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“Be the Good Child”: Aspirations and Challenges of Karen Youth Refugees Resettling in America

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Abstract

Starting a new life in the United States offers refugee families a renewed sense of hope. However, maintaining aspirations and opportunities can have emotional consequences on resettled youth as the collectivistic practices of Karen families often fall outside the norms of the host society. The mental health professionals serving Karen youth can tune into the narratives that connect youth with parents and between Karen communities overseas and in the United States to provide culturally responsive assessment and intervention. The qualitative research examined included: (a) refugee resettlement on Karen youth resettling and growing up in the United States; (b) individual and collective resources that promote coping ability and resilience; and (c) perceived meaning ascribed to their lived experience of refugee resettlement. Implications that emerged from a synthesis of the findings call for adopting a socioecological framework (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017) that integrates both cultural competence and developmentally informed practices with this unique population.

Keywords: refugee, Karen youth, coping, resettlement

Introduction

Resettlement remains an elusive dream for more than 99% of displaced persons worldwide (UNHCR, 2022). However, for the tiny fraction of refugees who are more fortunate to attain freedom and safety through resettlement, further hardships lie ahead for them in a new, third country. Indeed, post-resettlement challenges have been found to correspond with mental health risks and to impede successful integration into the host society (Fike & Androff, 2016). Even though the Karen people make up the largest ethnic group

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resettled from Burma (Kim, 2018), there is little to no information found regarding the resettlement experiences and resilience of Karen youth in the United States. Furthermore, scholars have emphasized the need to foreground emerging adults in research with refugee and immigrant populations, due to the unique and complex experiences, challenges, and developmental needs that arise through transitioning from childhood to adulthood (Cohen & Kassan, 2018), as well as the profound immediate and long-term mental health impact of stress in this stage of development (Cohen, Tottenham, & Casey, 2013). Some advances were made in suggesting the broad impact of post-resettlement experiences on refugee youth who resettled in high-income countries (Leo, 2021; Shakya et al., 2010). However, as a people group, the Karen are distinct in language, religion, cultural and family values, and pre-resettlement experiences that would immutably and differentially impact their post-resettlement adjustment and well-being (Marshall, 2018). Culture-specific evidence is critical for mental health professionals to draw from, to inform culturally sensitive strategies for assessment and intervention with the Karen youth and families in the United States (Bartholomew, et al., 2015).

Background

Karen Refugee Resettlement in the United States

Over the past decade, refugees from Burma were the largest group resettled in the United States, with 21% of nearly 600,900 refugees admitted (Monin, Batalova, & Lai, 2021). Since 2005, the Karen people group, the largest of the six ethnic minority groups from Burma, began arriving in masses from refugee camps on the Thailand-Burma border through the world's largest resettlement program to date (Monin et al., 2021). The Karen people group were escaping from human rights abuse and restrictions in their ability to attain self-sufficiency in Thai refugee camps (Monin et al., 2021). Specifically, applying for resettlement is driven by three interrelated desires: "better education opportunities for children, better job opportunities, and an overall better future for their familupies" (p. 192, Harkins, 2012). Resettlement in the U.S. offers a safe environment with opportunities for a desirable future; however, resettled refugees often contend with elevated levels of emotional distress related to past and current stressors associated with forced displacement and resettlement (Fike & Androff, 2016). Several studies suggest that post-migration stressors may trigger or exacerbate an existing predisposition to anxiety, depression, and PTSD from exposure to pre-migration trauma (Schweitzer et al., 2011). Post-migration stressors are better predictors of mental health outcomes of resettled refugees compared to exposure to conflict-related trauma before migration (Carswell, Blackburn, & Barker, 2011). Among refugee-background youth, a qualitative study by McCleary et al. (2019) suggested that post-traumatic symptoms resulting from pre-migration trauma diminish over the first year of living in the United States and are replaced by the stresses of resettlement and integration into life in a new country.

Resettlement Challenges Faced by Refugee Youth

The challenges that youth from refugee backgrounds encountered are intensified by increased family

expectations and responsibilities at a time when they traverse the interim phase between childhood and adulthood (Ziaian et al., 2018). Compared to other immigrant youth, refugee youth experience post-migration shifts in family responsibilities in more acute ways, due to the additional disadvantages and vulnerabilities associated with pre-migration experiences in war-torn countries and refugee camps (Shakya et al., 2010).

For example, refugee children are often required to take on wage-earning and caregiving duties due to economic difficulties faced by refugee families and poor health among parents and elders (Lynnebakke & de Wal Pastoor, 2020). Additionally, resettled refugee youth tend to learn English and nuances of the American culture quicker than their parents and elders, which positions them to help their families navigate systems in a range of settings, including the doctor's office, parent-teacher meetings, and legal situations (Atwell et al., 2009; McMichael et al., 2011). Studies reported that even though language and cultural brokering may instill a sense of pride for helping the family, children become burdened with responsibilities beyond the expectations of their age (Hynie et al., 2012; Koh et al., 2013).

