RESETTLEMENT EXPERIENCE OF REFUGEES FROM
BURMA/MYANMAR TO SAN DIEGO, CA

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Resettlement Experience of Refugees from Burma/Myanmar to San Diego, CA

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In 2007 refugee resettlement organizations in San Diego, CA began accepting arrivals of refugees from Burma/Myanmar. Little ethnographic research had been done on their resettlement experience, as they are one of the newest groups of refugees to arrive to the United States. What research had been done focused on the ethnic and religious majority, the ethnic Christian Karen. This thesis is a qualitative research of refugees from Burma reconciling their expectations with the realities of their new life. This thesis gives ethnographic descriptions of the narrated reasons for choosing to resettle to the United Stated and the refugees' expectations and realities of their economic situation and transnational social fields after arrival to San Diego, CA. Theoretical frameworks of subjectivity, transnationalism, and structural violence are used to analyze and discuss the data. It addition, the data showed that the diversity of the group manifests into differential access to institutional resources, exhibiting the importance of incorporating the diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious variations of this particular group of refugees into both research and social service programs. [Keywords: Refugee, Burma, Myanmar, refugee resettlement, subjectivity, transnationalism, structural violence, diversity]
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

I became interested in the refugee resettlement experience while volunteering as an English tutor to a family of 10 who had just arrived in San Diego from Somalia. My commitment with the local aid organization was to visit the family for two hours a week for six months. After a year of weekly visits, we successfully moved through Basic English quizzes and overcame the challenge of pronouncing, “elbow.” Through their stories of being in a refugee camp and as I watched their interactions with each other, I learned about laughter, faith, evil, poverty, family, kindness, and resilience. They had experienced life at extremes and taught me far more than I could ever teach them. They took their English skills and moved to another state for better job opportunities. They left me with an awe of the human condition.

When they left San Diego, they said, “Trudi, don’t forget me.” They have inspired me to move forward in my education to gain skills as an advocate for refugees. To do this I utilize applied anthropological methods to provide space for refugees to share their experience and discuss their needs. As I began to look at the community for a research topic, refugees from Burma\(^1\) began to arrive in San Diego. At the time, most people had never heard of the country, let alone the civil conflict and human rights atrocities inflicted by the Burmese government. With no experience or cultural understanding of people from Burma, aid organizations were in need of research on the needs of people from Burma. This was a perfect starting point to begin to document the resettlement experience of refugees from Burma.

Often, people believe that leaving a refugee camp to come to the United States is an opportunity full of bounty; resettlement is a freeing from the struggles of poverty and

\(^1\) Note: The name Burma is used in this writing as in multiple other writings where the author is sensitive to the political situation and the official name change of Myanmar is not accepted by the minority population.
oppression. While leaving direct physical threat is advantageous, the struggle of resettlement is often underestimated unless you are working directly with refugees. In addition, a common thought is that the resettlement experience is the same for all refugees. Here in San Diego, the diverse group from Burma is experiencing resettlement differently depending on their own history and position within dynamic structures that are developing in the community.

Just recently, after sixty years of civil war, Burma has gained international attention. Many people have fled Burma over the past 20 years due to struggles for power that are steeped in violence and oppression of competing ethnic groups. Thailand has been one location where these people have gathered for safety, resulting in nine refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border that house over 100,000 people (United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees [UNHCR] 2010). The United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) in 2005 began to resettle a small percentage of these people in third countries. In 2007 the United States began participating as a host to resettled refugees and San Diego is a home to a growing population of refugees from Burma. They have navigated a process of ethnic oppression, forced migration, statelessness, movement among refugee camps, and decision making that has involved multiple governments, bureaucracies, and organizations. They arrive in the United States with limited assistance that is compromised by a challenging economic time for the city of San Diego.

Little ethnographic research has been conducted dealing with the refugees’ resettlement experience. There have been some dissertations and small articles written on the importance of understanding the cultural background of the refugees from Burma for educational purposes (for example, see Fraire 2008). The literature also reflects a surface understanding of refugee culture that perpetuates a perspective that refugees are weak. For example, in the journal Cultural Profile there is a cultural outline of the history of Burma, the diversity of ethnicities and languages, as well as crafts and practices (Barron et al. 2007). In the subheading, "Resettlement to the United States,” the refugees' shortcomings are highlighted visually as large text in the margins of the article. While cultural understanding is extremely important, the way that it is presented can create a perpetual image of refugees from Burma as powerless and in need of help.

Existing literature often focuses on the largest minority ethnic group, the Karen. While 47% of the refugees from Burma in San Diego are Karen, there are eight other ethnic
groups also residing in San Diego (Young et al. 2010). Within ethnic groups, religious affiliations are varied as well. Much of the literature generalizes the Karen as being Christian, although 44% living in San Diego and surveyed in 2010 were not Christian (Young et al. 2010). There is a large portion of the population not represented in the literature.

This thesis research digs beyond a generalized cultural understanding and looks deeper into the experiences of refugees from Burma. This study will take into account not only the Karen Christian group, but also explore the experiences of the diverse ethnic, religious, and political refugees from Burma. It is also an attempt to go beyond the biased idea of refugees as "defenseless victims" (Pupavac 2006:1), or as "depoliticized subjects who lack the capacity to sustain themselves, let alone support others" (Brees 2010:282).

Internships with two refugee resettlement organizations and mentoring refugee families have given me the opportunity to spend time with families in their homes and to see the processes that aid organizations utilize to resettle refugees. I also did a two-month internship in Mae Sot, Thailand, a Thai-Burma border town, with the community of migrants from Burma. The refugees I talked with expressed a desire to share their story. For the refugees, this desire is layered with expectations that are different from their realities. They come to the United States with hopes of freedoms and financial security and better opportunities for their children. Upon arrival, they are placed in poverty stricken areas with few job opportunities. They do not speak the language, nor are their skills adequate for jobs available in the inner city. The challenge to overcome the unexpected poverty is so frustrating that they sometimes have desires to return to the refugee camp.

Three theoretical perspectives guide this study: notions of subjectivity, structural violence, and transnational migration. I will demonstrate how these important theoretical frameworks are interwoven and help explain the ethnographic data. Notions of subjectivity, in the sense that the refugees’ past and current experiences shape their sense of self and create an experiential perspective and relationship to their worlds, guide my research. Anthropologists who study issues of migration, which include refugees, have recognized the daily life of many migrant groups as one embedded in transnational spaces including living between two or more nation-states through participation in the social, cultural, economic, religious, and political activities of both localities (Foner 2003: 38). Utilizing transnational theory, I explore the refugees’ expectations prior to arrival in San Diego and their
participation in transnational social fields. Structural violence became evident during analysis of the data as these refugees are marginalized in Burma, the refugee camp, and in the United States as resettled refugees.

This study uses the qualitative data-gathering methods of ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews with participants and service providers. The refugees’ economic situations are described in addition to how access to resources shapes their experience of resettlement. Participants were chosen to expand on the populations covered in past literature, including diverse ethnic and religious groups in addition to the largest group, who are the Christian Karen. This thesis will discuss these diverse experiences, give voice to the refugees’ expectations and realities of resettlement, and discuss their institutional access to resources.

This thesis seeks to answer two major questions: What are the economic realities of refugees from Burma and how do these realities differ from their expectations before resettlement? What were the expectations of refugees with regard to transnational political activity, and to what extent have they been able to meet these expectations in San Diego? In addition, the data reveal an ethnic tension among the group, and the aid community, unintentionally, contributes to this tension. Understanding these questions both gives the refugees a voice in their experience by sharing what they are struggling with and informs aid organizations on how they may better support the success of the community.

Before the data and findings are presented, Chapters 2 through 5 will give background information. The resettlement process, statistics, and general background of the conflicts in Burma are discussed in Chapter 2. The following chapter is a review of the anthropological literature on refugees and the theoretical frameworks used to analyze the data. Chapter 4 discusses the research methods, followed with Chapter 5 as an ethnographic description of weekly visits.

The data drive the next two chapters, with Chapter 6 exhibiting the narrated reasons for the refugees to choose to come to the United States and Chapter 7 discussing the research questions in depth. Conclusions and suggestions are then given in Chapter 8.
CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND

BACKGROUND/STATISTICS

This chapter provides background material about major organizations, defines terms, and provides statistics of refugees internationally and locally. This chapter also provides a brief history of Burma and describes the conflict that is producing refugees.

Refugees

According to the UNHCR (2010), there were some 42 million forcibly displaced people worldwide at the end of 2008, 14 million of whom have refugee status. The UNHCR’s definition of a refugee, based on the 1951 U.N. Refugee Convention, is a person who:

owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country. (UNHCR 2012)

Thus, there are particular criteria that a person must prove in order to gain the status of refugee. This status allows the person particular rights internationally. Often this means residing in “camps” in a second country. These camps are created to provide temporary shelter until the conflict in their home country is resolved; however, many refugee camps become long term due to continuing conflicts. The ultimate goal for the UNHCR is for the refugees to return home. Often repatriation is not an option; thus, resettlement to a third country is a strategy used by the UNHCR for protection of displaced persons. The proportion of resettled refugees to the general population is higher in the United States than any other country. With this said the majority of refugees live in developing countries and one third of refugees worldwide live in refugee camps (UNHCR 2012).

As with most host countries, the United States operates under the UNHCR’s definition of a refugee. For over thirty years, the United States has functioned under the policies established in The Refugee Act of 1980. In 2008, resettlement of 86,460 of the 14...
million refugees was completed with 60,191 of them resettled in the United States (USCRI 2009).

**San Diego Resettlement**

Locally, San Diego is home to an estimated 90,000 – 150,000 refugees (Barraza 2011), served by four federally financed resettlement organizations; The International Rescue Committee (IRC), Catholic Charities, Jewish Family Services, and The Alliance for African Assistance. Among the four organizations, approximately 4000 refugees were resettled in San Diego during 2009, the latest year available for data analysis. In addition to resettlement organizations, multiple aid organizations, businesses, groups, and individuals contribute to the assistance of refugees in San Diego. The Refugee Forum lists over thirty organizations that participate in monthly community dialogue regarding refugees (San Diego Refugee Forum 2011). Most of the refugees resettled to San Diego, with exception Iraqi refugees, are placed in the City Heights neighborhood.

A demographic survey with the local community of refugees from Burma was conducted in 2010 (Young et al. 2010). According to Young et al. (2010), there are an estimated 300 refugee families from Burma residing in San Diego with an average size of 4.5 persons. While a large portion of the population is ethnically Karen, the survey showed that 53% of the population reported being from one of eight other ethnic groups. Nearly half of the population is of working age while only 16% are employed. The majority of the population in San Diego, 82%, was resettled from refugee camps in Thailand (Young et al. 2010:8).

**The Resettlement Process**

The majority of the participants of this study came from one of the nine refugee camps in Thailand while two came from Malaysia. The pre-arrival experience of the participants from Malaysia was far different due to there not being established refugee camps in Malaysia. Their process was to smuggle the oldest children into Malaysia where the children would then report to the UNHCR office and have their families meet them there for resettlement. These stories are very interesting and show diversity among the group;
however, for the purposes of the thesis, I will discuss the process of resettlement from a refugee camp.

Due to sensitivity of trauma, I stayed away from asking questions about the conditions of Burma or the refugee camp. The questions were to focus on resettlement and living here in San Diego. In their responses to resettlement, refugees sometimes spoke of their experience in the refugee camp and what life was like prior to resetting to give a context of how their lives have changed.

**From the Refugee Camp**

In 2005, the UNHCR came to the refugee camps in Thailand and registered the inhabitants. Lack of registration with the UNHCR during 2005 meant the refugees could not apply to go to a third country. Some of the participants were excited to show me that they still had their registration papers. One grandmother went into the back room and came out with the white plastic bag with blue IOM (International Office of Migration) letters on it. (Every refugee clings to this bag tightly to when walking off the plane into America as it is the bag that contains his or her official papers.) She pulled out a stack of 8.5 x 11 copies of their registration while telling me, “I looked around and there was nothing changing in the refugee camp. So, I decided there would be more opportunities if we resettled.” Most all of them stated that the final decision was based on their children and their desire for them to have education and freedom.

There are many countries to which they could have resettled: Australia, Netherlands, Canada, Japan, and so on. I asked one family “Why the United States?” They said, “The only thing you can think of in the refugee camp is ‘I have to get out of here.’ The process to go to the other places takes more than two years; the United States is about a one-year process” (field notes, May 2012).

The UNHCR staff interview and conduct a health screening on all refugees who are being resettled. After the UNHCR approves the individual families for resettlement the process of deciding where the refugees will reside begins. It was explained to me during my internship with the IRC that at the beginning of the year all of the resettlement organizations working in the United States get together and negotiate among each other which cases they will take on. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) then issues a loan to the
refugees for the air flight to the resettlement host country. This loan is interest free and to be paid back within 46 months. I would like to point out clearly that the refugees come to the United States with a debt. This debt is approximately (depending on airline prices) $1000 per person as soon as they step foot on the plane. The IOM then prepares the refugee for leaving the refugee camp with a set of clothing and shoes, documentation, flight ticket, and a limited (usually a few hours long) orientation of what to expect in their new country of residence.

**The Resettlement Organizations**

A couple of weeks or so prior to arrival, the resettlement organization in the United States is allocated a budget per refugee. This budget will be $900 to $1100 per refugee to be spent on their personal resettlement needs; the remaining balance is then issued by check to the refugee. Each organization is required to give $900 per person; yet they have the discretion to use the remaining $200 on other cases with greater need. The IRC simply gives each refugee the full $1100, while the Alliance for African Assistance (AAA) will do so only if it is a small family. Their justification for this is that a multiple person case will need more money to secure housing and household goods as opposed to a single person case. The case managers receive a package from the IOM containing health and personal information of each member of the family along with flight arrival information. The case manager then secures housing and begins to furnish the apartment based on any medical needs.

On the day of arrival, the case manager will pick the family up at the airport and drive them to their apartment. A “culturally appropriate meal” is provided at the apartment and a brief orientation to the home is given. The case manager is then responsible for bringing the refugees into the office within 48 hours of arrival for an orientation of services, scheduling, and providing translation and transportation for welfare and health screening appointments. Home visits are scheduled five days after arrival and then every 30 days until 90 days after arrival, for a total of four visits. Case managers also orient the newly arriving refugees to the local community, take them shopping at the local grocery market, enroll children in school and adults in ESL classes and set them up with appropriate job training and programs. At the end of 90 days, the case manager issues the remaining resettlement money in the individual refugee family budget.
Volunteers

As with most non-profit organizations, the resettlement organizations rely heavily on volunteers; however, volunteers are limited in both numbers and time. Both the IRC and Alliance for African Assistance have their volunteer coordinator position filled by an AmeriCorps volunteer. The position inherently has a high turnover rate; the AmeriCorps volunteer is often a recent college graduate transitioning into the work force or taking a year before starting graduate school who committed to one year with the organization. While this is fiscally beneficial for the aid organizations, there is a lack of experience among the volunteer coordinators and often projects are created but not completed.

BURMESE POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Burma is a unique country with a history of an enduring military dictatorship ruling over one of the most ethnically diverse populations. It is shaped by a colonial history different than most and has been ignored by the international community until recently.

Militarized Government

Burma has been in an ethnic civil war since its independence in 1948. This has resulted in the military isolating the country from the international community, nationalizing all business, news and education, sheltering themselves from criticism, and committing human rights violations against ethnic minorities (Smith 2007).

Ethnic conflict continues in the highlands where ethnic minorities desire autonomy and division of power between the state and local government (Fink 2001; Kipgen 2010). The military regime, named the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), seeks to control natural resources in the highland areas and is trying to create a “modern state” by building roads and other forms of infrastructure (Fink 2001). By means of forced labor, sexual violence, and forced relocation, the military regime attempts to achieve their goals by invading and taking control of territory in the highlands where ethnic minorities live (Fink 2008). Several ethnic groups have created nationalist armies to protect their territories. Christina Fink (2008) states that the past 20 years have brought ceasefire agreements but have not stopped the civil war; instead, there has been an increase in the governing military’s armed forces.
Given a history of isolation in a militarized nation and a civil war, it is important to look at the experiences of the people with the understanding that “militarization creeps into ordinary daily routines” as Cynthia Enloe (2000) states. Keeping this in mind will help inform the understanding of the participants’ subjective responses and reactions as they move forward with their lives.

