented challenges in maintaining their programs because of the lack of funding. The research findings suggest some approaches overcome the institutional barriers: (1) recognize and highlight refugees' resilience and contribution to the host country; (2) improve the initial placement and resettlement procedures; and (3) establish joint sponsorship programs in collaboration with private and nonprofit sectors. As Simich et al. (2002, p.604) suggested,

If refugees migrate to certain urban centres for social support from family and an ethnic community as well as for employment opportunities, they actually have the same priorities that the resettlement program is supposed to have – they are seeking to rebuild self-sufficiency rather than rely on government support.

For example, resettling refugee individuals at places with their families and co-ethnic groups can decrease their need for government assistance as well as increase their coping capacity in dealing with disasters. Therefore, both the main institutions and community at large need to change the mindset of viewing refugees as a financial and social burden and impose long-term investment strategies by integrating refugees into the host country and society. More importantly, integrating and involving refugee individuals and communities into the decision-making process, such as resettlement planning and emergency planning, can influence effective policy-making. Their involvement would be helpful to design customized services that recognize their various status, diversity, and service needs.

Effective Communication during Crisis

Effective communication can empower individuals and communities regarding structural, psychological, and resources factors. Effective communication needs to be based on a mutual understanding among communicators. Previous studies have found the key dimensions for individuals' acculturation and in-

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tegration: language, cultural knowledge, and safety and security (Alencar, 2018). As Ager and Strang (2004) suggest, “cultural knowledge refers to refugees obtaining knowledge of the dominant culture as well as non-refugees acquiring knowledge of the circumstances and culture of refugees” (p.4). Refugees have taken along with their experiences and adapted to living in the host countries. Their cultural traditions and current legal status impact their willingness and attitude to communicate with the host society.

Another point related to effective communication is public trust. Previous studies have suggested the use of information technology in crisis communication. Within the context of disasters, both the positive and negative impact related to information technology needs to be recognized. Information technology, especially social media, provides critical information for refugees to navigate during disasters. Social media also provide channels and platforms of interaction with both host and home societies. People are all influenced by advanced technology in many ways. However, information from unreliable and unofficial sources significantly impacts the circulation of critical information and might lead to harmful misconceptions. It is more critical for decision-makers and service providers to grasp the creation, circulation, and manipulation of information during disasters, communicate risk information, and provide timely and credible information. For example, Sharma et al. (2017) have suggested that accurate and credible information could help control virus spread and associated anxiety during the pandemic. This research resonates with this statement and has a similar finding regarding how misinformation could impede individuals’ response to disasters. In the communication process, public authorities and local organizations can use information technology and direct refugee individuals to trusted sources for critical information seeking to promote interactions between them and other organizations.

Refugee Community’s Empowerment and Resilience

This research finds that local nonprofit organizations and communities provide services and resources that can mobilize host communities to support refugees and facilitate the engagement between the host communities and refugees. Also, as mentioned above, previous research has suggested the role of ethnic communities in providing information and resources. Simich et al. (2002) pointed out that most refugees have violent and traumatized experiences, and people who have the same background and experiences could meet the idiosyncratic needs of refugees. This research finds that the political and social context of the host country matters for refugees’ disaster vulnerability and resilience. As Alencar (2018) found in her research on refugees in Sweden, the support from the host country would create a sense of belonging to the host country. To improve the refugee community’s resilience, it is critical to creating a space where refugees can contribute and be active actors. However, the research finds that refugee individuals have experienced language barriers, discrimination, prejudice, racism, social isolation, and difficulties accessing social services. Compared to other types of immigrants, refugees have much fewer resources, and high service needs to help them settle down in the host country and deal with disasters. Scholars have suggested that people who have immediate access to language training, employment, housing, and education upon arrival would settle and integrate into the host country more successfully (Nakhaie, 2018). In this process, local nonprofit organizations and communities can play a critical role in facilitating a formal network of social relations and a resource hub. These organizations can help refugees to adapt and integrate by providing resources such as language and skill training, cultural knowledge of the host country, laws, and employment. During disasters, these organizations can be critical information and service providers. More importantly, these organizations can be agents to present a positive image of

refugees in the host country, mitigate racism, discrimination, and the negative and stereotypical impression of refugees.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The current research findings provide rich information on how refugee populations experienced disasters. However, several limitations should be noted regarding the current study. First, the small number of research participants might not be generalized to a broader refugee community. The research participants were volunteers and were recruited from convenient and snowball sampling. Compared to the whole refugee population, they might have higher educational levels and English competence to communicate with the researcher. The researchers recognize the diversity and heterogeneity of refugee populations regarding culture, education, gender, and age. The researchers will try to reach out to individuals with limited English competence and various educational backgrounds for further research. This process might be necessary to include cultural insiders, who have a refugee background, to assist the recruitment and interview process.