Several studies reported that the high aspirations fostered by family members are a key factor in the educational success of first-generation immigrant and refugee students (Coll & Marks, 2012); however, others questioned the capacity for high aspirations and optimism to overcome numerous structural constraints that refugee families face which impede their success (McWilliams & Bonet, 2016). Specifically, the responsibility to address a family's immediate needs inevitably diverts attention away from their studies and, in some instances, altogether inhibits the pursuit of higher education (Lee et al., 2013; Orellana, 2009). Moreover, an increase in family expectations and responsibilities can conflict with the increasing autonomy and individuation that occurs during adolescent development. Evidence on how refugee youth navigate this inherent tension, however, is scant.

The few studies on youth who resettled in Australia may shed some light on the perception of familial obligations. For instance, Ziaian et al. (2021) reported that refugee youth from Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia regions seem to view additional responsibilities as part of their growth into adulthood and as a natural part of being in their family, rather than perceiving them as burdensome. In a study conducted among young Burmese women, Lee et al. (2013) reported feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and sadness when youth are unable to, or reluctant to, fulfill parental expectations. Taken together, these findings suggest that youth have a strong sense of duty and ownership as a member of the family despite struggling to fulfill all their post-resettlement roles and responsibilities. Nonetheless, given that the U.S. refugee resettlement program is unique when compared to programs in other countries, so would the demands on youth resettled in the U.S., as well as the resources available for coping (Marks et al., 2018). Additionally, even though several studies have cautioned that increased family responsibilities can adversely hamper a youth's individual well-being (Hynie et al., 2012; Shakya et al., 2011), the implications of these expectations on youth require further examination in order to explicate how youth make sense of, cope with, and are impacted by the conflicting demands of individual and collective goals.

Protective Factors and Resilience among Refugee Youth

Still, youth and families from refugee backgrounds continue to demonstrate strengths and resilience when

contending with the many challenges and barriers that arise after resettlement. These protective factors extend across individual coping styles, involving the broader community in a collective manner (Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2020). Among resettled youth in the U.S., for example, learning English can be a major source of anxiety for years following their arrival (Tandon, 2016). Over time, however, improvement in English language proficiency, aided by teacher and peer support, in turn, increases refugee students' sense of agency and self-confidence (Salvo & Williams, 2017; Tandon, 2016). Indeed, the aspiration to master English and succeed academically are essential sources of motivation and hope among children and adolescents after resettlement (Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018; Shakya et al., 2010), even though these aspirations are undercut by multiple systemic and structural barriers they encounter (Hynie et al., 2012). Among Burmese refugees in particular, believing that God understands their life experiences allows them to release their burdens to God through prayer, regain control over their lives, make meaning of their suffering, empowering them to move forward (Schweitzer et al., 2007). In the Karen community, shared spiritual beliefs and religious practices are inextricably linked with resilience through family closeness and community cohesiveness (Muruthi et al., 2020). Indeed, a critical source of emotional and practical support for refugee populations is found through community churches and religious institutions, which can assist them in the event of informational, language, and cultural barriers (Muruthi et al., 2020).

All in all, there is a lack of evidence that explicates the mental thoughts and feelings of youth navigating the aspirations and challenges of resettlement when considering family struggles, to make the most of an opportunity granted to a small fraction of refugees fortunate enough to gain resettlement to a third country. Qualitative research examining the lived experiences of Karen youth is therefore critical to elicit nuanced descriptions of coping responses pertinent to their cultural and developmental contexts and those that are influenced by stressors encountered upon resettlement in the U.S. Examples to include would be perception of what is stressful and how they learned to cope, as well as how they are changed by their struggles (Fazel, et al., 2012). Guided by Miller and Rasmussen (2017)'s socioecological framework of refugee distress developed, and based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), this study addressed gaps in the current literature by exploring the impact of the U.S. resettlement - including the implications of policy, societal, community, and family challenges - on resettled Karen youth in the state of Tennessee in the United States. The following questions were addressed: How do refugee resettlement challenges impact Karen youth resettling and growing up in the United States? How did Karen youth cope with and navigate the impact of these challenges?

Method

This study used a cross-sectional, qualitative, phenomenological design. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by Trevecca Nazarene University's Institutional Review Board prior to data collection. Participants of the study were recruited through snowball sampling (Patton, 1990). The first contact was made through a refugee resettlement agency, and subsequent participants were identified through word of mouth.

Participants

Participants were six females and three males who identified as Karen from refugee backgrounds. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22 years. All nine participants had completed high school within the past three years, eight of whom are students at local community colleges and universities in the United States, while one was contemplating attending college while working in a factory. Six participants were born and lived in Mae La Camp in Thailand for five to eight years before arriving in the United States. One of the three participants was born in Burma and had lived in Malaysia for two years before resettlement in the U.S. Since arriving in the United States, all participants have attended public school; seven participants were enrolled since elementary school, and two participants since middle school. All participants are multilingual and are fluent both in English and Karen, and one participant also spoke Burmese.