**Current Political Movement**

In 2011, the Burmese government began political reforms. Thein Sein became president and there were releases of political prisoners, including the iconic political opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. Reforms brought international attention as Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) approved Burma to chair the organization in 2014. In addition, in December, 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton became the first U.S. diplomat to visit the country in over 50 years. She visited with the president Thein Sein as well as Aung San Suu Kyi, and encouraged more development toward democratic processes. Following Clinton’s visit, President Barack Obama became the first U.S. president to visit the country. In April, 2012, Aung San Suu Kyi, running as leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD) party, won a seat on the Burmese parliament.

As peace agreements with ethnic minorities, democratic elections, and releases of political prisoners continue, other ethnic conflicts are flaring up. The ethnic Rohingya who practice Islam in the Eastern State of Rakine have suffered from a lack of recognition of citizenship in Burma and Bangladesh. The tensions have escalated to riots and human rights abuses by the Burmese military. In addition, there have been reports of Buddhist business owners refusing to provide services to Muslim patrons.
CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The following will review the literature and theoretical frameworks: subjectivity, structural violence, and transnationalism. However, before beginning the theoretical discussion, I will start with a review of anthropological refugee research in the United States.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL REFUGEE STUDIES IN THE UNITED STATES

David W. Haines (2010), in his book Safe Haven?: A History of Refugees in America, blends the history of refugee resettlement policy of the United States and the experience of the refugee. He also discusses the importance of understanding ethnic and gender identities and how the legal definition of refugee shapes the experience. This is important in understanding the subject positions of the refugees.

As mentioned before, 86,460 of the 14 million refugees were resettled worldwide in 2008 and the United States resettled 60,191 of them (USCRI 2009). When discussing the history of refugees in the United States, Haines (2010) frames the discussion with the United States’ moral consideration of accepting refugees with the dynamic relationship of identity and the definition of refugee. He divides the moral element of the United States participation into four main moral commitments: ideological, responsibility, fair share, and humanitarian. These moral commitments are not only reasons for acceptance of refugees into the United States but can also limit their acceptance or become reasons for rejection. Taking on a large portion of worldwide refugees is an example of what Haines (2010) calls the moral commitment to international “fair share.” However, as mentioned above, most of refugees live in developing countries with the majority living in refugee camps (UNHCR 2011). The moral commitment to humanitarian aid that Haines discusses is “reflected” by the definition of ‘refugee’ set out by the United Nations mentioned above.

This moral commitment to humanitarian aid is convoluted and limited by the legal definition of refugee (Haines 2010). Refugees are fleeing due to persecution based on “five
specific grounds: race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group” (Haines 2010:173). Refugee status is then reflective of an identity based on proof of fear within the realm of these five specific reasons.

Each of Haines’ (2010) moral commitments that determine acceptance of refugees into the United States is fluid and changing over time (Haines 2010:29). What have also been in flux are the people who have been fleeing due to conflict (Haines 2010:29). The multiple variations of refugees leave Haines to say that, “the refugee story can only be told fully in the stories of individual people” supporting the methodology of ethnographic research (2010:29).

With that said, there are some generalizations that can be seen amongst refugees that focus on age and gender, as well as what Haines calls ‘human capital’ and ‘social and cultural capital’ that predict their success and struggles in adapting to life in the United States. Human capital is what the refugees bring with them and is a factor for acclimation to the United States; for Haines (2010), this is the trinity of literacy, educational background, and occupational skills. The level of skills that each refugee brings with them will factor into their resettlement experience. Social and cultural capital includes cultural beliefs and practices as well as family and other social networks that refugees have in the United States. The political and cultural climate of their home will “color their expectations about the structure of the American political and economic systems – and about the agencies that aim to help them in their resettlement” (Haines 2010:33).

While refugees can be studied in similar ways to any other immigrants, there are differences in their experience that should be considered. Haines (2010) notes that there is a distinction that is often an oversimplified line drawn between immigrant and refugee; the immigrant is thought of as migrating voluntarily with full choice while the refugee is forced to migrate with little agency. Drawing a distinction like this leaves little room to discuss contrary or varied situations. Nevertheless, the concept of forced migration does have legal and practical distinctions with implications that differ for refugees. Regardless of the level of agency that refugees exercise in fleeing, Haines (2010) states that the decision to flee is often done rapidly, exposing them to dangers as well as financial and social losses.
THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Theoretical frameworks of subjectivity, structural violence, and transnationalism frame the analysis and understanding of the data.

Subjectivity

Much of what Haines discusses relates to subjectivity. The United States has a particular background that creates a subject position for the refugee, all while the refugees themselves have a history and identity that shape how they play out that subject position. While the analysis of the data gathered during research will draw on other multiple theoretical frameworks, the overarching theoretical framework of this study is subjectivity. Subjectivity is a helpful framework to understand the past, in-between, and imagined experiences of refugees as they are navigating a transitional period of resettlement.

In *Subjectivity: Ethnographic Investigations*, Biehl et al. (2007) discuss the development of the theory of subjectivity through a collection of essays that derived from a seminar series. The authors are showing that anthropologists apply the theory of subjectivity in various ways. The collection of essays emphasizes the need for anthropology to focus on the lived experience of the individual to inform theory. The authors encourage the use of ethnographic data about individuals to show how the individual and the collective are interwoven rather than separate, creating intersubjectivities (Biehl et al. 2007:53). With ethnographic work on individuals’ subjectivity, Biehl et al. (2007) argue, we can better understand moral decisions and how we create and change meaning of things.

While the book is primarily about mental illness, the theoretical ideas discussed can be applied to the experience of refugees. Simply, I define the term subjectivity as lenses created by lived experience through which a person views the world, including him or herself. These lenses are created with a dynamic process of the individual and the collective. Society will define a subject position and the lived experiences will play out that subject position. Where an individual is situated within a society will influence their subjective experience. For example, Kleinman and Fitz-Henry (2007) discuss how those who are marginalized will experience a subject position differently than those at the center of economic and political power. “Experience, then has much to do with the collective realities as it does with individual translations and transformations of those realities.” (Kleinman and
Fitz-Henry 2007:53). Refugees, like those who have experienced mental illness, are at the margins of society. As Downum (2013) states, subjectivity is a “paradigm that provides general direction to research, pointing toward a consideration of the emotional experiences of individuals inhabiting a similarly constructed marginalized space” (2013:8). The collective realities of refugees and the community of San Diego, as well as the individual realities of past experience and current situation, will informed their experience and subjectivity.

The writings in *Subjectivity* also encourage us to understand that a person’s subjectivity is not static, directional, or even progressive; rather, it is a moving, dynamic, and fluctuating process of the human condition. The varied, fluid, and dynamic characteristics of refugees, spatially and temporally, fit well with the theory of subjectivity. The past experience of the refugee will create a lens of their subject position; as they shift to different communities, they will have to adjust to the collective creation of that subject position. An individual will have a range of subject positions that will be expressed in different environments (Moore 2007; Bhabha 1994). “The value, then of a theory of the subject is that it provides a way of understanding how a complexly constituted self identifies with and/or resists and transforms various subject positions available within a particular social, cultural, economic and political context” (Moore 2007:41). Subject positions have been formed by an experience before refugees were resettled, often by being at the margins of institutional power. Then, within a new society, there will be a reforming or movement of what these subject positions mean or how the combination of new subject positions and old subject positions color the view. Some life background information of what their ethnic, political, social, and lived experience were gathered during the study to inform the subjectivity of the refugees prior to arrival. Understanding what they have experienced in the past will help us understand why and how they make decisions in the present.

While life backgrounds are key components to understanding one’s subjectivity, Homi Bhabha (1994) encourages moving beyond the origin narrative of the subject to look at the ‘in-between’ spatial and temporal areas of the subject. It is in the ‘in-between’ that Bhabha (1994) claims the individual and or communities find their identities (2). “It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (Bhabha 1994:2). Prior to resettlement, migrants from Burma are often
in a stateless condition. They may be an unrecognized ethnicity to the Burmese government, an undocumented migrant worker in Thailand and or a refugee in a refugee camp. They may be all of these more than one time before resettlement. During resettlement, refugees find themselves in another “in-between”, navigating their new environment, shifting roles, and moving from being stateless persons to a recognized legal resident of the United States.

**Structural Violence**

During data analysis I found the theoretical framework of structural violence, the systematic wielding of violence (Farmer 2001), helpful when discussing the economic process of resettlement. Johan Gaultan is credited for encouraging the discourse of structural violence (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004; Farmer 2001). Since Gaultan, multiple anthropologists have shaped the theory of structural violence while using it as a means of analysis.

Structural refers to historical, institutional, and political systems, policies, processes, and service of a particular social structure. Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois (2004) describe violence as a continuum, one that ranges from acts exerting physical pain through attacks on an individual’s worth. Marginalization, poverty, racism, sexism are examples of violations to an individual’s worth (Farmer 2001; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004).

In addition to the range or types of violence inflicted on a victim, violence can be apparent and obscured (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004). Farmer (2001) describes structural violence as often unconsciously applied by all who are within a particular social order. Oftentimes, violence is veiled or justified as an act for the common good or the moral right, hidden, or unrecognized since it is normal by all within the social structure. This normative action is imbedded in systems or institutional structures.

Those in poverty are victims of structural violence as they are reliant on systems of social services for their survival (Farmer 2001; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004). It is not that social services are inherently violent, but the hidden, normative, and justified for the common good aspects of social services that have the potential to be violent. Farmer (2001) encourages anthropologists to utilize a historical, political, economic, and material approach to analyzing the effects of structural violence with marginalized people.
While Haines (2010) discusses the structures that refugees navigate during resettlement, as well as the historic moral obligations of the U.S., I found little in the literature that discusses the structural violence that refugees experience during resettlement. During my data analysis, I recognized that refugees navigate structural violence of oppression and poverty, from the oppressive Burmese government, to the systems of the refugee camp, and the economic situations of their resettlement. Often it is thought that refugees are in better conditions here than in the refugee camp. While in some cases this may be relatively true, to ignore the structure of poverty that they live in while in the U.S. is in itself structural violence. Refugees are victims of structural violence through the resettlement process resulting in poverty.

**Transnationalism**

Transnationalism frames the questions of this study in more concrete terms. The collection of essays from *American Arrivals* (Foner 2003) informs the anthropological perspective of migration, immigration, and transnational studies. *American Arrivals* emphasizes the historic relationship of anthropology with the study of migration, including immigration and transnationalism. The chapters highlight how the interdisciplinary nature of migration studies has been a place for anthropologists to contribute and will continue to be a space for collaboration. While immigration studies were slow during the years following WWII, anthropology was looking at urban-rural migration patterns that included kinship, gender, and identity studies from both the push and pull dimensions leading to both sides of the migration chain to influence theoretical frameworks of transnationalism (Foner 2003:10-14).

Nina Glick-Schiller (2003) contributes by discussing transnational social fields, “observable social relationships and transactions” between, across and within national borders (2003:107). When analyzing social fields, the focus is on the changes in “social actions, ideas, and values as people are linked together by means of interlocking networks” (Glick-Schiller 2003:107). She explains that this gives us the ability to look at how people are part of two or more different national spaces. This study aims to uncover the social fields of transnational activity that the refugees may be participating in and/or creating as they are adjusting to life in San Diego.
Brettell (2003) discusses the analysis of the city. The history, economics, political policies, and institutions of the city will shape the experience of immigrants. Thus, the city should be part of analysis in research (Brettell 2003:190). The dynamics of City Heights with its low-income housing and high population of refugees from around the world is an important facet in the shaping of the experience of the refugees from Burma.

Before arriving in San Diego, refugees often have been living in multiple locations and transnationally. While in Mae Sot, I learned that movement of this group of refugees has not happened over one mass exiting directly to a refugee camp; rather, people have been flowing in and out of Burma and Thailand as stateless persons, meaning that no nation state recognizes them as a citizen, for over twenty years. Many of the resettled refugees have a history of being refugees in multiple refugee camps, as well as migrants in Thailand, Bangladesh, and Malaysia, sometimes moving back to Burma. The borders of Burma and Thailand are porous, just as the borders of the refugee camps themselves are. Before being resettled, the refugees have lived in transnational social fields with different rules. In “Theorizing Migration in Anthropology,” Caroline Brettell (2000) discusses how anthropology is sensitive to place and focuses on the “articulation between the place whence a migrant originates and the place or places to which he or she goes” (2000:114). As Inge Brees (2010) discusses in her research on refugees in Mae Sot, the interactions of policies from both countries, Burma and Thailand, influence how they participate in transnational activities (2010:283). Intentions of the study were to see to what extent refugees expected to have political transnational activities while living in the United States. As discussed in Chapter 7, further time and research is needed to answer these questions.

Susan Banki (2006) conducted a study in Japan among refugees from Burma and found that “transnational acts form a three-way relationship with legal recognition and local community and that because of conflicting relationships among local refugee communities, refugees from Burma with higher degrees of legal recognition in Japan do not necessarily expand transnational spaces” (2006:36). This leads to questions of what happens in the United States.
CHAPTER 4

METHODS

The methods used in this research included anthropological qualitative ethnographic observations, home visits, interviews with 16 households, two semi-structured group interviews, and three expert interviews: The Karen Organization board president, the Crawford High School incoming student teacher and advisor for the Karen Youth Group, and a Karen resettlement case manager. I observed the environment, activities, living conditions, networks, and behaviors of the refugees. Interviews were conducted from March 2012 through December 2012.

Prior to conducting research, I had two years of experience volunteering weekly with one refugee family since their arrival, and three-month internships with two different resettlement organizations. In addition, I participated in a two-month internship with a migrant community based organization in Mae Sot, Thailand, a border town with Burma. I have had the pleasure of spending over three years visiting with strong, resilient, funny, and kind people. I have witnessed arrivals to the United Stated, school gatherings, cultural gatherings, death, birth, weddings, car purchases, religious gatherings, divorces, homework…daily life.

Before conducting individual household interviews, I had an information discussion with community leaders: The Karen Organization board members, resettlement managers and a pastor of a church. Community leaders gave input and assisted with translation of the consent document.

ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS

My experience has shown that spending time with the families in their home and in community spaces gives them the opportunity to get to know me. Often, the refugees are very quiet, respectful, and hesitant to ask questions and only give simple answers when asked a question if they do not know you. Just as with anyone, with comfort and trust came more conversation and information. Spending time with them built trust and understanding of the
purpose of the research. The more time I spent with the refugees the more they open up about their experience and viewpoints.

Ethnographic observations consisted of weekly visits with multiple families. These weekly visits consisted of eating food together, tutoring children, teaching English, looking over mail, and sharing current events with each other. Invitations to religious and community gatherings also gave me an opportunity to observe large gatherings. Life events such as the birth of a child, the death of a family member, and marriage celebrations were also parts of the ethnographic data. Daily life exhibited was, at times, contrary to the answers given in the semi-structured interviews.

**HOUSEHOLD SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

Each participating household was visited a minimum of two times. Initially the design was to meet three times; however, there were a number of interviews that only required two visits due to their familiarity with me. Three main topics were covered in the interviews. The first was to gather background information. As transnationalism and subjectivity guide this study, each individual’s background will create a subjective perspective that will be reflected in how the refugees see the world today. The questions on this topic focused on gathering demographic and life history information, addressing ethnic identity, religious backgrounds and affiliation, and previous refugee camp locations. The second interview was to focus on the expectations and realities of each family’s economic situation after arriving in the United States, as well as their political knowledge or activity with Burma while in the United States. The questions focused on what they expected life in the United States to be like and how their actual conditions are. To follow up, the third interview was more open ended to seek any information that needed additional clarification from the previous interviews. I wanted to give the participant an opportunity to add or clarify any information given or to ask any questions they may have for me. Initially the research design was for individual participants; however, this proved to be culturally inappropriate as the whole household participates in discussions. Household participants would include the adults who resided in the home based on their availability. If a household did not have a member who spoke English, a translator accompanied the interviews with me.
GROUP SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

The Karen Organization of San Diego gathered two groups for a semi-structured interview in their office. The first consisted of elders and community leaders. The second consisted of young adults over the age of 18 and I will refer to this group as the Karen youth in the discussion chapters.

SAMPLING

The participant sample was not probabilistic; rather, the sample was a stratified diverse sampling of ethnic and religious relationship with the Burmese State. Recruitment was begun through connections that I had established within the community as a volunteer and during a prior internship. Participation then snowballed from suggestions for further participants by interviewees. Therefore, the sampling was the convenience type, using snowballing. The literature often focuses on the largest minority group, the Karen. While the Karen is the largest group and comprise 47% of the refugees from Burma in San Diego, there are eight other ethnic groups also in San Diego (Young et al. 2010). Within ethnic groups, religious affiliations are varied as well. Much of the literature generalizes the Karen as being Christian, when only a slim majority, 56%, of the Karen surveyed in 2010 in San Diego were Christian (Young et al. 2010). While the scope of this study was not able to encompass all levels of diversity and variety that are in the refugee community, an effort was made to include as many ethnic and religious groups as possible. Table 1 will show the sample distribution of ethnicity and Table 2 the religious distribution of the participants. Of the 16 households sample, six were Muslim, five were Christian, three were Buddhist, and one was Animist.