This research also suggests future research direction focusing on the interaction among the dimensions of institution, society, and individuals regarding refugee communities' vulnerability and resilience. In addition to refugee individuals, the researchers will expand the research scope by including refugee community leaders and emergency managers, all important actors in the disaster cycle. It would be helpful to include them in the research to fully understand the community social capital development and the policy-making and implementation in emergency management and crisis communication.

CONCLUSION

This research explores how refugees' social, cultural, and racial characteristics impact their communication during a crisis and disaster preparedness. Disasters intensify the need for the whole society to manage cultural diversity and maintain social cohesion (Bouchara, 2021). The research finds that refugee individuals and communities still lack the necessary competence and resource to engage with the host country. Because of their various experiences, histories, and perceptions, refugees' disaster preparedness and resilience relies on an inclusive social environment in all social actors. Resources, such as local emergency managers, community organizations, family, and co-ethnic groups, can work together and incorporate cultural understanding into the emergency management and crisis communication process.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Community Resilience: The capacity and sustained ability of a community to use its resources and assets, to respond to and recover from adverse situations, and to improve its physical and social environment.

Crisis Communication: The process to collect and disseminate information to address a crisis situation. It includes the technologies, systems, and protocols that enable individuals and organizations to effectively communicate during a crisis.

Disaster Preparedness: The knowledge, capabilities, and precautionary actions, including physical preparations and trainings for emergency actions, that are taken in the face of potential disasters. Preparedness efforts range from individual-level activities, to household actions, community efforts, and governmental strategies.

Linguicism: Discrimination based on language, dialect, and the characteristics of speech.

Misinformation: False or inaccurate information that is misleading and presented as fact.

Refugee: People who have been forced to flee and cannot return their country because of conflict, persecution, war, or violence.

Social Identity: A sense of belonging to the social world, a person's sense of who they are based on their group membership. The main argument of social identity theory is that group members of an in-group will seek to find negative aspects of an out-group, thus enhancing their self-image.

Social Vulnerability: The potential negative effects on communities caused by external stresses. Social vulnerability involves a combination of factors inherent in social interactions, systems, and institutions.

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Demographic Questions

- What is your age? (19-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55+)
- Where are you from?
- What is your ethnicity?
- What is your highest education attained (<high school, high school, some college/associate's degree, Bachelor's degree, Graduate degree)?
- How long have you been in the United States (Less than 1, 1-4, 5-10, 10-20, 20+)?
- How much is your household's monthly income?
- Do you own or rent the place where you live?

Disaster Experience

- What kind of disasters or crises have you experienced since you arrive in the United States?
- How did you deal with the disasters/crises?
- What kind of problems did you face during the process?
- What kind of support did you receive during the process?
- What lessons did you learn from the process?
- How did previous crises and disasters impact you and your home?
- What is the biggest challenge for you to prepare for disasters?
- What is the biggest misconception you have encountered in your community surrounding disasters, including COVID-19?
- What kind of resources and support would be helpful to improve your disaster preparedness?

Perceptions

- How would you rate your perception of risks?
- What are the differences of perception of risks in your home culture and in the United States?
- How would you rate the disaster preparedness of yourself and your family?
- How would you rate the disaster preparedness of your community?
- How can people in your community find empowerment during this time?
- Who do you think should be responsible of taking care of you and your families during disasters?
- What is the proper way of dealing with the crises?
- What are some trusted community resources everyone should keep on their radar?

About the Contributors

Geoffrey Luurs is an Assistant Professor of organizational communication and leadership at Murray State University. His primary research interests are in the intersections between communication taboos and health. His research has been published in *Health Communication*, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, and several research handbooks on emergent cyberbullying research.

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Chelsea Brass-Rosenfield is a doctoral candidate in health and interpersonal communication studies. Her research interests include the dark side of interpersonal communication (e.g. interpersonal violence, power, and psychological coercion) and uncertainty management (e.g. vaccine hesitancy). Chelsea is also a policy professional with previous career experience in public health, population health planning, and community-based participatory research.