Interviews

All interviews were conducted in English by the first author whose background is Malaysian, with over 10 years of experience conducting research and therapy with refugees from Burma, including the Karen ethnic group. The interviewer thus had 'prolonged engagement' with the culture and subgroup in question which enabled her to establish rapport with the participants. A semi-structured interview schedule was followed, with interviews lasting from 60 to 120 minutes apiece. Interviews began with broad, open-ended questions such as "What has been your experience resettling in the United States?" and were followed by deeper, more probing questions (please see Appendix for more information). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the interviewer. Transcriptions were completed directly following each interview to ensure accuracy. Throughout the process of transcription and analysis, pseudonyms were used to preserve anonymity (A01, etc.). A total of nine participants were interviewed, five of whom were interviewed for a second time for member checking and to follow up on emerging themes (Padgett, 2008).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted following the principles and techniques of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to understand how participants make sense of their personal and social world through an in-depth examination of their lived experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). Hence, studies involving IPA typically have smaller sample sizes to ensure an in-depth examination of narratives. As an inductive approach, IPA analysis is guided by the content of the transcripts. As the researcher became intimately familiar with the transcripts, underlying themes that ran through the texts naturally became apparent (Smith et al., 2012). Data analyses were primarily conducted by the interviewer.

The researcher began analyzing data by listening to audio recordings and following their transcripts. The next round of analyses involved a line-by-line examination of the transcripts, extracting keywords and phrases relevant to answering the research questions, and giving labels to encapsulate their meaning ("Indebted to parents"). Because the process of coding was conducted in multiple sessions over a period of several weeks,

the researcher had ample time to reflect on various themes that arose and could make connections within and across transcripts. Gradually, converging and diverging points from multiple transcripts became more apparent, through which the emerging themes and their interconnections were then organized into a hierarchy of sub-themes and master themes (Merriam, 2009). Four overarching and non-overlapping master themes were developed.

Data Trustworthiness

Four quality indices were employed to ensure the integrity of the qualitative findings: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking was used to establish credibility, after which participants' experiences were summarized and reflected to check for accuracy and clarify emerging themes. Dependability was enhanced via external audit; the second author, who was not involved in the initial stages of data collection and data analysis, examined the processes of data collection, data analysis, and the results. Transferability includes rich, detailed descriptions of participants' experiences, which offers readers an in-depth understanding of the phenomena. Characteristics of the Karen refugee population and the sociopolitical context of the United States refugee resettlement policy were described to facilitate the transferability of our findings to similar contexts. To strengthen the confirmability of findings, peer debriefing and a reflexive discussion with a consultant were held to challenge the researcher's personal biases and assumptions on the subject.

Results

Multiple themes emerged around the youth's resettlement experience and coping ability. Overall, the themes highlighted stress in addition to familial and community influences and supports for youth with a Karen refugee background, along with their own individual coping strategies, like hope. The themes captured what drives them to want to succeed academically and vocationally; tensions between their own and their family and community's needs; and their coping with the stress of resettlement through hope, persistence, religious faith, and community support. The specific labels for each of these themes include (1) motivations to succeed, (2) tensions between individual and collective needs, and (3) coping with the stresses of resettlement. The results are presented using pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants.

Theme 1: Motivations to Succeed

Theme 1 describes the participants' motivation to succeed, driven by the hardships and aspirations of refugee families who resettle in the United States. Unlike the parents of this people group whose employment prospects are limited, the children and youth of this people group have a promising future, due to their access to education in the United States. The participants' motivation for educational and vocational success were driven by a filial response to repay the sacrifices of their parents they paid in fleeing the war, leaving their

families, and resettling in the U.S. Due to their parents' language barriers and an altruistic desire to use their educational opportunities to pay it forward to help other less fortunate refugees in Burma and Thailand, the children and youth willingly take on the increase in family responsibility and obligation. These subthemes were labeled "Repay parental sacrifices,"; "Parents rely on their children,"; and "Pay it forward," as participants described verbatim.

Rpay Parental Sacrifices

All participants' narratives described the immensity of their parents' sacrifices that allowed them to escape the war that had been inflicted on their forefathers and to live a safer and more settled life in the United States. In choosing resettlement, their parents left their families and the familiarity of camp life for an unfamiliar environment, in order to provide their children with a better future.

> "[Coming here], they were hoping for, most importantly, us, for our future, and to be able to do more things that they didn't get to do [in the refugee camp]···I just know they had to sacrifice everything they had for us, you know, for us to have a better future." (008 NO)

The participants spoke dismally about how hard their parents had to work to provide for the family.

> "Because we get to live in here [in the U.S.], and get education so that they are the ones suffering because they have to work for us and get us food" (002 MP)

The low-skilled manual labor jobs held by their parents in the United States were physically demanding and required long working hours.