Table 1. Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Muslim Burmese</th>
<th>Karen</th>
<th>Burmese</th>
<th>Chin</th>
<th>Kachin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The data in tables 1 and table 2 do not include the participants of the group interviews.
Table 2. Religion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>Buddhist</th>
<th>Animist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Value</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The data in tables 1 and table 2 do not include the participants of the group interviews.

FIELD NOTES AND ANALYSIS

Field notes were recorded after each observation or semi-structured interview in Microsoft word. The Field notes were then coded with the use of MAXqda software. Field notes as well at the final thesis are written with no names of the participants. Identifying details, such as gender, names, and locations are altered in an effort to protect individuals’ anonymity.
CHAPTER 5

ETHNOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION

Weekly visits with refugees for the past four years inform this research. I cannot say what it is like to be a refugee in San Diego. I can only observe and offer my own perceptions of any experience I have with research participants. Furthermore, I recognize that I cannot completely separate my bias, objectives, and feelings from my observations. My own subjectivity colors what I see, how I observe, and how I feel about what I witness. Likewise, their perspective of our interaction influences how and what they share with me. I enter the refugees’ lives as a person who may be able to help them; initially, as a ‘white’ volunteer. I am happy to say that a few of them have become my friends, or as they would say, “my brothers and sisters.”

I have a wealth of ethnographic data; however, they are not all applicable to the specific topics of the thesis. This chapter consists of the small ethnographic details of my visits. These stories include some descriptions of their environment, the value of volunteers, and an example of navigating the healthcare system. The following are both my observations of their daily life as well as my internal dialogue and experience as I spent time with them. They are included to inform the results and discussion of the succeeding chapters.

COMMUNITY

The participants that I spoke with for this research told me of the pleasures they get to enjoy now that they are living in San Diego. They have freedoms and choices that were limited in the refugee camps. However, their living conditions in San Diego are not ideal. They live in small pest-infested apartments in the low-income neighborhood of City Heights. Extended families, grandparents, adult children, aunts, uncles, and grandchildren often share small apartments. Frequently, the choice to live together is for both financial and social reasons. In Burma and Thailand, they live with extended families and share the cost and responsibilities of caring for children and elderly. The cost of living in San Diego creates the necessity to continue this practice.
Their community extends beyond family. As long as they speak the same ethnic language, it is acceptable to walk into another’s home and make oneself at home. For example, a participant explained sharing by saying, “Even if you have not met someone before, you can go to their house, eat, and sleep, whatever you want for a short period of time” (field notes, June 2012). During visits, it was common for someone who did not live with the family to walk in the door and help him or herself to food from the kitchen and then leave.

Linguistically expression of this is in the kinship terms with which they choose to refer to one another. “When I first came here, I did not know why they say my name. In my country, we call each other the same age as us ‘brother’ or ‘sister’. If they are older than we are, we call them ‘uncle’ or ‘auntie’. So when everyone says my name here, I wonder why they say my name.” (field notes, August 2012). In addition, there is no distinction between first and last name, nor is there a common surname or family name among immediate family members.

As discussed further in Chapter 6, the resettlement organizations initially decided where the refugees would live. For financial and logistical reasons the organizations place most of the newly arriving refugees in apartments between University Ave. and El Cajon Blvd, and 54th Street and Van Dyke Street of the City Heights neighborhood. Driving through the neighborhood feels much different from the rest of the city, almost as if you were in another country. The question is, which one? There is a mixture of ethnicities from all over the world living in City Heights; people from Somalia, the Congo, Uganda, Burma, Vietnam, Mexico, Iraq, Bhutan, and so on.

There are small apartment complexes scattered among single-story houses along the hilly pothole-ridden streets. The colors of the buildings are pale and washed out. There is little green foliage, brown dirt, dingy white buildings, rusted black bars, and sun-bleached brick. Every few blocks there is the house on the corner that is having a perpetual yard sale with clothing hanging from the fence, and small appliances and baby toys lying in the small brown yard. Mexican women push their strollers up to bargain with the perpetual yard sale family. Children are playing on the sidewalks, driveways, and small dirt yards. A couch is on the sidewalk where there is usually a mattress or other disposed household good.
The people of this neighborhood bring color and vibrance to it. A woman in a bright red striped Karen longi (similar to a sarong) and brightly flowered t-shirt is walking down the hill of the street with another colorful piece of cloth that straps her baby to her side. A man with a green striped cloth Karen bag across his body is approaching a stop sign. Two women in colorful headscarves and long flowered skirts are walking on the other side of the street. African-American men in brightly colored workout shorts stand by their cars. Somali men stand at the corner by the market dressed in white long kurta shirts with white kufi hats covering their heads, smoking cigarettes and having conversations, which always seem serious in nature.

"TRUDI, WHY RATS SMELL BAD HERE? IN MY COUNTRY, THEY NO SMELL BAD."

I pull up to park behind an orange taxicab. I get out and an African-American man crosses my path to his car and makes no eye contact with me. Candy wrappers, papers, plastic bags, and cigarette butts cling to the weeds and fence posts. The fenced-in 10x20 foot dirt yard has seven or eight young children playing with plastic bags tied together to create a rope and container for a ball that they are playing tether-ball on the fence with. They scream and yell with laughter as they boss each other around. "NO! You don’t do it that way, you do it this way." I walk up the stairs and enter the complex through a black security door, which is never locked. My friends live at the first apartment with dusty mini-blinds that are missing a few sections and another security door with an empty deadbolt hole.

I walk in and Mother is napping on the twin bed in the living room. Overwhelming fumes of Raid mixed with the aroma of cooked white rice hit my nose and eyes. There is a small table in the corner with a laptop computer that one of the teenagers is engrossed in watching a music video in her language; she makes no eye contact or physical movement to note my walking in the door. As I walk in, I say, "Hello," brightly with excitement, though get little response. I take my shoes off by the door and sit down on the carpet. I look up on the wall to see if there are any new pictures taped up along the ceiling’s edge. Most of the pictures are the order forms that the children bring home for school pictures that have "copy" ghosted diagonally across small sample image. Sometimes, the family will order a portrait package of a 5x7 and wallets. Rather than cutting each photo apart and distributing them to
friends and family, they slap the whole 8x10 of one 5x7 and 4 wallets up on the wall. Certificates of school attendance and outstanding attitude are added to the images. There is a map of the United States on the wall and 8x11 white printed phone lists taped along next to it. In each home, there is at least one religious symbol. This particular house has a picture of Jesus placed among the school picture order forms. Other homes may have an image of Mecca, a Buddhist altar, or a Christian cross in the front room.

There is an orange, plastic bug screen covering bowls of food on the small coffee table. A cockroach scurries under the countertop and I shift my attention and ask the children, “Do you have homework today?” They talk to each other in their ethnic language. Other children join us in the living room, and they shift into gathering their book bags and placing a plastic woven mat on the floor. A younger child comes in and bounces around grabbing some fruit from the table, takes a bite and spits the seed on the floor. We settle in and the mail ritual of each of my visits starts. Father comes out of the room looking sleepy and rustles through a pile of papers on the counter. He gathers a pile of mail and hands it to me saying, “I, I don’t… I don’t understand,” with a nervous laugh. I take the mail from him and say “ok, no problem.” I sit on the floor with the pile of mail in my lap and try to answer questions of homework among the four children. Someone that I do not recognize walks in and little is said to him. He and I nod our heads in respect of each other and he bends down to walk past me into the kitchen and makes a plate of rice. I go through the mail and make a pile of credit card offers, internet cable promotions, and other “junk mail”. Then I hand them to Father and say, “This is garbage.” He says, “Garbage?” I say, “Yes, it is no good. Don’t worry about it.” He agrees and throws them away. I then answer a math question and attempt to understand the welfare notifications from the mail. Some of the paperwork is a quarterly report that we need to fill out for the welfare office regarding household income changes. Often, it is so difficult to explain that I just tell them where to sign their name. They follow and trust that I know what I am doing. Every so often, I tell them that I do not understand and that they should ask their caseworker or have their pastor look at it. (After church services, members of the church walk up to the Pastor respectfully and hand him piles of mail for him to translate for them.) One of the children places some soda, water, ramen soup with hotdogs, and a plate of fruit on the floor by me.
As the children are doing homework, they are asking me questions at the same time. I have to switch from kindergarten writing skills to middle school algebra to third grade English all at once. “Trudi, what does this say? Trudi, is this the right answer? Trudi, what does ‘rhyme’ mean?”

The questions quickly turn to cultural questions. “Tr, tru,Trudi, my my my teacher told me not to wear this,” pointing to a blue bandana, “she say it bad.” Mother laughs and mocks the stutter her son has, “My, my, my, (belly laugh)”. “Trudi, does the president rich?” from the teenage boy. “Trudi, I have never see an Indian, they live San Diego?” from Father. The teenage boy asks, “Why we war in Iraq?” I have to decide which question to answer. It is not that they are not all important; yet, how do I get into the history of the Bloods and Crypts and the symbolism of clothing, or the richness of power that the president has in the world, or that Native Americans are people with a history of oppression, or the politics of a US war, all with broken English? They are all processing the lessons they are learning outside of the home and feel comfortable to ask me for clarification. I am a bit overwhelmed as my mind races to figure out how to answer all of the questions.

Then, other types of questions come up; questions of poverty, questions that shift me into emotional confusion and anxiety, questions that keep me up at night and create sleep deprivation.

“Trudi, what are bugs, they suck blood at night?” I think, What bugs are we talking about?

“Mosquitoes?” I say.

“Mmm, no. Night time, all in bed” a young boy replies.

Bed bugs!!? I think. My heart starts racing, my stomach tightens, and I am freaked out. I try to stay calm because I do not want to shame them. I say nothing as my mind races with fear, concern, responsibility, guilt, and more fear. How am I going to deal with this? I did not live in wealth growing up. I have experienced the shame of temporary infestations of lice, mice, and cockroaches. There were always quick remedies of extermination and quiet cleansing. I had never, however, experienced an infestation of bed bugs. Growing up that way was something that only truly poor people experienced. They show me the baby and he has bites all over him. I feel helpless and heartbroken for the baby. Mother says, “Blood no good.” This is a common response to skin irritations. As an anthropologist, I want to ask about this phrase; what is no good blood, Are there other symptoms of no good blood? Is there a name for this condition in their language? What causes bad blood, how do you get good blood... Instead, am
spinning with pressure to respond to the issues of a bed bug infestation. I do not know how to deal with getting rid of bedbugs; yet, I feel overwhelmed with the responsibility to help them.

Before I could react another child says, “Is there any medicine for this,” turning to their back and pulling up their shirt to expose a ringworm infection.

*AHHAh!* My insides are in panic and my skin is itching. I feel sympathetic and overwhelmed by their condition and want to help with no answers. Then there is guilt. Up to this point, when I leave their house, I take my emotions and concern for their safety and health with me, but I personally can leave the poverty. Suddenly, their poverty has become contagious. *What if I get bedbugs?*

“The bugs chicashica shiica chica chica all over at night and they eat my candy!” one of the girls broke into the conversation with anger waving her arms as she gestures to the whole room.

Mother then participates and calmly says, “Trudi, why here rats smell? In my country no smell.”

*Why do they smell?* I think, *why is she not asking, why are there rats in the homes? Or, how do I get rid of mice? Why do you have to live with them,* I think, *why did I just eat that piece of pineapple?* My mind races with thoughts and I am speechless…physically, mentally, and emotionally overwhelmed.

“I don’t know,” I answer. (field notes, February 2012)

“I HAVE WINGS, BUT I CAN’T FLY SO GOOD.”

My introduction into the refugee experience was as a volunteer. The resettlement organizations recognized that there is a need for large families to have additional help when first arriving. Often, the women are at home caring for the children and have little exposure to the outside world. Additional exposure to English speaking people helps the women get exposure to English and American culture. Each resettlement organization has addressed this by creating short-term volunteer opportunities of two hours a week for six months in the families’ home. Not all families receive a volunteer due to the limited number and availability of volunteers. Those who do, develop strong connections with their volunteer.

Refugees depend on the volunteers to come and visit. It is a joy for them learn from the volunteers and to build a relationship with their volunteers. These friends become a safe face in a new environment of uncertainty. They become a resource, not only to help teach English and explain ways of life in the U.S., but they also provide a sense of comfort as someone to whom they can turn. This friendship creates confidence for the refugees. Volunteers are often students and transitioning through their own life and tend to move on or
disappear after few months. This leaves the refugees feeling abandoned and wondering why their friend and resource has left. In addition, resettlement does not end once the family is working. Life in general will continue to present challenges and it is helpful if there is someone to turn to who can translate the culture on a longer term than many volunteers are able to provide.

It is about 10 am and a friend I had met through my volunteering asked me to visit her via text messaging. She told me that she was going to cook me some breakfast. She asked via text, “What do you eat?” I responded with, “anything.” She then replied “even dog?” I responded, “Well, maybe not anything.”

I walk in the apartment and her elderly father is laying on a twin bed in the living room. There is a plastic woven mat in the center of the room with bowls of food; rice, curry meat, steamed greens, turmeric soaked cauliflower, fried fish heads and chicken, some pineapple, strawberries and small bananas. I take my shoes off outside and walk in the open door. She brightly greets me and her mother gets up and smiles at me. I sit on the floor among the bowls of food and she says, “Eat, Eat.” I say, “Okay, okay. What do you call this, dog?” as I grab a plate of rice and point to the curried meat. She laughs loudly.

As we eat, she tells me about her divorce and the struggles that her family is having. She said that her family thinks that if they did not come to the United States that her marriage would still be intact. She explains to me that in Thailand and in Burma they all sleep together, eat breakfast in the morning and the kids go to school and the adults all go to work. Here, in the U.S., the resettlement organizations are required to have a bed for each individual and separate room for boys and girls. She says, “So we don’t sleep together, there is boy room and girl room.” She attributed the housing arrangement and culture of separate sleeping to the breakdown in her marriage.

After we eat and clean up the dishes, she pulls me in her room where there are two beds, a large walk-in closet with a twin mattress on the floor. There is a desk with a laptop and she pulls up a You-tube video of news from her refugee camp. She points out family members and tells me about the events of the refugee camp.

She works full time and helps many members of the refugee community, all while she feels she is having trouble navigating life as a resettled refugee herself. She explains to me that she never had a volunteer help her when she first arrived. She says, “I just had to do it. I
make mistakes but just had to not be afraid.” She is trying to explain to me that she has done well, is employed full time, and still needs help. She is looking for a support system and someone who can help her understand not just how to get a job, but how to deal with family conflict and stress of working long hours while still helping others. She says, “I have wings, but I cannot fly so good.” (field notes, April 2012).

“I DON’T KNOW.”

Health care is a confusing and overwhelming process for the refugees. When they arrive, they are required to go through health screening, get shots, and answer personal questions with strange people. Many times, there is no offer of translation, the refugees simply move through the actions as they are told or gestured to do. If translation is deemed necessary by the doctor, many times it is by the phone and simply re-states what the doctor says. Asking questions, as will be discussed in Chapter 7, is not a characteristic of this group. The healthcare system is full of people wearing official uniforms and speaking professional jargon that creates a perceived authority over the refugees; refugees from Burma do not question authority. The following is an example of what a family experienced during the birth of their son prior to research.

I had not seen the family in a couple of weeks and stopped by for a visit. I walked in and there were three large pots steaming on the stove. The house was more disorderly than usual and Father looked exhausted, his hair was a mess and he was sweating.

I said, “Where is mom?”
He said, “I don’t know.”
I looked at him with question.
“She have baby,” he said.
“Oh great, where are they? What hospital is she at?” I replied with excitement to meet the new member of the family.
“I don’t know,” he said with panic flushing over him.
“You don’t know? Ok. When did she have baby?” I asked.
“Two day ago. She called 911 and they take her,” he said.
“Ok, do you want to see her?” I asked
“Yes.” He responded with desperation.
“Ok, ok.” I replied.
I went to the laptop and did a search for hospitals in the area, called one asking if they had a patient by her name and came up with nothing. I called a second and was successful in finding her and getting her room number. We got in the car and went to the hospital. As we walked into her room, she was sitting on her bed, dressed in a sweater, Christmas hat, a longi, and socks. I said, “Hello my sister, where is the baby?”

She said, “I don’t know.”