Grant P. Campbell is a Communication Assistant Professor at Marine Corps University in Quantico, Virginia. Mr. Campbell edits student and faculty writing, teaches about writing and storytelling as leadership tools, and explores interpersonal and intercultural facets of communication. He has also taught *Communication and Popular Culture*, *Public Speaking*, and *Intro to Human Communication*.

Robert Carroll, Ph.D. (2018), is an Assistant Professor of Instruction in the Moody College of Communication at The University of Texas at Austin.

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Kristen L. Cole is an Assistant Professor in Communication Studies at San José State University in San José, CA. She received her PhD in Communication from the University of New Mexico in 2013

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Josh Compton (Ph.D., University of Oklahoma, 2004) is Associate Professor of Speech at Dartmouth College. His research explores image at two distinct points: before an image attack (inoculation theory) and after an image attack (image repair theory), with special attention to the contexts of health, sport, and political humor. His scholarship appears in journals such as *Communication Monographs*, *Communication Theory*, *Annals of the International Communication Association*, *Human Communication Research*, *Journal of Communication*, *Frontiers in Psychology*, and *PLOS ONE*, and he authored the inoculation theory chapter in *The Sage Handbook of Persuasion* (Sage) and co-authored the inoculation theory chapter in *Persuasion and Communication in Sport, Physical Activity, and Exercise* (Taylor Francis). Josh has been an invited expert for the Department of Defense's Strategic Multilayer Assessment program (USA) and NATO's and USSOCOM's Joint Senior Psychological Operations Conference, and is a member of the Global Experts on Debunking of Misinformation group. He has been named Distinguished Lecturer by Dartmouth College and has won the Outstanding Professor Award from the National Speakers Association and has twice won the L. E. Norton Award for Outstanding Scholarship. He currently serves as the Book Review Editor for *Journal of Communication*.

Nathaniel B. Cox is an adjunct professor at Duquesne University and Penn State University. He currently teaches courses in Business and Professional Communication, and Public Speaking. Nathaniel received his Master of Divinity from Hood Theological Seminary in Salisbury, North Carolina with a concentration in Preaching and Worship. During his matriculation at Hood Theological Seminary Nathaniel was awarded the 2016 George Clayton Tharrington Memorial Award for Preaching. An award given to the Seminary for recognition of the senior student who best exemplifies creative homiletics, keen imagination, and extemporaneous style. Nathaniel is currently a PhD student at Duquesne University in Rhetoric. Nathaniel's research focuses on social justice, religion and rhetorical leadership. He is the senior pastor of Trinity AME Zion Church of Pittsburgh. And holds several positions within the denomination and in the community as he works to better the lives of those around him. In his secular vocations Nathaniel has worked in sales and sales management. He is married to Maggie E. Cox and together they have two daughters.

Elizabeth A. Craig (PhD, University of Oklahoma, 2008) is an Associate Professor of Communication and a faculty partner with The Center for Family and Community Engagement at North Carolina State University. Her teaching and research are in the areas of interpersonal and family communication where she examines mental health, family adversity, and the communication of resilience.

Valerie Cronin-Fisher is an Assistant Professor at Governors State University. Her teaching focus within communication is interpersonal and family relationships, communication theory, health in interpersonal contexts, mediation and conflict, and listening. Her primary goal as an instructor is to empower students with communication skills that will help them navigate life with greater understanding

About the Contributors

and competence within their close relationships and workplace. Dr. Cronin-Fisher's research interests include romantic conflict, relational dissolution, self disclosure, jealousy, uncertainty, and motherhood and birth communication. The goal of her research is to produce practical applications for individuals who are experiencing turmoil or uncertainty in close relationships.

Adrienne Darrah is a development and alumni relations professional who has spent her career at several large organizations, including The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the University of Virginia, the University of Oregon, and Penn State. Adrienne is a three-time Penn State graduate and holds a BA in art history from the College of Arts & Architecture which she received in 1998, an MBA from the Smeal College of Business which she received in 2012, and an MPA from Penn State Harrisburg which she received in 2018. Adrienne is currently working on a PhD in communications focusing on public relations. Adrienne's research interests lie in the role of mass communications in fundraising and donor and alumni engagement and how it relates to nonprofit organization strategies and women's roles in fundraising organizations.

Mariana Gaspar is a Marketing Manager, from Porto, Portugal. At the University of Porto, Mariana learned the importance of human and social knowledge for communication in her bachelor's degree in Communication Sciences. Later on, during her master's degree in Marketing Management at IPAM - The Marketing School, Mariana had the opportunity to research on communication and social marketing strategies against discriminatory behaviors.