> "Their work is so hard. Night shift working 8 hours, my mom is working 11 hours, working Monday through Saturday, and you know, come home always feeling sore, hurt··· Sometimes I get depressed or just sad, and I would think a lot about like, I should do more sometimes, and... especially when they're getting older." (006 KH)

Recognizing their parents' sacrifices and hardships, participants feel indebted to them and strive to repay them by actualizing their parents' dreams and aspirations for them to attain educational and professional success.

> "In their [parents'] life, they like never accomplished something, they never completed school, like they never been to school··· They keep me going on because I have to think about them, and I have to think about how hard they try for me, and how they do stuff for me." (005 LK)

As one participant described, their achievement is seen as a collective accomplishment that acknowledges their parents xxx, "My success reflects them because they are my parents, they raised me." (007 SK).

Participants are also motivated to financially support their parents in the future so that they can relax and stop working.

> "I would be so proud just seeing them [having an] easy life, just living with no work... I don't want them to work no more, buy them a house, just let them live a simple, easy life." (009 SP)

To them, fulfilling their parents' dreams, helping them, and caring for them into old age is an expression of love through action.

> "We [Karen people] stay with our parents because we love our parents, we want to stay and help them… In our culture, it's not very common to say, "I love you", we don't say that. So, I want to let them know that I love them very much…" (009 SP)

Parents Rely on Their Children

Karen parents rely on their children for practical and financial support due to cultural and language barriers that impede their adjustment to the host community and country. Missed job opportunities and employment hardships were attributed to the lack of English language skills. "[Language barrier] prevents so many Karen people from achieving what they can achieve." (009 SP). Socially isolated from the broader community, Karen parents become dependent on the Karen community, especially their children, after resettlement, given their inability to communicate in English.

> "The Karen people, they're like blind because they can't communicate with other people outside of the Karen community… They always have to rely on somebody else for what they're gonna do in their life, you know. They can't just go out and look for a job that they want to do. They have to try to find a Karen community so when they go to work, they can talk to someone." (007 SK)

Karen children were expected to learn the language and culture to help the family adapt to a new country. The participants became responsible for interpreting and navigating systems from an early age. They interpreted phone calls and conversations, translated letters and documents, as well as negotiated with officials and institutions outside the family.

> "They [parents] rely on us to learn the language and the culture so we can tell them about it and teach them, [to] help the whole family with living here, so you don't always have to feel like everything is new… I help with my other [younger] siblings' schoolwork, their fill outs, appointments, and same thing with my parents, with their appointments and all that." (006 KH)

Some participants expressed pride in being able to help their parents, "It feels good to be able to help your family in a country that [uses] the language that they don't understand and you understand." (002 MP). Nonetheless, in spite of their willingness to support the family, youth are often overwhelmed by juggling

caregiving and household duties with school and work.

> "Very stressful because… I have to do almost everything to take care of my little brother, I had to wake up early in the morning to get them ready for school and everything, take them to the bus come back and get myself ready and then go to school, so it's kind of hard." (004 PM)

Pay It Forward

Being a refugee has made Karen youth more aware and appreciative of the opportunities and privileges not available to other refugees. "We are grateful as a whole," as 001 AR described, "We are more cautious. That's the thing, we are more aware and appreciative." They are also cognizant of help and support received as new arrivals, which drives them to pay the kindness forward and help others, especially in the Karen community.

> "Because of other people's help, I am where I'm at. So, being helpful to others is very important because it is like a passing thing." (007 SK)

The participants spoke resolutely about returning to Burma and Thailand someday. They believe that opportunities received in the United States are meant to be shared with people in their homeland, "God blessed us all like the Karen people to be able to live here and get to know and learn stuff here and bring it back there." (007 SK).

Furthermore, they added that the atrocities they witnessed and experienced as refugees propelled them to become a force of good in making the world a better place. To them, being altruistic and helping others yields a sense of purpose and meaning, because of the gift of resettlement with which they are blessed.

> "Because there is so much evil in this world, you know, that we [refugees] do see and know, and we can't do anything about it… If you're given an opportunity, you should also help other people because that's what humanity is like, helping others to live on this earth because sometimes it gets really hard and difficult, and being able to help other people is a blessing; blessing to them and to you." (007 SK)

Theme 2: Tensions between Individual and Collective Needs

Theme 2 describes participants' struggles in differentiating themselves as individuals from the collective expectations and aspirations of their family and communities for a better life in the United States. As refugees, they have had to make sense of their surviving a war that continues to afflict their people and homeland. In addition, they have had to grapple with the guilt of living a better life than other Karen people, including their own parents. The sub-themes of "Comparative suffering," "Be the good child," and "Separation-individuation challenges" emerged to depict participants' experiences and perspectives of the compounded effects of resettlement on their individual well-being.

Comparative Suffering

All participants appear to be straddling two worlds. Despite being naturalized as American citizens and having grown up in the United States, they still identify themselves as refugees. Seeing themselves as refugees stems from the ongoing challenges encountered since arriving in the U.S. More specifically, their ethnic identity derives from a strong sense of solidarity with those Karen people who are still being persecuted in Burma, and are living in refugee camps in Thailand.