I don’t know? What? How could you not know where your baby is? I thought.

“Can I go home?” she pleaded with me. I started to get concerned that there may be something wrong with the baby.

“I don’t know.” I said, a bit confused at the situation. Is the baby ok? Does she not want to see the baby…what is going on here?

I went back out to the nurses’ station and asked about the baby. They questioned who I was and eventually I was told, “Well, he is in NICU. But I can’t tell you anything.”

“Wait, he is in NICU? What is wrong?” I was shocked and appalled that this woman could so callously disregard my concern.

The nurse said sternly, “I don’t know, and I can’t give you any information. You can call the nurse in NICU but she won’t tell you anything either.”

Fortunately, the NICU nurse was open to explain that the baby just had an infection and needed 7 days of antibiotics. The nurse encouraged me to bring Mother to see the baby. I went back to the room and tried to explain. I asked the mother if she wanted to go see the baby, and she was resistant. A nurse came in the room to check on her and told me, “I have a lot to learn from her, she was checking her own uterus earlier.” The nurse encouraged her to go see the baby and I sensed a concern from the nurses that Mother did not want to stay in the hospital with her baby. Finally, Father said that NICU is far and she could not walk. I quickly remedied that problem with a wheel chair and we were on our way to NICU.

The nurse handed Mother the baby and asked me, “Does she want to try breast feed? It may take a little time because she has been bottle feeding and just ate a couple of hours ago.” Before I could answer or they could pull the privacy screens around, Mother had him latched and feeding.

After the feeding, I asked Father if he wanted to hold his baby. He looked at me with anxiety mixed with a smile and said, “Yes.” I said, “Ok, get your baby.” He hesitated and looked at the nurse. He seemed afraid to hold his baby. I have witnessed him with his other
children, he is very affectionate and confident with them. It was not that he did not know how or what to do. He simply did not know what his boundaries were in this environment.

We went back to the mother’s room to wait for her to be discharged. They brought Mother a dinner of meatloaf, steamed vegetables, and mash potatoes. Mother looked at it disgustingly. I said “Is the food no good?” She said, “No” and pushed it away. I said, “Yeah, hospital food doesn’t taste good.” Father then said, “In my country, because we no medicine, after baby come, Mother eat rice and soup. Meat no good after baby” Mother said, “No food, no milk” gesturing to her breasts, “no milk, baby no eat” then she leaned over to the call button and said “hot water.” In that moment everything made sense. She wanted to go home so that she could eat her culturally appropriate food that was steaming on the stove so that her milk will come in and she could feed her baby. Her whole concern was to care for her baby - not to abandon him - and the hospital was encouraging her to stay and eat food she sees as wrong.

The first night we talked with the nurses and the social worker, we had a translator on the phone to explain why the baby was in NICU. The social worker gave them some bus tokens so that they could get to the hospital and bring the baby breast milk, but they could not provide the mother with a breast pump. In my mind, this is a health system FAIL. How did they expect these people to get to the hospital everyday via bus – and no breast pump? Fortunately, I had the time to help. I took them home and went to get a breast pump for Mother.

For eight days, I would pick them and their bottles of breast milk up and take them see the baby. They laughed and I watched as they bonded. Every time mother would pick him up and before anyone could think of getting the privacy screen over her she had him latched and feeding. One time she said to me, “Why no one feed my baby?” I would try to explain that they would feed him formula while still emphasizing that breast milk was best for him.

Every day there was a different nurse caring for him, they were curious about where the family was from. From the outside the refugees seem very stern, no words, no emotions, little eye contact or facial expressions, very quiet and “yes” or “no” answers. Often they fold their arms across their chests, as this is a body language of respect rather than closing oneself off. They do not ask questions. I felt as if I would have to explain this to the nurses so that
they did not feel as if the parents were not attached or caring of their child as all of the other American parents were constantly asking questions and spending hours with their babies. On the fifth day, on the way to see the baby, Father asked me, “Trudi, what infection?” My heart dropped that he did not understand what had happened to his baby.

During the research interview, I asked them how it was having a baby in the U.S. Mother said, “I didn’t want to cry in front of the nurse. But I almost did when I saw that there was no betel nut.” (Laughter from all). “I tried to be good and eat the food. It is so different to have a baby in the U.S. In my country, it is very easy. You can walk to the clinic, the father can be there and visit anytime, and you can eat food so that the milk will come” (field notes, January 2012; August 2012).
CHAPTER 6

FINDINGS: REASONS FOR RESETTLEMENT

As discussed in Chapter One, the participants of this thesis research are political refugees, registered with the UNHCR based on the legal definition of a refugee. Receiving this identifying status is symbolic of the individuals’ past oppression. As refugees, the individuals then have more, albeit limited, legal choices for their future than those who may have the same experience but have not been registered or recognized by the UNHCR. One of those choices is to apply for resettlement and start a new life in a third country. However, due to the limited nature of this option and the extensive application and acceptance process, only about 1% of refugees worldwide are resettled (UNHCR 2013). The refugees make the initial decision to apply for resettlement; this is not an automatic decision. Many refugees choose to stay in the refugee camp and see what happens in the future. For those who do decide to apply, many factors play into their decision. The conditions in the refugee camp, poverty, limited health resources, ethnic oppression, lack of a state, fear, and death all play into this decision. This thesis does not focus on those stories; it rather focuses on the experience in the United States. Still, it is important to understand why they made the decision to leave their extended families, friends and understood environment. If we have a better understanding of their expectations, we can better assist in their reconciling those expectations with the realities they face upon resettlement.

The research was designed to minimize stirring up past memories or traumas; there were very few questions of the refugees’ experience prior to coming to the U.S. Instead, I attempted to leave an open forum for them to share what they felt was important for contextualizing their experience. Many used stories from their past to explain how they arrived in their current situation. When I asked, “Why did you decide to resettle to the United States?” the results of the household interviews revealed two main purposes: to gain freedom and for their children to have more opportunities. The following sections will examine the two explanations separately, with examples of the participants’ stories and my experience in Mae Sot, Thailand to contextualize the environment they came from. This is important in
understanding how their past experiences shape their subjectivity, or the lenses through which they see the world.

“Freedom”

It is an expected response to hear refugees say that they come to the United States for freedom. Initially hearing this response, I thought that they were using the word ‘freedom’ in an attempt to mirror the rights of the United States and contrast the oppression of Burma. As the research continued, I began to recognize that there was a pattern of associating freedom with the ability to “go outside” boundaries. For these refugees, freedom is in terms of physical movement rather than ideological liberty. The lived experience of limited freedom influences their decision to leave the refugee camp. The following will give some examples of the participants’ narration of ‘freedom’, discuss the environment they came from, and show roadblocks and successes to gaining this freedom.

A participant said, “We come here for freedom. We can go outside. We can go anywhere. We can even buy a car if we want to.”

“What does, ‘go outside’ mean?” I asked.

He said, “To go to the market, to go in the street, to go where I want to go.” (field notes, May 2012)

Subjective Expectation

My understanding of the life in the refugee camp informs my perspective of their subjectivity and why this would be an expected desire for them. The participants in this research, excluding the ethnic Chin from Malaysia, have lived in refugee camps in Thailand for 7-25 years prior to resettlement. Though it is illegal to leave the confines of the camp, I have heard many stories of them doing so for both work and education in spite of the high risk of Thai law enforcement personnel catching them. This situation creates a fear of moving outside the borders of the camp. The limitations that they were subjected to for years, for some of them their lifetime, create a desire to have the ability to go ‘outside’ or beyond boundaries without fear.

When I was in Mae Sot Thailand, I witnessed the conditions that create this fear of movement and breaking boundaries. There are checkpoints throughout the city that serve as a constant source of fear. Checkpoints consist of Thai officials at the side of a road, watching
and occasionally stopping people passing by. In an attempt to minimize movement of illegal 
migrants, there is a series of checkpoints that create rings of law enforcement. On a daily 
basis, I would ride my bike past two checkpoints to get to my destination, 5 miles away. I 
became accustomed to the locals smiling and watching me as I, the silly white person, 
dripping with sweat, would fumble down the street, smile back, and try to avoid potholes 
with my bike. The first time I saw a uniformed officer on the side of the road, I smiled 
brightly, as if to say, “Hi, I am happy to be here. I am going to respect your rules. Hope 
you’re having a good day.” They returned with an unexpected stone cold stare that seemed to 
be searching for the devil within me. I never smiled or made eye contact again, avoiding 
them by riding my bike on the opposite side of the street. Thus, when the refugees talk about 
the ability to have freedom to go outside, I was able to empathize and imagine the fear they 
felt as they navigated through the checkpoints.

The cost is far higher for them than it was for me. The following is a description of 
what might happen if caught outside the refugee camp. Those who were sharing this idea 
with me posed it as a hypothetical suggestion of how one might navigate avoiding the Thai 
law enforcement, leaving me to understand that they had experienced it firsthand but were 
not admitting guilt. “If you leave [the refugee camp], the police catch you. You have to go to 
 jail, maybe for a couple of days or sometimes for two years. Then the Thai police take you to 
 the river [Moei river that borders Thailand and Burma] and put you in the water.” Officials 
tell the refugees to swim back to Burma. Instead, the family tells me that it is best to wait in 
the water until nighttime and climb out of the river back into Thailand. “At night you get out 
of the river, and take the bus back to town. Before the police checkpoint, you get off the bus, 
run into the jungle, you know?” As the father explains this to me, the family begins to laugh. 
He moves his hand back and forth mimicking a snake and says, “On the bus, off the bus, into 
the jungle, back on the bus, off the bus, into the jungle.” With a deep breath and far away 
gaze upward, as if looking into the past, he shakes his head and laughs again. The daughter 
says, “Sometimes it would take hours to get back to the camp!” and continues to laugh. (field 
notes, July 2012).

In an attempt to contextualize the past with the present, they commonly refer to the 
camp as a jail, “In Mae La, it is like a jail, we cannot move.” Another metaphor used 
frequently is a zoo, “All we do is eat and sleep, and eat and sleep. Like in a zoo. They even
bring us the food.” (field notes, May 2012). Another participant expresses the same feelings with anger and frustration, “In refugee camp, like ZOO! Trudi, like animals!” He quickly follows it up with a smile and says, “Here, we free, we free to go outside.”

They are speaking of movement in the physical world. I am not trying to claim that they do not wish for freedoms of speech, religion, assembly, and all of the other liberties of United States. Rather, that they are narrating the desire to move about the environment freely; a freedom that they expect the United States to offer. This is an expectation of freedom that is concrete rather than an idealistic concept of liberty.

**Roadblocks and Successes with this Expectation**

While there are many variables that determine the success of each individual, in general, the longer the refugees are in San Diego, the more freedom of movement they gain. Time provides them the ability to process culture shock, minimize economic barriers, and adjust to environmental conditions.

Upon first arriving, the refugees experience culture shock and fear impedes their freedom of movement. The following is a collection of quotations from different interviews of participants who have been in San Diego for over four years recording their experiences of culture shock.

“No, I hear there are bad people. My case manager tell me, no open door, maybe bad people. So, I just sit here, me and wife, and wait for case manager. I don’t turn light on, nothing.” He pulled in his arms and curled up in a ball illustrating his fear. Then he laughed a large belly laugh and said, “I scared.” (field notes, June 2012)

“No, we were at the street light and my father walked out in the street and got afraid so ran back to the sidewalk. He didn’t know when it was ok to walk across the street. We went home instead of to the market.” (field notes, July 2012)

“One time I went on the bus to go to the welfare office. I no know where to go because everything looks the same to me. The bus goes in circles. I was on it all day. The bus driver asked me if I needed help and I no say anything. I was afraid. I just got off the bus and waited for another bus to come.” The whole room laughed. (field notes, April 2012)

With time, the immediate fear of the new environment wears off and they begin to gain the courage and comfort to navigate the city. They can walk to the local markets, but to
get to the welfare office and other social services, another means of transportation is required. To buy a car or even ride the bus requires a financial investment. After household bills are paid, families have little or no money left. It is not until they gain employment that they have access to car loans. The participants who arrived in 2007 found jobs within months, continue to maintain employment, and own cars. Those who arrived after 2008 have difficulty finding a job due to the economic situation of the U.S. This slows their ability to succeed in gaining freedom of movement.

Another barrier refugees grapple with is the fear of the criminal element in their environment. Often I hear stories of their neighbors with guns or the prostitute walking down the street. During a visit, a participant pulled me to the window and said, “Look, Trudi! Look at her.” I looked out the window to see a woman in a tight mini-skirt standing seductively in the middle of the street. I said, “What is she doing?” as she faced an oncoming car. “She stops men” the participant replied. I watched, and she would not allow the car to pass until after she spoke to the driver. “I scared. I stay inside” the participant whispered. (field notes, September 2012)

There is success over time with this expectation of freedom of movement. The participants who have been here the longest are beginning to move about the environment. They have gained loans to purchase cars, enabling them to commute to work. When family members have weddings or funerals, they travel to other states to participate. The youth are traveling to other cities to visit friends and family, or to play in soccer tournaments with other refugees from Burma. When days are hot, they go to the beach to escape the lack of air conditioning. They are physically moving about their environment; they have “freedom to go outside.”

**OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHILDREN THROUGH U.S. EDUCATION**

In addition to “freedom,” all of the participants discussed the desire to come to the United States for their children to get an education. The following will give examples of how the participants narrate the desire to give their children an education. As many referred to their experiences with the education system in the refugee camp and Mae Sot I will give some background on the options they had for education prior to resettlement and how
resettlement is a means of providing their children with greater opportunities. In addition, this section will review what the youth shared with me about their experience of the culture shock, concern for their peers, and suggestions they have for the community. Lastly, I will discuss the unexpected challenges of parenting that the refugees face in the new environment.

**Education for Opportunity**

The decision to come to the U.S. is not an easy one. There are sacrifices to weigh and expected challenges to prepare for. “I knew it was going to be difficult for me because I do not speak the language [English] but I came here for my children, so they could get an education and have a good life.” (field notes, May 2012)

When they speak of an education, they are expecting to give their children opportunities that are not available in the refugee camp. This does not come without expected and unexpected challenges for both the children and the parents. The following section will briefly describe the opportunities for education in Burma and Thailand in contrast with what the refugees believe an education in the U.S. offers.

While the refugees arrive in the refugee camp due to political and ethnic issues, their education becomes a means for future hopes. During my visit to Mae Sot, I interviewed caseworkers from an NGO, World Education. They explained to me that many refugee and immigrant children come to Thailand to get free education because in Burma it is expensive to attend school. While residing in the refugee camp, there are two options for children to gain an education. The can attend school in the refugee camp or gain a student identification and attend migrant schools in Thailand. With the assistance of World Education, refugee camps in Thailand have schools for children living within the camp where some of my participants both attended and worked as teachers. World Education also assists in developing and supporting an extensive ad-hoc school system in Thailand for migrant children. For example, in Mae Sot there are over 70 schools devoted to educating migrant children from Burma. The Thai government neither recognizes the school system nor prevents it. Either option of education in the camp or in Mae Sot is far more than is available in rural villages of Burma, where most of the refugees are from.

The participants in this research who grew up in a refugee camp have illiterate parents, yet they are literate in Burmese, and have conversational English and basic math
skills. Those who go to school in Mae Sot can gain a high school education certificate; however, neither the Thai nor the Burmese governments recognize it. As no government recognizes their education, once they are finished, they cannot move into the Thai or Burmese college system. They have no work visa, and are thus illegal migrants in Thailand. This leaves little opportunity for further education, work, or livelihood after finishing high school.

When the refugees speak of education in the U.S. for their children it is not just of the ability to learn how to read, write, understand history, and do math. Rather, they believe education in the United States will give access to opportunities that will utilize their education for work and a future. One participant said, “I think about life in the refugee camp and everything is the same; no opportunity. So, [I] decided to apply [to be resettled]. It best for my children I think. Maybe in the future, after they go to school, they can get a good job” (field notes, August 2012).

The Youth’s Perspective

Part of my research included a group interview with the Karen youth as well as an interview with Mrs. Osgood, a City Heights Crawford High School teacher for incoming non-English speaking refugee students. The youth shared experiences of what it was like to arrive in San Diego and their concerns for their future they acclimated to the new environment. Mrs. Osgood shared how the new students’ transition from different systems of education is challenging.