Jennessa Hester is in the English, Film, and Media Studies doctoral program at Texas Tech University. They received their Master of Arts from the University of New Orleans in 2020. Their current research focuses on the construction, destruction, and transformation of bodily identity in literature and media.

Madeleine Holland, Ph.D. (2018), is an Assistant Professor of Instruction in the Department of Communication Studies in the Moody College of Communication at The University of Texas at Austin.

Diana K. Ivy, Ph.D., has been a Professor of Communication for nearly 40 years, 28 of which have been spent at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in nonverbal, interpersonal, and gender communication. Her master's degree and Ph.D. in communication are from the University of Oklahoma; her Bachelor's degree is in speech and theatre from Texas Wesleyan University. Ivy is author/co-author of three communication textbooks (GenderSpeak 6e; Nonverbal Communication for a Lifetime 3e; Communication: Principles for a Lifetime 8e). She has published book chapters on nonverbal and interpersonal communication, plus articles in communication and interdisciplinary academic journals. At TAMU-CC, she served as Faculty Senate Speaker; Director of the university's Women's Center; Dept. Internship Coordinator; and past President, current Board and singing member of the Corpus Christi Chorale. In 2013 she conducted post-doctoral coursework at Oxford University, studying C. S. Lewis and communication.

Kristy Jagiello is an instructor in the Department of Communication and Performing Arts at Madison Area Technical College in Madison, Wisconsin. She earned her PhD in Communication at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, with a focus on interpersonal communication. She also completed a graduate certificate in Mediation and Negotiation. Her research interests include difficult conversations in close

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Falon Kartch received her Ph.D. in Communication from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 2013. In 2013 she was hired as an Assistant Professor at California State University, Fresno where she is currently an Associate Professor. She writes and teaches in the areas of family science, interpersonal communication, family communication, the dark side of close relationships, gender communication, and menstruation studies. Her research centers on exploring how familial bonds are formed and maintained as well as how various populations define what it means to be “family,” particularly in contexts in which “family” occurs outside of social and cultural conventions. She is particularly interested in the application of relational justice frameworks on close relationships, including parenting/child relationships and post-divorce coparenting relationships. Her most recent work explores parent/child communication regarding menstruation.

Sara V. A. Kaufman is a Ph.D. candidate in the Brian Lamb School of Communication at Purdue University. Her research focuses on the communication within families in the context of companion animal end-of-life. She broadly studies interpersonal and health communication and is particularly interested in issues related to grief, online social support, coping and animals in human social life.

Chandler T. Marr is a PhD Student and Graduate Teaching Associate in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. Chandler’s research interests focus on informal talk at work - such as gossip, joking, and co-rumination - and how these relational forms of interaction contribute to the overall process of organizing. Recently, he’s turned his attention to how culturally-defined “feeling rules” govern the expression and experience of painful emotions like grief and anger in organizational contexts. Overall, the goal of Chandler’s research is to provide individuals with the tools needed to flourish in their personal and professional relationships.

Bonnie McCracken Nickels (Ph.D., University at Buffalo) is an educator-scholar specializing in interpersonal and health communication. She teaches courses in Interpersonal Communication, Health Communication, Organizational Communication, and Persuasion. Her research focuses on communication at end-of-life and difficult relational interactions. She has published articles in *Health Communication*, *Journal of Family Communication*, and *OMEGA – Journal of Death and Dying*.

Jessica Neu holds a BA from Allegheny College, an MS from Carlow University and currently serves as an adjunct professor at Duquesne University’s Department of Communication and Rhetorical Studies. A Ph.D. student studying Rhetoric, Jessica is a member of Phi Kappa Phi Honors Society and the NCA Pedagogy Panel, “Get Creative, Pedagogical Ideas for Theater, Film and New Multi-Media.” Jessica’s research in Theater is featured in *Journal of Communication*, *Speech and Theater Association of North Dakota* and she has presented at multiple conferences including MEA, NCA and CSCA. Jessica resides in Pittsburgh, PA and enjoys spending time with her two kids and husband and traveling, especially to Disney.

About the Contributors

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of self-harm behavior, exploring the exceptionally high rate of assault experienced by schizophrenic populations, or determining the impact of stigma transfer on the efficacy of the therapeutic alliance, Lee studies the unique ability of stigma to disrupt health pathways through the promotion of physical, emotional, and cultural violence. Utilizing his background in gender, masculinity, and critical-cultural studies, Lee specifically studies the danger stigma poses to the health-seeking behaviors and mental health outcomes of male populations.

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