> "Even though I have lived here [for] 10 years, 12 years, I would always say I'm a refugee because I am a refugee. Back there [in Burma], our ancestors are still refugees, still running, they're still having trouble, the government and all that stuff… As a refugee, you work hard, you go to school, you know, you learn, you have to do a lot." (006 KH)

Indeed, identifying themselves as Karen refugees inadvertently impacts their adjustment to life in the Global North. For instance, since the military coup in February 2021, they have been feeling helpless and guilty watching their people's afflictions from a place of safety and peace.

> "I know that I'm living in a good place but my family in Burma are not. I feel like I'm in their place and I'm experiencing what they are experiencing every day… A lot of people are dying, but I'm here living peacefully… It is a really sad situation because you cannot do anything for them." (002 MP)

Participants described a tendency to compare their distress to that which their parents and other Karen refugees in Burma and Thailand experience. Living in the U.S., they are dismissive of their own predicaments and feel inclined to push themselves to do their part by sacrificing more and working harder. One participant reported, "I just think to myself like I should be more grateful, like I shouldn't complain, this all the stuff I have in America" (009 SP). They also have an expectation to always be grateful for everything that they have in America.

> "What they [parents and elders] have gone through is twice worse. I think back in the refugee camps, they were doing the exact same thing, just twice more… If they can miss out on the fun, then I can miss out on the fun and take care of them as well. Me doing my part as part of this family, as part of this community, this is my part to uphold this standard [high expectations] even though it gets hard, it makes you cry." (001 AR)

Be the Good Child

Participants described doing everything that is expected of them, both out of obedience and compliance. Growing up, they strived to stay in school and get good grades; they helped their parents, family, and communities; and they were respectful, helpful, and stayed out of trouble.

> "It's like a lot of standards that you have to hold. If we disappoint… like whenever I get in trouble, I think that the whole world [Karen community] knows, not just our family, that I have not been good, like you know, been disrespectful and not been the best child, like I did something bad, like the troublemaker, and if you are troublemaker then it's like "Oooohhh"." (001 AR)

They felt that since they were held to extremely high standards by their parents and elders, failing to measure up would be a source of shame.

> Being in America came with a set of expectations that the participants felt pressured to meet. They were constantly being told not to waste educational opportunities available to a small percentage of Karen refugees fortunate enough to resettle in the United States. "My grandpa would say, "Don't waste it, don't waste it because they [Karen people] don't have opportunity back there [in Burma/Thailand]." (004 PM).

However, seen from the perspective of Karen refugees in the U.S., the constant pressure to fulfill the collective dreams and aspirations of their people grossly disregards their own difficulties they encounter while contending with a myriad of challenges at school. As 006 KH described, "She [mother] was very pushy and very strict… As a kid, I feel like I needed more "You can do this" kind of encouragement." They wished that their parents were more empathetic and encouraging with their school struggles.

> "You are held at such a high standard because you are in America… You are in a country that has so much opportunities. And I think, for that, they forget that we are human, you think that I'm capable of doing this just because I'm in this country." (001 AR)

Failure to meet their parents' expectations has profound implications. They felt obligated to continue their parents' efforts by attaining educational and vocational success, so that their sacrifices since fleeing Burma were not in vain. To that end, they were afraid of disappointing and failing their parents, and by extension, themselves.

> "They [parents] came all the way here to like give us opportunity to, you know, I guess have a better life. If we do anything to like jeopardize that, it's like waste their effort…. It's like, I owe them something, so I try my best to like not mess it up… If we do something, it would like fall back on them, you know. It would be like, I failed. I failed them, and myself, like it would be in vain, their sacrifice to come here." (003 JR)

Separation-Individuation Challenges

The process of discovering and becoming individuals in their own right with their own perspectives and goals are challenged by their role as dutiful and respectful child.

> "Here, you are expected to be the good child; you are expected to go to college, you are expected to be the face of your family… if your past family didn't go to school then you are the face of that person that is like, "Oh wow, you know that, his daughter or her daughter did go to college and he is like successful". It's like their way, their eyes of success is not what our eyes of success is as young adults, so that's why it's very difficult." (001 AR)

The participants tended to trade their individual needs for the collective demands of family and community, however, because disobeying and going against elders who have sacrificed and labored for them is a sign of ungratefulness and disrespect. As 004 PM shared, they frequently struggle to say no or disagree with parents and elders:

> "I don't want to do that [disagree with them] because, you know, I don't like talking back to my parents. I feel like it's not a good thing, talking back to your parents. They raised you and everything." (004 PM)

Even though they yearn for autonomy to navigate their own lives, as one participant described, "They just think you'll be successful in life if you follow their lead, if you listen to them, but sometimes we need our own space, like it's our life too." (004 PM). Developing and pursuing goals that differ from the family wishes requires them to overcome their fear of dishonoring and disappointing their parents.