The first and overarching struggle for children entering the school system in San Diego is the language barrier; they are timid to speak up and have shame of their inability to speak English. “We are ashamed of no language so we whispered when we first go there [to school]. We don’t feel confidence and it is hard to ask questions in class.” (field notes, July 2012). Their propensity to stay quite is a means of dealing with shame or lack of knowledge is a pervasive cultural quality that influences many of their experiences in the U.S. “The first day my case worker took me to school but on the third day I had to walk to school by myself. I got lost and got to school late. I went to the office because I knew I needed a late pass. They asked me “why are you late?” I wanted to say ‘I got lost’ but I did not know how. So, I just
stayed quiet. They said to me, “tell me what is wrong,” and I just stayed quiet. Water was in here,” as she pointed to her eyes. (field notes, July 2012)

Another aspect is the feeling of isolation and fear. One participant stated, “The first day of school was so lonely. I didn’t know anyone and just wanted to run back to Thailand right away and never come back. It was lonely. I was scared.” I attempted to relate to the participant and shared some of my fears while I was in Thailand and the loneliness I felt being there by myself. Another participant quickly and succinctly clarified the difference of our experiences by saying, “Yes, but you knew you could, and were going to go home. We cannot go back home. We may never be able to go back.” (field notes, July 2012)

The Karen youth participants who have been here the longest are attending community college while working part-time. They attribute their success to being the first refugees from Burma to come to San Diego since they learned English faster than later arrivals because there was no support system that spoke their native language. They often serve as translators for their growing community. “I would like to say something. In my opinion, we are the first generation to be here and there was no one here to help us. Now, when they [newly arriving refugees from Burma] come, we are here to translate for them and they do not have to learn. I think this is why we have learned English.” (field notes, July 2012)

Aside from the culture shock, language barriers, and diaspora feelings, transitioning between education systems causes frustration, and confusion, and can be a disadvantage to the children. In the refugee camp, grade level is determined according to their skill set. In San Diego, grade level is determined according to their age. Mrs. Osgood shared with me that it is challenging academically for the incoming students, “When they get here, the children struggle because the level that they are placed in is over their head, and they get discouraged.” She added that there is a level of systematic mismatching between being in the refugee camp and San Diego by saying, “often their age is inflated in the refugee camp, because if you are older, your family will have more rice allocated to them. At times their documents may say that they are eleven years old, but they really are nine.” While I have not heard this from refugees from Burma, I do know that they determine age differently than we do. First, there is often a lack of knowing when a birthday is; time and calendars are not as important to daily life in Burma. Muslim communities do not focus on their date of birth. In
addition, they consider a newborn one year old at the time of its birth. It is possible that all of these factors could cause their official documents created by the UNHCR in 2005 to be different from their age, as we understand it. These incompatible systems have negative repercussions on the children’s education and possibly the families’ financial future, as I will discuss further in the next section.

Young men struggle the most academically. Mrs. Osgood explained that what she sees, especially with the males, is frustration and discouragement resulting in many refugee students dropping out of school. The Karen youth participants expressed concern about the young men also, saying, “They are not going to school, and they get lazy.” The Karen youth feel it is most important to give the young men positive reinforcement, “They need to stay busy, and they need to be told they are good” (field notes, July 2012).

**Parenting**

The parents knew that life was going to be different and challenging. This section will discuss the financial stresses, lack of culturally appropriate parenting methods, and the cultural differences that arise between the parent and child through the process of acclimation that lead the parents to feel frustrated and disempowered.

While understanding the challenges of not speaking the language, many parents did not anticipate the financial obstacle of providing a home for their children in the U.S. Many of the refugees had the expectation of gaining employment quickly to financially care for their family as their children completed school. Financial insecurity affects the whole family. The older teenagers often do not have the opportunity to complete high school. Once they turn eighteen years old, the financial situation changes. The number of children in a family determines the amount of financial aid the family receives. Social services consider an eighteen year old an adult and the family’s financial aid decreases once their teenager reaches eighteen. This loss of aid increases the financial stress of the family. Families often make the decision that the young adult child can no longer continue with school, even if they are still trying to finish high school, but rather must enter the workforce to contribute financially to the household. Often the decision not to continue school is coupled with the young adults’ feelings of inadequacy academically and the need to provide for the family (field notes, July 2012).
Another unexpected challenge is the loss of parental control. Two aspects of this loss are the culturally appropriate child rearing practices, and the children’s quicker cultural acclimation. Both of these aspects of loss of control feed on one another and create fear, stress, and confusion.

There are many cross-cultural differences in child rearing, especially as it relates to discipline. While I did not witness physical reprimanding personally, my participants discussed how it was an acceptable means of discipline “In my country, if child is no good, ok to…” she bit her lips then with an open hand swung her arm back and forward mimicking what it would be like to hit someone on the back. She also recognizes that these attitudes towards discipline are not appropriate in the U.S. “Here, they will take my child from me, right?” (field notes, July 2012). Arrival orientations inform the refugees that physical reprimanding is against the law. There is no further discussion on the subject in the orientation; they do not offer guidance of acceptable methods of discipline.

Regardless of the social, moral, and ethical beliefs on the matter, prohibiting their method of discipline without offering alternatives takes away parental control and adds extreme stress to the family. It is not until Child Protective Services are involved and there is legal action taken that a family receives lessons on appropriate parenting techniques. One family shared with me their experiences with this. “My son was hiding something from me, he was in trouble, but I don’t know why. Here we do not eat together, we do not talk. Sometime, he come home hurt. I was scared for him. I ask him and he talk back, I scared and I,” he threw his open hand back and swung down, “whap.” He continued, “Police come and now I go to family counseling and take parenting classes.” (field notes, May 2012)

Other aspects of the new culture cloud the ability to know how to rear their children in the U.S. One participant moved from being very casual and telling funny stories of being lost in the city to a very serious tone, “Discipline is difficult to understand. We need more training for the youth. About, drinking, drug abuse and culture. Point of view is different – the culture and the law and the environment is different.” He continued to say, “The children know more of the culture. Sometimes it is hard for me to know what is right or wrong, so I just say nothing.” It is difficult for parents to be an authority of their home when they are not an authority of the cultural environment. (field notes, August 2012)
The children acclimate far more quickly to the new environment through school. They attend local schools with American children and learn English through class and play. They learn that if any adult hits them that they should call the police. The women often stay home taking care of younger children while the men go to ESL classes with other refugees from around the world, limiting their contact with U.S. culture. Often the children become the cultural broker for the family and translators for their parents. Children, come home and explain the way things are to their parents, often incorrectly. These misunderstandings can include what is acceptable for children to do. The children may misinterpret, have a lack of maturity in understanding, hear incorrect information from other children, or simply manipulate the situation and their parents for their own gain. The children may also be coming home with correct information; yet, the parents are at a loss to know what is correct and what is not. Anxiety and frustration builds for the parents. The environment is different; there are gangs and drugs in City Heights. This is scary for the parents as they love their children and want to protect them while they feel that they do not know how in an unfamiliar environment. One time I asked a parent, “In your country, what do you do when teenagers takes drugs?” He replied, “I never see teenagers take drugs, I don’t know what to do.” (field notes, August 2012)

The refugees came here for their children to have access to opportunities via education in the U.S. While many are struggling to overcome the unexpected difficulty of navigating a new way to raise their family, just as the access to freedom, the longer they are here, the more successful the youth are in gaining access to education and opportunities. There are a few youth attending community college and universities while, many others are working and financially contributing to their households. They all have the ability to work toward opportunities they did not have in the refugee camp.
CHAPTER 7

FINDINGS: ECONOMIC, TRANSNATIONAL AND DIVERSITY

The research questions focused on the refugees’ economical and transnational expectations and realities. The data show the refugees’ economic realities are not meeting their economic expectations. Methods of interviewing and questioning failed to answer questions about transnational expectations and activities; nevertheless, ethnographic observations showed activity in transnational exchanges both socially and politically. An unexpected result of the thesis design showed the diversity dynamic in the community as well as ethnic sensitivity and tension regarding differential access to resources. None of these three points is mutually exclusive, nor are they completely dependent on each other.

ECONOMIC EXPECTATIONS AND REALITIES

One of the main purposes of the thesis research was to see if and how the expectations of the resettling refugees were matching their lived experiences, and with that, to see where their needs are not met. The data suggest that in fact the economic realities of the refugees are not meeting their expectations. Captured in the words of one participant is an example of common participants’ financial expectations before they arrived: “I thought everyone would have the same. Everyone would get a house and a car and be taken care of. They told us that when we got here, if we worked hard, people would help us. But,” shaking her head and looking down, “…we don’t know.” (field notes, May 2012).

High cost of living, debt, unemployment, underemployment, the Great Recession, American consumerism, and the resettlement process itself are elements of the structural violence, or system-created conditions that perpetuate oppression (Farmer 2001; Schepers-Hughes and Bourgois 2004). As it is undoubtedly clear by now, the refugees live in poverty in San Diego. They move from one form of structural violence in Burma to another in the refugee camp to another of poverty in the United States. Structural violence then becomes part of how they view the world and how they fit into the world, or their subjectivity. They
actively were attempting to flee the refugee camp for freedom and opportunities, and as I will discuss in this section, the economic systems that they must navigate upon arrival in the U.S. create oppression. The systems described below are in place to assist the refugees’ resettlement economically; however, I argue that financial aid systems and the resettlement process inadvertently create the structural violence of poverty. This poverty limits their ability to freely move and take advantage of opportunities. The community’s answer to the needs of the refugees is jobs; however, those with jobs are still struggling financially. Jobs alone do not break the refugees free of the pressure of poverty.

**Financial Aid**

To aid in the economic transition, a stipend is given to each refugee family for resettlement costs. In addition, families are enrolled into a welfare-to-work program called CalWORKs. CalWORKs provides financial aid to assist “families with children from dependency to self-sufficiency through employment” (County of San Diego 2012). This program assesses the need of each family and allocates monthly cash aid, food stamps and MediCal; the larger the family, the higher the financial allocation. The program is limited to 48 months and offers job training and job placement assistance. To continue cash aid, proof of 35 hours per week of either English as Second Language classes or employment is required.

There is no doubt that without this financial aid, life in the U.S. would be far more difficult. The following example is a description of the financial realities of a family of eight. They receive the maximum cash allowance, $1170 per month and $400 per month in food stamps. Their rent is $1050 per month. This leaves $120 per month for phone, electricity, transportation, cleaning supplies, toiletries, clothing, and other basic items a family of eight needs. Quickly, the family learns that $120 is not enough to survive on and job seeking starts. On the surface, this seems as if the structured program, intended to move persons into the workforce, is successful in creating self-sufficient members of the community by forcing them into the workforce.
Debt and Lack of Financial Independence

Looking deeper into their situation, the resettlement process itself puts the refugees at a disadvantage economically before they even arrive. All refugees arrive in financial debt; as discussed in Chapter Two, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) provides an interest free loan for the cost of their plane ticket to the United States. This typically runs around $1000 per individual, including children. A family of five is $5000 in debt as they step off the plane onto American soil. Six months after arrival, the IOM begins to send them a monthly bill with payments due that would equal the family paying the debt off within two years. That would be a bill of $208 a month for a family of five, which is an overwhelming financial burden.

From the beginning, financial decisions are not theirs to make, from how the stipend money is spent, how much they can afford in rent, or even the neighborhood they live in. Before they arrive, some of the money has been spent by their resettlement case manager for apartment deposits, first month’s rent, and home furnishings, leaving financial decisions made without their input. These financial decisions have long-term consequences. The case manager decides where the family is going to live for the next year by negotiating leases, how much rent they can afford with their cash aid, even what furnishings and household supplies they need. They are placed in low-income neighborhoods with limited job opportunities.

Enculturation

With the resettlement process, enculturation begins and this often has financial consequences. Items are purchased to furnish homes based on the American template. It is the responsibility of the resettlement organization to provide, upon arrival, a checklist of items purchased with the refugees’ stipend money. While resettlement organizations try to be as frugal as possible by digging into their stock of donated supplies and purchasing household goods from thrift and discount stores, the case manager has the responsibility to make purchases on behalf of the refugee family. Case managers must also provide a home with separate rooms for children and adults, and a bed for each individual. Results are American housing arrangements with a bedroom for each gender, one for the parents, twin beds for the children and a queen for the parents. The living rooms have a couch, love seat,
coffee table, and, if there is room, dining table. The case manager stocks the apartment with nonstick pots and pans, dishes, glasses, silverware, towels, bedding, cleaning detergent, and hygiene products. Attempting to be culturally sensitive, the case managers purchase a rice cooker.

All of the homes I have visited eventually morph into more culturally comfortable conditions. They remove bedframes and push mattresses tight together on the bedroom floor, couches are given away, the dining table is pushed to the corner, a floor mat is purchased, and dining commences on the floor. Large stockpots, woks, and community water jugs, with one cup, are placed on the counters next to the rice cooker.

Financial enculturation continues as the case managers, within a two-week period of resettlement, come over and teach them how to shop. They take them to the grocery store, thrift stores, and Walmart. This is to teach them how and where they can use their EBT (food stamp) card, cash, and how to get a money order to pay rent. These are necessary steps as many do not know how to use ATM-type cards and are learning U.S. currency.

These lessons simultaneously become lessons on consumption and consumerism. I witnessed one families’ first shopping trip during my resettlement organization internship. Let me preface, I have never witnessed a case manager’s intentions to be impure. They sacrifice their time, family, emotions, and even their own health to work extended hours for low pay and high stress responsibilities because they believe in what they are doing and in giving the refugees an opportunity. I do not blame the case managers for making mistakes; I have made plenty.

In this family’s case, the case manager decided that before school started, the children needed new clothes and because the family was large, they still had a good sum remaining from their resettlement stipend. These are enjoyable trips for the case managers after difficult duties of welfare offices, airports, hospitals, paperwork, and pleading phone calls. The case manager invited me to go along, we packed the family into a van, and we were off on an adventure at Walmart. As we walked in you could feel the awe as they looked up with big eyes at the copious amount of products. The case manager told each that they could pick one outfit and one pair of shoes to purchase. The children ran though the store excited and the parents stayed calm and said, “I never see a place like this.” After the shopping cart was full of clothes, shoes, and of course a few toys the kids could not part with, we walked up to the
cash register and the case manager told the father to take out his money. He fumbled with his wallet and waited, watching as the cashier took each item and passed them across the red lights. I watched the father and with each beep of the bar code reader, sweat beaded on his forehead. He fidgeted and watched the numbers on the screen go up. Obvious stress was in his eyes as he glanced up at me with a nervous smile. I said to the case manager, “He is nervous, are you sure we should do this?” She paused and watched him; I could see her concern for him. Then she justified it with, “Yes, they deserve to spend some money and feel good. And, Walmart is cheap. They need to know where they can go buy things.” The bill came out to be just under $300.00. He pulled the cash out of his wallet and gestured to me for help, I said, “Yes, that’s right,” and I gestured to him to hand the money to the cashier (field notes, 2010).

During the thesis interview, I was able to ask the father of this family about how he felt when we went to the Walmart for the first time. He said, “It was hard, I didn’t know what to do and the children were going crazy, I couldn’t control them. I was worried I didn’t have enough money for everything. I didn’t know what everything cost. I didn’t know what I would have to pay for next in the future.” It was just the beginning and they were following what the case manager told them without questioning, yet fearful of the future. They know that they have to manage their money and that things are more expensive than in their country. Everyday upon first arrival is full of new things to learn and pay for. (field notes, August 2012).

Not only are costs of goods higher, there is a shift in debt arrangements and rent is a stressful adjustment. A participant shared with me that in Burma, if you cannot pay your rent, the property owners understand and trust that when you have money you will pay the debt; calendars, late fees, and threats of homelessness do not regulate the honor system of debt payment in Burma. “Rent is a constant stress. In the refugee camp, we don’t have to worry about tomorrow. We know we will have food. Here we constantly have to worry about tomorrow and how to pay the rent.” (field notes, May 2012)

**Unemployment and Needs**

“What would be helpful is if you know of a job. I don’t want luxurious things; we don’t need things like that, just need to pay my rent.” (field notes, May 2012)
When I ask anyone, “What does the community of refugees from Burma need?” the first answer is always “Jobs.” I asked resettlement organizations, case managers, teachers, volunteers, refugees who have been here three months to five years. The first answer is always jobs. It is no news to anyone in the community that jobs are the priority.

The unemployment rate in San Diego in 2007, the year refugees from Burma began arriving, was 4.6 percent and rose to 9.6 percent by 2009 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). As we saw in previous sections, the earlier arrivals have better success with employment. The participants who arrived between 2007 and 2008 gained employment quickly and have held those jobs for five years. Those who arrived after 2008 are struggling to find jobs with the Great Recession creating a competitive job market.

