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# Designing for Newly Resettled Older Refugees in the United States

**Prakriti Kaini**

Georgia Institute of Technology  
Atlanta, GA 30332, USA  
prakriti.kaini@gatech.edu

**Reema Upadhyaya**

Georgia Institute of Technology  
Atlanta, GA 30332, USA  
reemaupadhyaya@gatech.edu

**Abstract**

Resettlement of refugees into a new host country is a complex phenomenon, particularly for older adults, who are likely to face additional socio-cultural, linguistic, and financial barriers during the assimilation process. We recognize the potential for well-designed technological tools to make this transition smoother for older adults. However, deploying conventional methods to study the needs of non-conventional vulnerable population entails a myriad of challenges. We try to identify possible participatory methods that can be used to understand user needs of the older resettled refugees. Since the Presence Project (Gaver et al., 1999), cultural probes have been used to obtain design inspiration by facilitating non-intrusive participation with users beyond the workspace. In this submission, we propose cultural probe as a way to engage with the older resettled refugees in the US, and bring up culturally relative considerations for the design of its artefacts to achieve desired user engagement.

**Author Keywords**

Refugees; Resettlement; Older Adults; Cultural Probes; CSCW.

**ACM Classification Keywords**

H.5.2. User Interfaces.

## **Introduction**

In 2015 alone, over 100,000 refugees were resettled globally. United States accepted 66,500 refugees, the highest in the world (UNHCR report, 2016). Unlike voluntary immigrants, refugees are forced to flee their native countries, have experienced significant trauma and loss, and have survived harsh living conditions (Feuerherm and Ramanathan, 2015). Despite host country's efforts in making the transition process smooth, resettled populations often experience social isolation and financial hardships resulting in anxiety, depression, and other mental health illnesses (Almohamed and Vyas, 2016).

Our target population, the Bhutanese refugees (Lhotshampas) are a group of Bhutanese residents of Nepali origin deported from the Kingdom of Bhutan during the "One Nation, One People" movement. After many years in refugee camps in Nepal, the UNHCR initiated their resettlement around the world including the United States (Benson et al., 2012).

**HCI in Refugee Resettlement:** Use of technology to ease the process of transition into host communities, through development of navigation, communication, and antenatal care coordination tools, have been studied by the Human Computer Interaction (HCI) communities (Almohamed and Vyas, 2016). However, the deeply personal nature of starting ones lives from scratch in a foreign land as refugees can make it difficult, inappropriate, and intrusive for researchers to observe and investigate struggles of daily lives. Deploying workplace design methods may not be adequate to understand what the users need. Moreover, factors like reliance on community leaders for correspondence, language barriers, and cultural

differences add to the challenges of studying refugee populations. These barriers are further heightened for studying older adults who may have lower literacy levels and limited exposure to technological artefacts.

**Resettlement Challenges for Older Adults:** Within the resettled refugee populations, older adults are most likely to experience social isolation and face multiple barriers in the process of acculturation. Due to low familiarity with the English language, they are removed from the employment and community involvement opportunities in the host country. Furthermore, issues such as lack of participation in community based activities and the absence of relatable community activities, may further hinder the formation of new social bonds, limiting their participation and integration in community.

## **Description of population**

We intend to study Resettled Bhutanese Refugee adults, aged 65 years and above, currently residing in the state of Georgia. Members of this population are old enough to recall deportation from Bhutan and subsequent life as asylee in Nepali refugee camps, and hold onto their cultural values. The younger generations, on the other hand, are quick to assimilate in the new dominant culture through employment and schooling, which can be a cause for some existing tensions within the population. This can often lead to further marginalization and isolation of older adults within their families and community. It is imperative that issues arising from differing rates of acculturation within this community be considered in understanding the spectrum of problems that this population faces.

## Methods

We believe that a non-intrusive, but participatory user centered methods such as Cultural Probe, can be effective in exploring the problem space for this population. However, the design of artefacts used in the probe needs to be carried out with the consideration that the users may not be familiar with the "regular" activities, such as mailing postcards etc. In addition to language barriers, there may also be culturally different ways of expressing one's thoughts and experiences. Therefore, the cultural probe needs to be culturally relative for the user population.

Learning from previous studies on cultural probes, the following materials are generally used to get an insight on important aspects of the older adult's everyday lives in the United States.: 1. Postcards addressed to the researchers for participants to write about their daily activities, thoughts, and desires 2. Map of the local area where the users can highlight their physical activities, and geographical movements 3. A Polaroid camera to take pictures of people, places, and things around them that may be important to them, or those that they have a strong positive, or negative feeling about 4. A diary to place the pictures on and write any commentary they want. 5. A Dictaphone to record thoughts and comments 6. A visitor's sign in notebook to log people they meet and that come to visit 7. Post it notes of varying colors, crayons, and pens, for the users to use for diary or post card entries (Gaver et. al., 1999; Crabtree et.al, 2003).

However, the materials for such probe kits have been derived from studies focused on older adults familiar with the western socio-cultural practices. The artefacts

might be unfamiliar and therefore non-appealing to users from a completely different culture resulting in non-use of the cultural probes. Our goal is to design culturally relative probe artefacts that can be used to understand the daily lives of older Bhutanese-Nepali refugees in Georgia to achieve desired user engagement.

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