> "I have fear that I will not meet the expectations that they set out for me. I just fear that I will not make them happy." (005 LK)

Taking a gap year to contemplate college and explore his career path, one participant grapples with disappointing his parents by potentially not going to college. Nevertheless, he found solace by remaining at their side.

> "I feel okay [not going to college]. They wanted me but they don't force me so I'm fine with it. Plus, there's other ways to be successful in life, but they don't know that… I feel like I'm letting my parents down, but I'm still here [living] with them so that brings me peace." (008 NO)

Theme 3: Coping with the Stresses of Resettlement

When discussing stresses related to participants' experiences of adaptation and integration in the United States, their strengths and resources were evident across individual, familial, and community levels. Theme 3 captures the coping strategies that participants utilized, to weather the myriad challenges since resettling in the United States. The sub-themes of "Hopeful for the future," "Persistence and determination," "Spirituality and faith," and "Community of refugee support" emerged to encapsulate the protective factors that participants attributed to their endurance and resilience.

Hopefulness for the Future

All participants reported that although resettlement was not without its challenges, it gave them and their families a sense of hope. As one participant described, through resettlement, they broke free from the chains of protracted displacement that bound generations before them, "We were like the first generation as a family in the 2000s to come here, so we broke the chain of having to suffer in the camp and having to now we have the opportunities, you know, to live and, and do what we want to do, you know, in the country with freedom." (007 SK) To them, resettlement marks a new beginning to educational and livelihood opportunities as well as promising possibilities for the future.

> "It [resettlement] is a start of a new life for my parents, and for me and my siblings, and to learn more and understand life more because, you know, the world is such a big place. If we were stuck in a refugee camp, you know, we would still be [in] a bubble… not seeing what the world has to offer, so having the opportunity is a new start. A very hopeful, very optimistic life, with a future." (006 KH)

Getting a second chance at life outside the refugee camp also allows participants to wonder and dream about their future. They feel hopeful that they can explore and become much more in life than they could within the confines of a refugee camp.

> "It's just, I guess a second chance, at like a better life, because for sure if I stayed there, I don't want to think about it, but I think I would be like married and have children (laughs). Like now, I do have a better opportunity to better myself, I could like do more, for one, or try to do more. I don't have to get married, like I could do it for me, by myself." (003 JR)

Lastly, being hopeful helped them withstand hardship. For instance, when confronted with a problem or a difficult task at school, they believe that they always have another opportunity to try again and do better. Indeed, approaching every day as a brand new day gives them hope and helps keep them going.

> "Every day feels like a new day, another day, yeah, a new day, new beginning… It keeps me hopeful and that.. like, going forward. I always tell myself whenever I feel bad like you know, like yesterday when I feel bad, 'Okay there's still tomorrow, you can fix it or you can do better'." (004 PM)

Persistence and Determination

All the participants felt incredibly proud to have graduated from high school. When discussing school-related challenges, all participants unequivocally credited their academic success to their persistence and determination to grow and learn.

> "I'm a determined person. Like I want to accomplish stuff and I am dedicated to do stuff... I don't

> want to give up easily because I tried so hard to get to this point, and I just don't want to give up in the middle of it." (005 LK)

They reported that despite feeling overwhelmed with self-doubt and frustration at times, they were determined to keep going until their goal was achieved. One participant shared, "I just keep trying even though it takes very long for me, I think I just go step by step and keep trying." (006 KH) At times, they needed breaks to de-stress before continuing with their efforts.

> "When it was hard, yeah, I kept trying until I got it. I never gave up. Sometimes it was frustrating... When I get frustrated, I just kinda doze off, I just kind of give up a little like I just think about something else instead of focusing... And then I will go back again, and try again until I get it." (009 SP)

On the whole, participants believed that they were capable of overcoming language and academic barriers in spite of their struggles. With every milestone achieved, their confidence grew. In addition, they kept challenging themselves to take more risks and aim higher.

> "I remember feeling like, "I can do something", so that kinda build confidence, I guess… I started doing stuff and challenging myself. By the time junior year rolled around, I was in AP English class! I mean, English? I didn't even know English back when I was here. That made me realize that I can do stuff, like I can achieve my goals and in school, academically." (007 SK)

Spirituality and Faith

As a consensus, all participants shared that their close relationship with God, and with religious practices such as prayer, helped them cope with and navigate the trying circumstances they encountered. As one participant indicated, "Prayers, yeah. It's like a close relationship with God. It gives us hope." (009 SP). Their spiritual beliefs provide a sense of hope and reassurance that a benevolent God is in control, even amidst suffering and life's uncertainties.

> "Sometimes I think to myself like, "Why? Why would God allow my parents to suffer things like this?" I think He is just testing us, there's something that we don't know the answer to… Even though my family is suffering, we are still very grateful, thankful for God. We still come to church and praise Him." (009 SP)

Moreover, participants shared that they trust God. Indeed, they believe that God has a reason for everything they go through. One participant described this mindset as one of surrendering to God's plan and purpose as what helps them trudge through hardships. Indeed, this perspective allows them to derive hope, and draw meaning from all their experiences.