While low English skills are a hindrance, the resettlement application process itself also creates disadvantages for the refugees regarding job placement possibilities. The ability to get jobs is limited by what information of their past work experience they are comfortable sharing during the resettlement application process. They do not report the types of work they have done in Burma or Thailand on official documents. One participant told me that they have all learned to say that they were farmers before living in the refugee camp, as it is the easiest. If you were to say anything else, it would lead to more questions and leave the potential for more investigating into their lives. Often this eliminates the potential of skills that they have for future work. For example, when I asked a father during the interview what kind of work he did in Burma he said, “Nothing, no work.” This is a common answer second to “farming.” However, when visiting the same family one day, a repairperson came to change the light fixtures. The father was watching him and in relaxed conversation told me that he used to be an electrician and knew how to change the light fixtures. (field notes, June 2012).

Local unemployment pushes the refugees to seek employment elsewhere such as New York, Texas, Indiana, and South Carolina. There are meat-processing plants in the areas that are hiring refugees from Burma. One family sent their 18 year old to South Carolina to work at a meat packing plant. The whole family is preparing to move there even though the father has employment in San Diego.

Having a job does not mean getting out of poverty. The jobs that the refugees receive pay minimum wage and have little career training or advancement opportunity. One of my
participants began working one month after arrival and had to quit her ESL classes. Five years later, she works at the same job and making under $9.00 per hour for 35 hours and 6 days a week with no benefits, which is typical for the participants with jobs. With four children at home, her focus is raising her children after work, so there is little time to continue improving her English or career skills for better job opportunities. The issue is more complex than just finding jobs for the refugees.

**Transitioning Off of CalWORKS**

The time comes when the cash aid of CalWORKS ends and the family is forced to be self-sufficient. This stressful and difficult transition brings up nostalgia for the refugee camp. The following is an example of a discussion I had with one family who received a notice of their ending cash aid.

“No money, no pay bills, no live here.”

I drive up to a large apartment complex buried in the side streets of City Heights. The parking lot is full of screaming kids of multiple ethnicities playing tag, jump rope, and a game I call ‘push little brother in his stroller so fast that we both almost fall.” There are a couple of African refugee men in the corner sitting on the electrical box smoking cigarettes, a woman covered in a burka pushing a stroller filled with garbage bags toward the trash dumpster, and a Karen family pushing a shopping cart full of groceries into the parking lot. There is trash in the dirt planters in the place of plants. The sidewalk is full of cigarette butts but the evening and air is full of spices; curry, turmeric, chili peppers, onions. I get out of my car and children run up and ask if I am going to take them to the beach again.

I say “No, not right now, maybe sometime in the future.”

“Are you going to come to my house?”

“No, today I am going to your aunties’,,” I tell them.

They run off and continue their game of tag and bossing each other around.

I step up to their apartment and slip my shoes off among the pile of flip-flops outside. I knock and walk in. The carpet floor is covered with layers of self-adhesive shelf lining. On a previous visit, the mother told me, “So dirty” pointing to the matted and blackened office carpeting. “We live here 4 year, the manager no change floor.” Thus, they found an inexpensive alternative.
Uncle, lying on the twin bed watching a movie on Netflix shifts his attention to me with a bright smile. Grandma is in the corner of the black couch with her legs curled up in her longi and smiles gently at me and quickly diverts her gaze. Bright paper grocery store advertisements, taken from the grocery store they work at, cover the walls. Behind the large flat screen TV is a wall covered from the ceiling edge to behind the TV of pictures of family, school photos, school photo order forms, certificates of achievement, and photos of times in the Thailand refugee camp. On the wall behind the couch and twin bed hang women’s headscarves.

I say joyfully, “Manegalaba!” (Burmese for hello)

I get a bright response from the mother sitting on the floor breast-feeding her 1-year-old baby, “Maneglaba, teacher, I missed you!” Mother is wearing a longi and a bright pink V-neck t-shirt, where her gold crescent moon necklace sits visibly on her chest.

I sit on a chair in the corner next to the twin bed. The baby is distracted from eating and interested in seeing me. I smile and clap twice and hold out my hands for him to come to me. He smiles and begins to stumble over to me with his newly acquired walking skills.

“Teacher, you eat rice?”

“No, no” I reply. I say this, not because I do not want to eat the delicious spicy curry meat and vegetables over steamed white rice with fresh cucumber salad and steamed bamboo shoots and the green onion vegetable broth that I have been waiting all week to eat, but because it is polite to say no to the first offer of food. A participant informed me that it is rude if a guest (a person who is not of their ethnicity) says yes right away to the offer of food. “Why you no eat?” she says sternly with disappointment.

Grandma sitting on the couch says, “Too skinny teacher, eat, eat!”

“No, No” I say passively as I scoop the baby in my arms and take a deep sniff at his cheek (a Burmese kiss). “Yeess, teacher, eat,” the mother pleads.

“Ok, ok” I give in, afraid that if I say no one more time they will stop offering. Mother is excited and quickly gets up to fix me a plate.

Grandpa comes in the living room from the bedroom wearing longi, a button up shirt, and a warm smile. I say, “My brother, it is so good to see you. How are you?”

He smiles bigger, sits next to me, and says “Oh, so tired. I work, I work so my family take care of,” as he hands me a pile of mail.

Mother laughs and says “Teacher always look at paper. Soo many paper.”
I laugh and say, “I know, you get so much paper.”

Father comes in the door carrying a lunch pail; I look up from the mail and say “Hello, how was work?” He smiles revealing his red and black betel nut stained teeth and says, “Hi, it was so so.” He comes in and goes into the bedroom to change out of his shorts into a green longi. He comes back out and sits on the floor where his toddler stumbles over looking for the iPhone in his shirt pocket.

The family talks to one another in Burmese and I look over the mail. I notice that one of the documents is from the Welfare office and is stating that the mother and father of three only have five months left of cash aid, that is, an approximately $700 decrease in the household income.

I tell them what it says in simplified terms. “In five months, no more cash aid.”

The father loudly says, “No more cash aid?”

I say, “Yes, that is what this says.”

He says matter-of-factly, “They no give me money, I go back Thailand.”

Mother quickly and sternly says something to him in Burmese points to the children and he quiets.

I say, “They told you that you only have 48 months of cash aid, didn’t they?”

Obviously frustrated and stressed he said with shame, “I am working, but no money. No money, no pay bills, no live here,” the father says.

This family is one who has arranged to live together with five adults and three children in a small two-bedroom apartment. Four of the adults have held employment the whole time they have been here and are still struggling to pay the bills. They have told me that they cannot call in sick because if they do, they will struggle to pay the rent with no wages earned for one day. The father is frustrated that he does not know what more he can do. The emotional, diasporic response to go back to Thailand comes out. This is a common comment. Sometimes there is the desire to reconnect with family members, or to be among others who speak their language, but it is always with the frustration of not having the financial means to return, even for a short visit. (field notes, June 2012).

While the examples may not seem physically violent and there is a tendency to assume, they are better off as refugees here than in Thailand, I often question if they are. Scherper-Hughes and Bourgois speak of structural violence as often invisible, as it plays out in daily life while it is “…socially permitted, encouraged, or enjoined as a moral right or
duty” (2004:5). We can see the oppression of the Burmese government as a form of structural violence when images of the military shooting non-violent protesters as with the Saffron revolution. Extreme poverty, low health care, and lack of opportunity in refugee camps are also a clear example of structural violence. Often it is difficult to see structural violence in the offering of opportunity to live in the United States. Navigating a system of social services seems an oxymoron to call structural violence. However, I argue arriving in debt, having no understanding or input on financial decisions in the beginning, and struggling with the challenge of high unemployment and underemployment rates, leave the refugees in the hands of a system that makes the ability to move out of poverty out of reach and is structural violence.

**Transnational and/or Political Expectations and Realities**

In addition to economic expectations and realities, this thesis also sought to explore the transnational and political expectations and realities of the refugees from Burma. During the period of research, the international community began to recognize and discuss Burma because the Burmese government started to hold democratic elections, release political prisoners, and meet with Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and President Barack Obama. The international attention to Burma is a step toward recognizing the isolation and human rights abuses of the past military junta. It also is a step toward hope for the people of Burma and the refugees I spoke with expressed they were feeling this hope.

The refugees often speak of their ethnic struggle with the Burmese government and the desire to return and continue the struggle for peace and freedom for their respective ethnic groups. I had anticipated the data to reflect an expectation that they could utilize the opportunity of being in the United States to gather power to support the efforts toward a more democratic and free Burma. In fact, the data collected did not confirm my prediction.

There are transnational social fields or “observable social relationships and transactions” (Glick-Schiller 2003:107) between, across and within national borders in the daily lives of the refugees. The method of interviewing was not a successful means to gain an understanding of their transnational activities and I attribute this to their subjectivity of living under a military rule and learned methods of navigating authority. The ethnographic data
conversely showed active transnational social fields and diaspora activities of communicating with people in Thailand and Burma, and with other resettled refugees from Burma worldwide. As Glick-Schiller (2003) points out, transnational activities may be part of more than two countries and the data show a strong connection with Thailand as well as Burma. Transnational activities will vary over time often as immigrants become more rooted in the new home (Glick-Schiller 2003:106). As the refugees become more comfortable with their environment and gain citizenship it is possible that their political activity will transform.

**Subjectivity of Asking and Answering Questions**

The following will discuss why the methods of interviewing with this particular population are less productive due to their subjectivity or lived experience, describe the ethnographic data on transnational activities and the social fields that are developing, and introduce the complexity of a diaspora that identifies with both Burma and Thailand.

The framework of subjectivity, the lived experiences that influence how one continues to experience the world and play out subject positions, gives insight on how the refugees respond to interview questions. During the semi-structured interviews, when I asked of transnational or political activities, the participants seemed to ignore, answer simply, or avoid the questions. It was difficult to get anyone to talk about friends or family, current political events, or if and how they connect with others abroad. I attribute this to the discomfort with the questions. I noticed this on multiple occasions.

In an attempt to understand why they avoid questions, during a group interview, I asked one person who was describing getting lost on the bus why they did not ask the bus driver for help. I choose this time because, while the incident described was stressful, it was a light moment of the interview and participants seemed comfortable. As soon as I asked, another participant broke out with excitement and hit his chest, “It is in my flesh,” I gave him an inquisitive look, “I don’t ask questions because when I was little, if I ask a question my parents hit me. No ask question!” he gestured as if holding a swatch in his hand and hitting his own shoulder. “It is beat into my flesh to not ask question,” he continued to hit his upper arm, “it is in my flesh.” He went on to explain, “Also, there are so many questions being asked of us when we arrive. They ask, ‘where are your parents?’ It is just easier to say, ‘they have died.’ If you answer them [that they are alive], another question will follow. So, many
of our paper work says that our parents are dead but in a year or so we sponsor our parents to come here,” the whole room broke into laughter. He continued, “One question turns into many questions…it is just easier to answer the simplest way, even when asked what we did for work, it is easiest to say you were a farmer.” (field notes, April 2012). While the topic of conversation was not about their transnational activity, it was telling of why they do not ask questions and how they would avoid my questions of transnational participation or desires. There is both a fear taught by parents regarding questioning and a learned method of answering questions to avoid further questioning.

Direct questions tended to fail. I asked if they know about what is going on in Burma politically and the response was, “No.” I asked, “Do you talk with friends in Burma?” Again, I would get, “No.” “Not even on the internet?” I attempted again, with, “No,” as the response. When I asked if they expected to keep up to date with the politics in Burma while here in the U.S. they said they did not have time or space in their head to think about Burma because they are too busy trying to figure out how to pay their rent and feed their children. Many times when I asked them about the current political situation in Burma they would say, “It is all lies” and then quickly refer to “forgetting” about it, “I have to think about now and the future here, not what is going on there, I have to forget about it.” (field notes, May 2012). Another family said, “We forget. My head is full. Every day, every day,” patting her hands on her head “we think about, how we pay rent. We don’t have time to think about Burma we forget about it.” (field notes, June 2012). Part of this may be a coping mechanism both to avoid my asking of more questions that are personal as well as to stay focused, stressing the situation they are in now.

The research methods included multiple visits, allowing room for conversation and giving them an opportunity to get to know me a bit. I found that when they became more comfortable with me, they would open up about transnational types of activities. On one visit, the family began to tell me that Aung San Suu Kyi had been released from house arrest. I asked, “How do you know this?” They answered with “YouTube, there was a video on the internet.” I was afraid that if I went quickly into direct questions they would shut down again so I asked, “Do you have Facebook?” With a quiet tone as if gossiping, “Ya, my friend from Burma told me they do not have any electricity. The government is just a lie.” This gave me the opportunity to ask more about what they felt about the political situation in Burma, yet
again it had to be indirect, “What do you mean they have no electricity?” “They say the government is change, but they still take things from the people. My friend only has electricity for one hour a day. At night, they do homework with candles, you know? The government is the same they just took off their uniforms.” I repeated my question from before, “So, you talk with your friends about this, how do you get information about what is going on in Burma?” “Oh yes, from BBC. I download it every day to my IPod and listen to it at work,” the brother said. “They have news in Burmese?” “Yes, I like to keep up on what is going on.” (field notes, May 2012)

Another reason they may have avoided any transnational activity is the ingrained fear of the government and the repercussions for their family. I asked if they talked to their families in Burma. Most would say no and that they do not have any family in Burma. Those who know me well would tell me yes, but that they need to be careful with some of them because if the Burmese government finds out, their family will be in trouble.

An economic element hinders the ability to communicate as well, in that the costs of international phone calls are often too high for them to afford. I asked if they had sent money back to Burma for their family and I received the same sort of response. Some of the families told me that they did not send money back to family in Burma because they do not have enough money to share but that they expected to. Those who know me the best told me that they send money to their family. “Just a little bit. It is not very much money here, but it is a lot there.”

**Ethnographic Observations**

Where direct interview questions seldom yielded good information about refugees’ transnationalism, ethnographic observation and indirect discussions with key informants demonstrated an active connection with both Burma and Thailand. In spite of protests that they are too consumed with everyday stresses to be concerned with political life abroad, the ethnographic data show that they indeed do keep up on news coming out of Burma, participate in cultural activities, and stay connected with friends and family in Thailand and Burma through diverse media and online social networking sites.

When walking into an apartment it is common to see someone sitting in front of a computer watching a video on You Tube in Karen or Burmese language of dramas, soap
operas or news, or talking via internet video communication software. One day, I went to visit a family and on the computer was a Burmese news station. I asked what he was watching. “VOA” (Voice of America). “How often do you watch this?” “Maybe every other day or so. It helps to know what is going on.” (field notes, April 2012). On another occasion, I was visiting a participant and when I walked in, she took me to the back room where she had her computer and she said, “I want to show you something.” She pulled up on YouTube a news program (RFA MyanmarVideoChannel 2012) produced within a refugee camp in Thailand. I was surprised at the professional set and production of the news program. (field notes, May 2012). This technology helps her keep up to date on events that affect her friends and family who are still living in the refugee camp. In addition to watching videos, live video calls are a means of staying connected with friends and family by using Skype or ooVoo. My participants keep in touch with friends and family in United States, Canada, Australia, Thailand, and Burma.

**Traveling and Transnational Activities**

Traveling within the United States is a common practice. During my visits with the families, we would talk about traveling and they shared their stories of their trips to Indiana, Arizona, New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. While these are not international travels, the purpose for traveling is to participate in transnational cultural activities with other refugees from Burma. They go to play soccer with other Burmese refugees and participate in Burmese and Karen New Year celebrations. One family came together from all over the United States for their grandfather’s funeral. For the San Diego Karen New Year celebration, many traveled to San Diego from Arizona, Indiana, Texas, and from other parts of California. During my research, a couple of participating families had members who were in Thailand and Burma visiting with family.

**New Year’s Celebrations**

New Year’s celebrations are significant cultural gatherings that not only create a space for the diaspora to come together and celebrate their cultural identity; they also promote cultural awareness among the host community. Two such celebrations take place
annually in San Diego-Thingyan, or Burmese New Year, also known as the Water Festival, and the Karen New Year.

In Burma and throughout neighboring countries such as Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia, the Thingyan or Water Festival marks the New Year, typically starting in mid-April based on the Theravada Buddhist lunar calendar (Lu 2008). Traditionally in Burma, the festival encompasses performances of music and dance, and symbolic sprinkling of scented water on each other, which cleanses one of sin with the tone of charity, rest, and relaxation. Contemporary versions of the celebration involve large stages with music and dancing and joyful water fights (BurmaNet News 2007).

In San Diego, Laos, Thai, and Cambodian Buddhist Temples celebrate Thingyan. Wat Lao Buddharam of San Diego has invited the community of refugees from Burma to participate in their Thingyan celebrations since 2010. Refugees from Burma, regardless of ethnic or religious affiliation, attended and some contributed to the celebration with Burmese dance performances. The Lao immigrant community organizes the festivals; thus, language and customs are not Burmese, but rather Laotian. The refugees from Burma are guests participating in a familiar cultural event. The result is low attendance with difficulty to gather enough participants from Burma for dance performances or to participate in organization. Many prefer to travel to Los Angeles to participate in the Thingyan organized by the Southern California Burmese Association. In Los Angeles, hundreds of people from Burma attend the celebration. It is a cultural gathering and for community leaders and political officials to attend, such as, U.S. House of Representatives, Mayors and local officials (BNTV commercial, 2013). These appearances of public officials both establish, validate, and inform the community of people from Burma.

The Karen New Year is celebrated on the first day of Payathoe based on the Buddhist lunar calendar, typically in December or January of the Western calendar (Karen Buddhist Dhamma Dhutta Foundation 2011). Karen New Year is a time of remembering and celebrating their ethnic culture, past leaders, and the plight of their ethnic struggle with the Burmese. Events include speeches from community leaders, cultural dance, music, and food.

In San Diego, Karen New Year is a large celebration held at Crawford High School in 2012 and 2011. It is an all-day event held in the school auditorium. The auditorium is decorated with the Karen Flag, portraits of Karen leaders, and flowers framing the stage.
During the first few celebrations I attended, I was ushered up to the front of the auditorium to sit with all of the other white American guests, who are wearing Karen clothing that had been given as presents to them.

Both the American and Karen National Anthems open the celebrations. Speeches from Karen Organization of San Diego leaders, city councilmembers, and the Crawford High principal precede the multiple dance performances from youth. In 2013, a group of refugees who traveled down from Bakersfield gave a performance. Youth from a church group performed an ethnic Chin dance. Elders play traditional musical instruments while singing ethnical pride songs. The Karen Youth Organization acknowledged their teacher, Mrs. Osgood, for inspiring and believing in them. The highlight of the show is the fashion show where Karen, Kareni and Chin youth strut the stage to rock music in ethnic clothing as well as some contemporary alterations to the striped linens. After the performances, all gather to eat ethnic food and mingle among each other. It is a happy occasion not only to meet with each other in one large place but also to invite and educate other members of the city and community of their ethnic traditions.

**Aung San Suu Kyi Visits the United States**

A few Burmese members of the community in San Diego, who were not participants of the research, were committee members of the Southern California Burmese Association based Los Angeles, which organized Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s speech in Los Angeles. I had the pleasure of taking 10 refugees from Burma to see the iconic leader of the democratic movement in their home country speak. I rented a van and drove three ethnic Mon, three Muslim Burmese and two Karen from San Diego to the Los Angeles Convention Center. The experience was different for all of them. Waiting in line were people who, from an outsiders perspective, all looked the same. Both men and women wore brightly colored longis. From an insider’s perspective, the colors and patterns of their clothing symbolized their ethnicity. Many ethnicities were represented creating a rainbow of color; Mon, Karen, Burmese, Chin, Kachin, Kareni, Rakahine, Shan and so on.

During the speech, Aung San Suu Kyi did not speak much in English and she seemed to have the crowd of 500 or so laughing and giggling the whole time. On the way home, I asked those in my van what her speech was about. The Muslim Burmese told me that she
encouraged them to get their education and then go back to help support and educate those in Burma. I directed the question to the Karen in the car, one said, “It was good. I don’t think she understands refugees.” From the back of the van a Muslim woman said, “I think she does, there are refugees all over the world. She knows that there are refugees,” dismissing the previous statement. I said, “Well wait, what do you mean that she doesn’t understand?” He said, “The Burmese are very educated. They know how to do things. I don’t think she understands how hard it is to be a refugee in the United States.” (field notes, September 2012).

Nostalgic Diaspora Desires/Citizenship

The participants’ political activities or desires remain unclear, but their actions demonstrated an active knowledge of the political goings-on in Burma and Thailand. In addition, all participants wanted to know about what they needed to do to become citizens of the United States. To have citizenship is to further their ability to move about their environment both here and in Thailand. They speak of the refugee camp with nostalgic memories of large homes, room to grow food, jungle to harvest fruits, and areas to raise animals. Not only do the refugees miss their families and friends, they long for the relative wealth they enjoyed in the refugee camp. For example, a family explained to me that before they left the refugee camp their home was a place where celebrations were held, people would come to visit and they would grow their own food and raise chickens. “We had the largest house and everything we needed. Here we don’t have anything.” Often the young refugees know no other home than the refugee camp. When they speak of going back home, they speak of going back to the refugee camp in Thailand. To some degree, diaspora youth are not of Burma but rather of Thailand. When I asked a participant why they wanted citizenship of the United States they said, “It is best, no more police. When I go to Thailand, it is good.” I asked, “So when you go back to visit in Thailand you will not have to worry about the police bothering you?” “Yes, I think it is best for here so I have no trouble and to visit my family,” they responded.

DIVERSITY OF PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERIENCES AMONG REFUGEES FROM BURMA

There was a purposeful attempt in the research design to include an ethnically diverse
sample of respondents. This conscious effort came from my knowledge of multiple ethnicities of refugees from Burma coming to San Diego; yet, I could find little mention of any ethnicity other than the Karen in the literature. I also knew that religious backgrounds are diverse for the population, when most of the literature found focuses on the Karen and generalizing them as Christian. The demographic study conducted by Young et al. in 2010 showed that these generalizations exclude a large portion of the population in San Diego.

By including an ethnically diverse sample, I was able to see variations in access to resources on an institutional level. In addition, there is sensitivity to ethnicity within the larger group of refugees from Burma. The following will review the diversity in ethnicity, language, and religion among the population. In addition, I will give an overview of the institutions in San Diego that contribute to access to resources for this population and how access to resources is not equal. I will further explore the institutional strength of the ethnic Karen and the grassroots effort of the non-Karen as it relates to citizenship classes and further to general access to resources.

**Ethnic Diversity**

Burma is known for its ethnic diversity, with estimates of 100-180 different languages spoken (Ardeth 2008; Smith 2007). (Governmental seclusion from the international community for the past 60 years explains the discrepancy in all demographic information in the literature including, the range of 100-180 different languages). While the Burmese government has had civil conflicts with minority ethnic groups, oppression affects all its citizens. If anyone, regardless of their ethnicity, resisted the government, their livelihood was threatened. The populations of refugees from Burma are composed of a mix of ethnic minorities and the ethnic majority of Burma, the Burmese. For the purposes of this thesis, grouping of ethnicities into nine larger groups is used, all of which have subgroups of their own that are beyond the scope of this research. The nine are Karen, Chin, Mon, Burman or Burmese, Muslim Burmese, Shan, Kachin, Kayah, Rahkine. This grouping of the population in San Diego is based on a demographic survey conducted in 2010 as seen in Table 3 (Young et.al 2010). The Karen category alone contains more than 20 smaller groups, with the two largest sub-groups being the Sgaw, typically Christian or Animist who live in
Table 3. Ethnic Diversity of San Diego Burmese Population

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
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<td>Kachin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kayah</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayin/Karen</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chin</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim Burmese</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burman/Burmese</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shan</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rakhine</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The literature reflects different configurations of grouping ethnicities, for example the Karenni are sometimes grouped within the Karen and sometimes within the Kachin (Fink 2008; Myint-u 2007; Smith 2007; Ardeth 2008).

While there is a tendency for marriages to be ethnically endogamous, there are examples of intermarriages among the participants of this thesis. In one family, the father is ethnically Burmese, yet he now self-identifies as Karen. He explained to me that after meeting his wife he followed her culture and religion. “When you marry, you follow the wife. I was angry that I had to change my religion [from Buddhist to Christian], but I thought about it a lot. I decided that there is no bad religion, only bad people and you cannot study more than one religion. So, for my family I became Christian, and am Karen.” However, in another family, the husband is Muslim Burmese and the mother is Karen. She self-identifies as Karen while the family unit identifies as Muslim Burmese and follows Islamic practices.
This would suggest an ability for women to remain independent and have the agency to define how they identify ethnically. Exploration of women’s autonomy and agency would require further research, additional questions, and a larger sample beyond this thesis.

As with intermarriages, living arrangements as refugees in San Diego connect the multiple ethnicities together. In one large apartment complex, there is a variety of ethnicities living in close proximity together. There are interpersonal interactions between people of different ethnicities. They are friends with each other, the children play together, and the families share resources, information, and time together as neighbors. Often this is due to the multilingualism among the population. Many speak the national language of Burma, Burmese, in addition to their ethnic language. If they have lived in a refugee camp where the majority was ethnic Karen, they may have Karen language skills as well. In addition, Thai is taught in the Thai refugee camps and is another common language used to communicate.

During my research, a family was struggling with a tragic illness of a family member. As the family was overwhelmed and confused by the severity of the illness, other neighbors of different ethnicities and stronger English skills spent hours at the hospital assisting the family in understanding the medical conditions of their relative. Acts of friendship are common among the refugees, regardless of ethnic identity.

Ethnicity serves as a great sense of pride for all groups. A Chin respondent told me, “When we speak our language and listen to our music, even eat our food that is different from others [from Burma], we feel at home, we feel happy. We don’t want to forget our culture.”

The following are examples of Karen songs performed at Karen New Year,

Karen National Song “Blessed Country”

Blessed Country. I always want to sing about beautiful hills, mountains, rivers, and forests. I love all those things, which are all blessed.

(Chorus) Blessed country, Kaw Thoo Lei (= Karen State). I love all of your beauty. I can give all my life for you. Htee Set Mae Ywa (= Yellow River), Kaw Thoo Lei, and people’s freedom. I love all of your beauty. I can give all my life for you, Kaw Thoo Lei. (Karen New Year 2013 Planning Committee 2013)

(Note: When they speak of “country,” they are narrating the Karen State as an autonomous State. The Burmese government however, has not provided that; thus, the civil war between the Karen and the Burmese government.)
We Are Karen

We, Karen, value and love the truth. Our grandparents say, “if we are one in heart, we can upright the ladder and climb up to the heavens.”

The flag is given by our heritage; we have to keep our culture. Everybody has a duty to let the world know who we are.

(Chorus) Now, it is the time again. Our hearts will be one. We will do the best for our country. If we know we are Karen, the victory will be forever. (Karen New Year 2013 Planning Committee 2013)

The lyrics of this song show the unity, preservation, and a call to victory of autonomy for the ethnic Karen. (See KOSD 2013 for translations of other songs performed)

Language

Many speak their ethnic language at home and Burmese as a common language when among others. There seems to be some contention and ill feelings associated with this across the ethnicities. The non-Karen tend to speak Burmese and do not mind using it as a common language to communicate with each other. The non-Karen perceive the Karen as being bi-lingual, but choosing to not speak Burmese out of being obstinate. The non-Karen I worked with often generalize and complain that the Karen refuse to speak Burmese. I have witnessed a bilingual non-Karen refuse to translate in Karen during a doctor’s visit, explaining to me that all Karen understand Burmese. The Karen on the other hand want to preserve their linguistic identity rather than identifying with the ethnicity that has pushed them out of their homeland. While I have witnessed Karen saying they do not speak Burmese when they do, it is true that some have no Burmese language skills. Many Karen are bilingual or multilingual and choose not to speak Burmese, the language of their oppressors. This is relatively unimportant for navigating daily life in the United States, where English is the language of currency. However, during stressful and confusing situations, such as social and health services, the failure to use the language best understood by a refugee can leave the refugees with little agency in understanding and making decisions.

Religious Diversity and Affiliation

Religious organizations can be a space not only for personal worship but also for access to resources. Just as the refugees are ethnically diverse, they are also religiously
diverse as you can see in Table 4 and Table 5. According to the demographic survey done by Young et al. (2010) the population of refugees from Burma in San Diego are:

Table 4. Religious Affiliation San Diego

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Islam</th>
<th>Hinduism</th>
<th>Christianity</th>
<th>Buddhism</th>
<th>Animism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Participant Household Religious Affiliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Islam</th>
<th>Hinduism</th>
<th>Christianity</th>
<th>Buddhism</th>
<th>Animism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are two Christian churches offering services specifically for refugees from Burma. One offers a Sunday morning service in the Karen language. The church is walkable for most and is a space to worship and gather among others who share their language and experience.

I have never attended Sunday morning services at this church; however, I have attended a wedding celebration. The small chapel was overflowing with people sitting in folding chairs, standing in the hallway and gathering outside as children were sitting and running up and down the aisles. There were songs performed for the bride and groom, and a standard Western style wedding ceremony. After the exchange of vows and prayer sanctioned the marriage, members of the church transformed the room into a dining hall with long tables and everyone lined up for a meal. They ushered me up to the front of the line as a typical practice to honor their guests.

The second Christian congregation began in 2010 and provides services in the Burmese language to multiple different ethnicities from Burma. The church provides a bus to shuttle refugees from their home in City Heights to the church, approximately 12 miles away. Services are on Sunday afternoons, as to not conflict with the morning services at the local church. Many of the refugees’ first connection with the pastor was when they first arrived in San Diego as he was working as a translator for a resettlement organization. He shared with me that when people ask him for help he says, “You come to my service every week, and I will help you.” An ethnic Burmese participant told me that before attending the Christian services, he was a Buddhist, but now he is a Christian.
I have attended a few of the Sunday services and special Christmas celebrations. The church is a large building complex with multiple auditoriums varying in size. The church accommodates religious gatherings for various ethnic groups beyond those from Burma. At the end of the hall is a small auditorium that holds approximately 150 people and has a stage with musical instruments and microphones. During Christmas celebrations, ribbons, balloons, and a Christmas tree decorate the environment. The services start with performances of songs and dances from the youth backed by the band with a drum set and electric guitar. Guests or new members stand and say their name followed by announcements. The children then exit and go to another room for Sunday school. The pastor gives a sermon prior to group gospel songs followed by closing prayers. After the service, everyone moves to a dining hall and shares a Burmese meal of noodles. The pastor and leaders of the church, all men, sit at one table and are served while the rest of the congregation waits in line to get their meal. Usually, against my desire, I am treated as an honored guest and am ushered up to sit at the pastor’s table. Once the pastor has finished his meal, members come to the table with a pile of mail for assistance with translation. They hand it to him with one hand while touching the forearm or elbow of the extending hand with the second hand, out of respect.

The congregation also holds Friday evening Bible study. This is a revolving gathering in members’ homes where they sing gospel songs and the pastor gives a lesson on a Bible verse. This is also an opportunity for the congregation to focus prayer for the individual family in their home. I have attended a few of these gatherings. Each host clears out their front room of all furniture and covers the floor with mats. As people enter the small apartments, shoes create an obstacle to entry as they pile up outside the front door. As people sit on the floor along the walls, more people enter and fill in the center of the room. One youth member will bring a guitar and start strumming songs that the other youth begin to sing. As the pastor and his family arrive, all squish in to give him an audience as he stands above them. Worn and tattered booklets of photocopied song lyrics circulate around the group. Small toddlers crawl around on laps and the group begins to sing. I do not understand a word, but I hear the passion of their voices and ability for the average to harmonize expressing devotion; I know they are singing gospel songs. The pastor then preaches for a half hour and asks the host to stand and say a few words. The group then offers a prayer to
the family and closing prayers conclude the formal gathering. The host family then serves food while everyone sits on the floor, eating, and chatting together. It is during this time that the host family hands the pastor an offering of money. This is another opportunity for the congregation to elicit the pastor’s help by translating mail for them.

There are three Buddhist temples that the refugees visit and make offerings. I participated with a family on a couple of occasions. The family prepared food and dressed in nice traditional clothing. The inside of the temple has multiple gold statues of the Buddha and altars in the back of the room. There are mats covering the floors and we walked in and sat on the floor in front of the altars. The family then showed me how to hold my hands to my chest as if praying then lean over opening my hands palm down with my index fingers and thumbs touching and touch my forehead to my hands on the ground. We repeated this three times. Women were gathering and preparing the food that the family and others had brought and a monk came into the room and sat in front of the altar on a small stage. With smiles and casual conversation, the monk welcomed family and me to the temple. I was told that occasionally a monk from Burma, practicing in Los Angeles will visit the temple in San Diego but this particular monk was from Laos. He switched between Thai and English to communicate with us, another example of multilingualism among this group. He told me, “If you come here, everything will be okay. All you have to do is visit and come inside.” The rest of the members of the temple gathered around on the floor and a few other monks entered in and took their positions while making no eye contact with anyone. They began to recite a sutra and everyone joined in with their hands in a prayer position. Women brought bottles of water and a small bowl and placed it in front of me as others went and collected their own bottle of water and bowl. As the monk recited a verse, we all slowly poured our water into our bowl. At one point, everyone dug into their pockets to find a dollar, went up, and clipped a dollar to a tree like structure. Once the prayers were completed, the women got up and prepared the room for food. The monks were served first; before the monks ate, a man on each corner of the monk’s table, lifted it just slightly off the ground while the monks recited another prayer. The women then laid out food on the floor and plates for everyone to eat.
The family told me that they go and make offerings to the monks on a weekly basis. They go and ask for blessings and prayers when faced with difficult times. I did not witness any access to resources other than spiritual.