> "God is doing what He is doing for a purpose. No season is ever wasted, so that's how I see it, whether I have to do something I don't like, like it's for a reason. Whether I get in a car accident, it's for a reason, like everything has a reason for the way it's here. Like here, like right now I'm here for a reason." (001 AR)

Furthermore, the participants' belief in a God who loves them unconditionally in turn teaches them to be more compassionate toward themselves. In contrast to their proclivity for self-criticism, self-compassion becomes an antidote to their feelings of failure due to falling short of perfection. For one participant, reading the Bible reminds her that she does not need to be perfect because the God who created her does not expect her to be perfect:

> "I would just take the bible and read the bible, and like God didn't say you didn't have to be this perfect or you know, this and that, I do that sometimes. God created me, so you don't have to be that perfect, sometimes I feel like when I do something wrong." (004 PM)

Community of Refugee Support

All the participants resettled in America at an early age with little-to-no proficiency in English. Given that language barrier was identified as a major stressor for several years after their arrival, support and help from teachers and Karen friends at school in learning the English language proved instrumental in helping them adapt to a new environment and culture. As recent arrivals, their families relied on the Karen community as cultural brokers to learn the new skills and customs necessary to live in a new country.

> "[When] we need help [with] something like applying stuff, they will explain or help us because they know that. We don't understand what, it is the first time we see those stuff. Before, we live over there [in Burma], it's totally different ⋯ [they] know our language and can explain it to us." (002 MP)

At school, as minority students new to learning the English language, they often felt overlooked and excluded. However, participants were especially grateful for teachers who were thoughtful in welcoming them and accommodated their needs. Ultimately, they were made to feel that they belonged in the classroom.

> "⋯ he [the teacher] made me really felt like I belonged there, he introduced me but he didn't make me talk... But, that made me less nervous because he made me fit in." (006 KH)

Finally, participants also pointed to friendship as an important source of emotional support. The camaraderie among friends helped them cope with any increase in academic stress. As one participant recalled, "We were all going through the same thing so we understood each other's struggles and no one was judging anybody ⋯we were all in it together." (001 AR). Indeed, being in the same boat as their peers normalized their predicaments and made them feel less alone. They were able to empathize with and help

each other as they weathered challenges together. "… we're struggling to you know, we're at the same thing." (003 JR)

Discussion

Through the amplification of Karen youths' lived experiences in the face of post-resettlement challenges, this study offers a unique contribution of describing the complexities of Karen youth upholding additional the family responsibilities and parental expectations, to fulfill the promise of educational opportunity after resettlement. Specifically, this study generates new knowledge about Karen youth's post-resettlement roles and responsibilities and their impact on their individual well-being, as they navigate tension between their refugee background and their growing desire for autonomy as emerging adults. Such impacts and potential protective factors are important to identify, given that refugee mental health difficulties may interfere with effective integration into a host society (Fike & Androff, 2016). The discussion links the findings of this study to previous literature, and addresses the implications for culturally sensitive counseling to both recognize and intervene in resettled refugee youth mental health needs in the context of their families and communities (Bartholomew, et al., 2015).

The qualitative results indicated that resettled youth still identify themselves as refugees, in part because of ongoing hardships following resettlement. Not only are youth cognizant of the barriers and difficulties that their parents encounter in the United States, Karen youth hold themselves accountable for the roles they play that greatly impact the well-being of their families. Current study findings support evidence from previous observations that language barriers and employment hardships led refugee parents to rely on their children to step into parental roles, such as helping the family navigate systems and shouldering household responsibilities from a young age (Bartholomew, et al., 2015). Hynie et al. (2012) cautioned that while children playing the role of "resettlement champions" can promote a family's well-being, juggling their post-settlement family responsibilities with their educational goals can be detrimental to their individual well-being. This study foregrounds Karen youths' struggle for independence and autonomy due to a deep sense of indebtedness toward their parents, for giving them a life denied to their forefathers. That is, as "the good child," youth must forsake individual views, interests, and goals to comply and be a child, becoming instead "the adult" who is approved by parents and elders as a way to express gratitude and love, make them proud, and bring honor to the family.

The theme of repaying parental sacrifices found in this study is not uncommon in literature on family obligations among immigrant and refugee communities (Yoo & Kim, 2020). Nonetheless, the reciprocal sense of duty and mutual sacrifice of participants and their parents toward the shared goal of improving the lives of their loved ones contrast with accounts of intergenerational conflict reported in other studies, offering an additional perspective on the "immigrant bargain" between youth and their parents (Koh et al. 2013; McCleary, 2017; McMichael et al., 2011). Indeed, the practice of prioritizing the well-being and goals of a larger collective such as family and community over one's personal desires is integral to the beliefs and values of Karen collectivist culture (Bjorklund, 2021).