I have not attended the Muslim service that the refugees from Burma attend. Men occasionally go to services on Friday, but often it is difficult because they are working. The women told me that they go but some of the women there are not friendly, so they feel uncomfortable. The mosque that they attend has a majority of Somalis and Iraqis.

During the research, a family member of a participating household passed away. I was invited to the burial and family gatherings. The unexpected death was confusing and heart breaking for the family. While I have chosen not to detail the event surrounding the death and funeral out of respect for the family’s privacy, the funeral was an example of access to resources through religious affiliations. The family had been paying monthly dues of $25.00 to the mosque since they arrived in San Diego. These dues provide services for funerals, weddings, and financial assistance for extreme health issues. Affiliation with the mosque and participating with dues then is a kind of insurance plan that funded the funeral services.

Religious organizations serve as not only spiritual resources but also economic, cultural, and transitional resources. They are a place to gather and discuss issue of resettlement with peers and those with more experience. They offer spaces to participate in cultural practices. They are also resources for assistance with mail and financial emergencies. In addition the religious spaces are diverse just as the community is.

**Aid Organizations/Institutional Karen Strength**

Four resettlement organizations have services that assist with post-resettlement needs such as health clinics, immigration services, food security assistance, and job placement services. Other organizations provide resources for refugees often gather and exchange information and ideas at the monthly Refugee Network meetings. The Episcopal Refugee Network, which began in San Diego by helping refugees from Sudan, has expanded its non-profit to assist refugees from Burma, namely the Karen (Episcopal Refugee Network of San Diego 2013). The Karen Organization of San Diego, established in 2009 with a grant from the UNHCR, helps with post-resettlement needs such as translation, transportation,
community gatherings, weekly topical community meetings, and collaboration with other community service organizations. The mission statement is “Karen Organization of San Diego is committed to educational and social enhancement of various ethnic minority groups from Burma who reside in San Diego, California” (KOSD 2013). All of these organizations have a staff member who speaks Burmese and Karen. This is advantageous for the aid organizations for translation of services to the population as the Karen are the majority.

Karen vs. Non-Karen

For discussion purposes, I use the term non-Karen to generalize all who are not ethnically Karen. This is not an attempt to dichotomize the group; however, institutionally there is different access to resources if you are Karen.

My interviews with non-Karen families provided un-elicited information on tensions between non-Karen and Karen regarding institutional access to resources. During my first interview with a non-Karen family, they began to tell me of tensions between them and the Karen. “The Karen, they talk bad about us. They don’t want to help us. We help them, but they don’t help us.” The families explained to me that when they were in the refugee camp in Thailand, the majority Karen would help each other but not them.

In the refugee camp they beat up other people, they throw stones, they fire your house. They discriminate because we Muslim in the refugee camp. If you get hit or someone throws a stone at you or hurts you, and you go to the leader, the leader will say, ‘so what?’ But, if the Karen person gets hit, everyone cares, everyone comes and helps them. Here, the Karen can’t do that because the police will come. They don’t marry with other ethnic groups, they only marry Karen. They say that they don’t speak Burmese, they only know Karen. But they have to speak Burmese, they are from Burma. Trudi, there is even a caseworker only wants to help the Karen, no other groups. They do their own thing and no help us. (field notes, May 2012).

This family's viewpoint is that the Karen, who held an advantage in the refugee camps of Thailand, are continuing discrimination by isolating and not incorporating other ethnic groups with the services they have available.

Because this was a common topic with non-Karen, I began to look at the structures that were forming in the community to access to resources. Celebrations organized by aid organizations have a primarily Karen presence. The public see refugees from Burma as synonymous with the Karen. During the 2012 World Refugee Day celebration in San Diego,
organized by the Karen Organization and the IRC, only Karen and Sudanese cultural dancers performed. The Union of Pan Asian Communities holds a yearly conference and invites Karen dancers to perform. While there are non-Karen who would perform for these events, there is no institution that organizes and connects them with these options. These events are important symbolic demonstrations to the larger community about the presence of immigrant groups and the culture they bring with them. Thus far, the events are lacking to demonstrate the diversity of the refugees from Burma.

Mrs. Osgood of Crawford High School supervises the school’s Karen Youth Group, developed to give the youth leadership skills. I asked Mrs. Osgood why she felt that the other refugees from Burma did not participate in the youth group meetings. She said, “I don’t know why they don’t come. I have invited them to come. Sometimes, they tell me that they don’t speak the same language. Nevertheless, I have seen them talking together in class. I know that they can communicate together” (field notes, June 2012). The Karen Youth group is open to incorporating other ethnicities into their group as the Vice President serving during my research is Iraqi. I asked a Chin participant, who attended Crawford High, if she attended the Karen Youth Organization at her high school. She responded by saying, “I don’t go there, it is not for me. It is ok because then I make friends with other people. I learn English better that way.” (field notes, May 2012).

During the Karen wedding I attended, the dinner table was full of other volunteers from the community. There was praise and pride for the first Karen youth to begin college that year. I celebrated with them and added that another refugee from Burma, an ethnically Burman or Burmese, was attending college also. The response was, “Why would there be Burmese refugees here?” (field notes, July 2012). They were unaware of the other college students among the refugees from Burma and many of them were unaware of other ethnic groups of refugees from Burma in San Diego or that the government oppresses all ethnicities to some extent including the ethnic Burmese.

During an interview with a Chin family, I asked what they felt the community needed. They said they would like to see an organization that provides post-resettlement services, one that can have translators help with welfare paperwork, social security, managing health issues and to have a place that can have lessons on childcare, career development and other issue that may arise in the community. I said, “That is what the Karen
Organization is doing.” Frustrated and sternly he said, “The Karen are different.” He held his hands out, palm to palm, holding an imaginary a box off to the side of his body for the Karen to go in. “The Karen, they are their own group. I am talking about something for everyone” (field notes, May 2012).

Citizenship Preparation

As mentioned in the previous section, the group is exploring their options of how to become a citizen of the United States. Many of them are coming up on their five-year anniversary of residency and will soon be able to apply for citizenship. Shortly after I began my research, the Karen Organization of San Diego, in collaboration with the immigration department at Jewish Family Services, began hosting a free citizenship class for refugees from Burma.

During the research, many of the families asked me what the process for citizenship involves. I would tell them that I did not know. They would be a bit perplexed wondering how I could not know. I would have to clarify that since I was born in the United States I did not have to go through the process myself, so I am unfamiliar with it. I would tell them that I had heard that the Karen Organization was giving refugees from Burma free citizenship classes. “No, no. I do not go there. Where do I go, Trudi?” they responded and repeated the question. “Why don’t you go there?” I asked. “Mmm,” shaking her head once in the negative, “I don’t go there.” On a separate occasion with a different participant, the response to my suggestion was, “pshh, I don’t want to go there! They [the Karen people] are not nice to us” (field notes, May 2012). He continued to tell me about when he was in the refugee camp if there was a dispute between a Karen and non-Karen, the Karen would always be protected regardless of who was in the wrong. This shows that this ethnic tension is rooted in their past experience of living in the refugee camp where the Karen had a power over the other ethnicities.

Another time when citizenship process questions came up, I finally asked, “Why don’t you go to the Karen Organization? I don’t understand if they offer classes in citizenship for free and they are so close to home, why do you not go to them?” He replied, “If the organization is named ‘Karen’ that means it is for the Karen people, not me.” Touché, I felt. (field notes, July 2012).
What is happening instead is a grassroots spread of information on citizenship. As I attempted to help the refugees who did not want to attend the Karen Organization, I contacted the Jewish Family Services Immigration department. They also explained that there were classes at the Karen Organization. I explained that some of the non-Karen did not want to go to the organization and were looking to see what they could do on their own. The representative explained to me that she made it clear that all ethnicities would be welcome. I explained that I did not see the Karen Organization doing anything to the contrary and still there is a resistance to attending classes at the Karen Organization. Jewish Family Services was more than happy to see any refugee from Burma and help them through the process; they were hoping that collaborating with the Karen Organization would help with transportation and access since the Jewish Family Services are 10 or so miles away from the community in City Heights. I passed the information on to two families and they scheduled information meetings with Jewish Family Services. Two participant families of this thesis have now successfully navigated the process, are citizens of the U.S., and are helping others. The non-Karen are attending citizenship classes, studying together, taking the citizenship test, becoming citizens, and spreading the information and study resources among each other.

Institutionally, there is greater access to resources for the Karen since organizations have a better contact with the Karen by employing them as translators. In addition, organizations such as the Karen Organization of San Diego are established and becoming leaders in the community in assisting refugees from San Diego. The non-Karen are utilizing interpersonal relationships to achieve their goals and gain access to resources, but they do not have an institutional basis for doing so.
CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

The participants of this study are happy to be in the United States where they can gain freedom of movement, opportunities for their children through a state recognized education, and hope for their future. With resettlement, they face challenges toward achieving these goals. Some of the challenges are with cultural acclimation and adjustments to a different way of life. Other challenges are upsetting their economic expectation of financial comfort. High unemployment rates, underemployment, and the systems of the resettlement process leave the refugees in a cycle of poverty and victims of structural violence. These struggles can frustrate them and bring on nostalgic feelings.

Data on transnational expectations are limited and were difficult to uncover. I attribute this to the participants’ experience of fear of oppression of political freedoms from the Burmese government. Even so, transnational social fields among families and friends are developing among local institutions and grassroots networks that connect across multiple ethnic, state, and nation-state boundaries. There were less than expected signs of transnational political activities happening among the refugees from Burma in San Diego. While there are some connections to political parties in Los Angeles, the data did not show any political gatherings in San Diego. Nina Glick-Schiller (2003) argues that with time and legal recognition transnational migrants increase transnational activities. The research participants seemed to anticipate this trend, seeing the acquisition of U.S. citizenship as a source of security for traveling to Burma and Thailand and engaging in social affairs, thus achieve their goal of freedom to move about their environment on a transnational level. Banki (2006) found that the opposite happened in Japan among refugees from Burma as transnational activities decreases as the community gained state recognition. It is important to note that diasporic transnationalism is not necessarily with the “country of origin,” (Burma) but with the “transit country” (Thailand) as well. Thailand is the only country remembered by many young refugees, and one with which they still have ties. Their language training in Thai in the refugee camps links them not only with Burmese refugees but also to a certain
degree with the larger Thai society. Additional future research will show how the refugees’ transnational social fields and transnational political activities change as they continue to gain U.S. citizenship. What will their social fields evolve to look like? Do refugees from Burma lack transnational activity at this time due to their legal recognition? Will transnational activity increase or decrease as they become state-sanctioned persons?

The research design of including an ethnically diverse sample uncovered important differences between the ethnicities, especially in institutional access to resources. These differences are unintentionally exacerbated by aid organizations’ focus on the ethnic Karen. This has created a benefit for the ethnic Karen refugees with local institutional support. Institutionally focusing on the Karen marginalizes large portion of the population in regards to access to resources, increases ethnic sensitivity, and continues ethnic tensions that are rooted in their past in the refugee camps.

I attribute the depth of these research findings to the methods of anthropology. It became clear as the research progressed that the combination of interviews and ethnographic observations provided a better understand the experience of refugees from Burma. The refugees’ subjective experience of oppression and structural violence give them a unique way of navigating questions. Ethnographic observations, including the input of the marginalized, and spending extended periods with the community provided data that pushed deeper into the lived experience than past literature.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS**

Suggestions for service providers would be to recognize that the refugees coming from Burma are a very diverse group, ethnically, linguistically, and religiously. In addition, there is diversity in the ability to access resources. Understanding this it is important to designing programs and providing services accessible for all. Focusing on the majority continues marginalization and increases tension among the group.

When first meeting a family, explaining the research, and that I wanted to know what they felt they needed, they said, “No one has ever asked us that before. Why not?” (field notes, May 2012). The refugees have navigated a complex process to survive in a civil war resulting in arrival to the United States. They have been active participants in decisions for their future as well as they have been under the control of resettlement process. They are
aware of their needs. Many of them have experience as community leaders organizing community and educating efforts in the refugee camps. They want to discuss their ideas and desires for the community. They are quiet and guarded, yet this does not mean they are not experienced and intelligent. Opening a safe space where they are the authority is important in understanding and providing the services that meet the needs of the refugees.

Resettlement does not end after housing and employment is secured. Assistance with translation, transportation, job placement, and career development is a need. More job opportunities are a known need; however, those who have a job are underemployed, working six days a week, using public transportation, and being paid minimum wage with no benefits. If they are sick, they go to work because missing a day would mean that they could not pay their rent. There is no financial security, no benefits, or time to gain any other job development or English skills. Programs that continue to provide job development and career skills are needed even if the refugee is employed. This would be most effective if partnered with employers.

The argument is that refugees are placed in the intercity to give them access to social service offices and the cost of living is lower. While the refugees can take a bus to the local welfare office when they live in City Heights (as with any area), they cannot afford to move out of the area without job opportunities that have career growth potential. The goal should rather be to place them in an area where they do not need to rely on social service with housing programs in areas where there are job opportunities rather than in impacted low-income neighborhoods.

There is a need of teaching more culturally appropriate methods of disciplining children. Translating, including cultural translation of the new environment, often falls on the children, causing a lack of parental control. Suggestions from the participants included gatherings of parents to learn culturally appropriate parenting methods and to discuss, as a community, how to raise their children in the U.S. without losing the benefits of their ethnic culture. They would also like to see more youth activities and cultural celebrations. This is both to keep their children focused on positive activities and to continue their ethnic language and culture.

Many aspects of the healthcare system are overwhelming for the refugees from Burma. The authority of the system leaves them with little agency in their health. Often they
give full trust to American doctors and medical practices, and then are confused and feel as if they are not being helped. They are resistant, due to their subjectivity, to ask questions of healthcare providers. Again, understanding the diversity of the group is essential to informing the patients and families of risks, limitations, and choices of healthcare. The patients requested language should be provided for translations. If they request Karen, they should have a Karen translator regardless if they know the Burmese language or not. When translators translate, cultural translation is just as important as the language used for understanding of the issue and process of a medical condition.

I know that it is the intention of the Karen Organization of San Diego to provide all of the above to the community. During the drafting of this thesis, they have become an institutional model for the community. They are collaborating with multiple organizations and institutions across San Diego to provide translations, transportation, community development, job development, healthcare assistance, tax preparation, citizenship classes, and cultural, youth, and educational events. Many of their activities are inspiring for any community institution. However, the non-Karen are not accessing resources through the Karen Organization of San Diego. Possibly, changing the name of the organization and incorporating the Burmese language would open the doors to non-Karen.

It is possible that the community will develop additional institutions to service the non-Karen. Regardless, the challenges for any organization is to bring the community into common spaces where respect and honor all ethnicities from Burma is celebrated. This would take an effort of educating all ethnicities and arbitrating ethnic conflicts within the local community. The community is aware of the ethnic tensions. However, they all have personal relationships between ethnicities; thus, I would suggest empowering them to address issues on an institutional level. To do this, more than one representative from the community would be on organizational boards or in decision-making positions.

**FOR THE FUTURE**

It is my hope that the ethnographic data provided in this thesis will serve as a stepping-stone for future research on the needs for refugees from Burma; that their voices can continue to be collected, shared, and heard. The sample size of this research is small, leaving many unheard perspectives and research topics to be explored, for example topics on gender
issues, medicinal practice, healthcare, stress and PTSD, evolution of local institutions, transnational activities, citizenship, access to education, religious practices, further ethnic and linguistic topics. In addition, when the refugees from Burma are ready, documenting, and sharing stories of pre-resettlement through resettlement will illuminate the strength of the human condition.

I hope this thesis is an example of the importance of anthropological methods when doing research with refugees. Qualitative, ethnographic data can build and grow as the community evolves. In addition, for those who have little experience with refugees, I hope that it gives a perspective of the strength and determinations of people from Burma. Life in the U.S. is not always better than where they came from. They are continuing to struggle and face issues of oppression and marginalization after resettlement. They are small in stature, quiet, guarded, and polite people. However, their experience of life demonstrates resilience, endurance, and kindness that is large and powerful. They will give you anything they have, even if it is just the sound of their laughter.
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