Even so, the concern of failing after such a sacrifice was made by the family lingers and restricts youth from exercising their own autonomy to make decisions related to their future without fear or guilt. In one sense, the pressure to achieve for their family can serve as an external motivator to succeed, yet simultaneously place added strains on their mental health. This finding, while preliminary, suggests that refugee youth who themselves to high standards and being hard on themselves can potentially lead to stress, anxiety, and depression, which are reportedly prevalent with this population (Betancourt et al., 2012). Potential implications from this study highlight the need for counseling professionals to obtain a distinct understanding of the quandary that may exist for the Karen youth within the context of their family and refugee backgrounds.

As seen in previous research, the outcomes of this study caution against the adverse effects of educational aspirations and expectations of resettled refugee youth (Leo, 2021; McMichael et al., 2011; Morrice et al., 2020). While some studies indicated that the high aspirations fostered by families in the face of adversity can become a catalyst in refugee students’ educational success (Coll & Marks, 2012), this study underscores the emotional distress that refugee youth experience, while navigating the complicated and unfamiliar education system, along with difficult family circumstances that may impede their educational pursuits. Further, they aspire to use future financial resources, as well as the knowledge and skills gained through educational exposure in the United States, to give back to Karen refugees in Burma and Thailand. The desire to help other Karen in their home country, individuals who participants referred to as “our people,” was attributed to a sense of solidarity that seems intertwined with the values of collective caring and Christian love, which was also observed among Sierra Leoneans who resettled in Australia (Puvimanasinghe et al., 2014).

Interestingly, the failure to attain their imagined future can be attributed to personal deficits rather than a culmination of pre-migratory factors and systemic barriers confronting first-generation refugee families. This finding supports evidence from previous studies (Koh et al., 2013), yet this study adds that resettled youth also tend to minimize their post-resettlement hardships due to the greater suffering endured by their parents and other Karen refugees in displacement settings. Literature on survivor guilt among resettled refugee youth is limited; what there is is often subsumed into the discourse of post-traumatic stress syndrome (Goveas & Coomarasamy, 2018). Conversely, this study submits a more nuanced depiction of guilt that youth experience given their moral obligation to fully utilize the educational opportunities available to a small fraction of refugees fortunate enough to gain resettlement. However, one possible implication is that their hesitation to pinpoint directly any personal symptoms could lead counselors to improperly assess any clinical need. Based on the outcomes of this study, it seems plausible then that Karen youth would focus on making meaning of their family's suffering more than their own well-being and counseling needs. Perhaps a focus on Karen youths’ resilience within the context of their family could be used to demonstrate inner strengths rather than a clinical focus on symptoms only.

Limitations and Future Directions

All participants were derived from one geographical area located in a Southeastern state in the United States. Thus, the results were limited to the Karen youth population specific to one area and country. Generalizability may also have been limited by the use of a small-scale qualitative study. The intention of the study, however, was not to generalize but to understand the lived experiences of participants via in-depth engagement with narratives from a sample of Karen youth in the United States. Additional points of triangulation would further enhance data trustworthiness. Furthermore, our study could have benefitted from ethnographic methods to immerse in and capture the culture of the Karen youth. In addition, optimal next steps might include Karen youth as research consultants to co-design the research questions and conduct the interviews, which would allow for research participants to feel more comfortable and open.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

1. The experience of resettling in the U.S. can be different for everyone.
   Could you tell me about your experience coming to the U.S. and resettling in the U.S.?

2. What was it like for you to resettle in the U.S. as a refugee?
   a. What were your thoughts and feelings about resettling in the U.S. as you grew up?
   b. How have they shifted over time?

3. What are the challenges you have encountered?
   a. What makes these challenges difficult?
   b. What were your thoughts and feelings about the challenges then? How do you think about them now?
   c. What impact did it have on you, if any? Has that changed over time?
   d. What about your family, what were some of the challenges they faced that you were aware of? And how were you affected?
   e. What challenges remain today? What new challenges do you experience now?

4. Sometimes when refugees have left a place during war, they have seen or heard difficult things such as violence and loss. These experiences may be problematic in their new lives.
   a. Are you aware of the past experiences of fleeing and migrating that affected either you or your families' lives while resettling in the U.S.?
   b. In what ways were you affected? How severe were they?
   c. What did you or your family need to deal with?

5. In facing these challenges, how do you navigate or overcome them?
   a. How did you and your family cope? What helped, and what did not help?
   b. What do you think is yours, your family and community's strength?
   c. How are these strengths related to your culture or community values?
   d. What kind of help or support do individuals or families ask for and receive help within & outside the community?
   e. What advice would you give to service providers (e.g., resettlement or non-profit agencies or schools or churches) to help and support refugees who are resettling?
   i. What do you wish they could understand and improve upon?

6. What does coming to the U.S. and resettling here mean to you?
   a. How do you make sense of the events that have unfolded?
   b. In what ways are these meanings related to your culture and background?