

Escape from Harm's Way: The Experiences of Southeast Asian Elders and Their Families

By

Daniel F. Detzner*, Aysem R. Senyurekli, Zha Blong Xiong***
University of Minnesota**

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- * Departments of Post Secondary Teaching Learning and Family Social Science, University of Minnesota, 246 Appleby Hall, 128 Pleasant St. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455.
ddetzner@umn.edu.
- ** Program Associate, Human Rights Education Program, The Advocates for Human Rights.
- *** Associate Professor, Family Social Science Department, University of Minnesota.

Abstract

This study uses a life history approach to understand the lived experiences of 40 Southeast Asian elderly refugees who fled from their home countries and resettled in the United States in the late 1970's and 1980's. The focus is concentrated on the elders' narratives of escape. Their experiences are consolidated into motivational elements leading to flight; six dichotomous dimensions of the leave taking; and complicating factors affecting the escape. The results indicate that escapes: (a) are motivated by a multiplicity of overlapping factors; (b) appear to have an impact on health after resettlement; and (c) are complex events where the same generational cohort fleeing from the same conflict, during the same time period, may arrive in the same destination with very different levels of distress. This study aims to develop a framework for understanding the escape narratives of elderly refugees as a way to understand the nature and sources of individual, family, and community distress that often hinders successful integration of refugee populations.

Escape from Harm's Way: The Experiences of Southeast Asian Elders and their Families: Introduction

According to the World Refugee Survey (2008), there were more than 14 million refugees worldwide at the end of 2007 who escaped from wars, political crisis, ethnic and religious conflicts, or natural disasters. There were many more internally displaced persons and extended families forced to flee their homes. Although only a small percentage of those who fled are considered elders in their home countries, the elders that took flight and survived have unique perspectives and harrowing tales to tell after leading family members to a safe haven. They experienced many stressful and traumatic experiences prior to, during, and after departure that range from witnessing the murder of family members to permanent separation from children (Rottman & Meredith, 1982; Segal & Mayadas, 2005). For many, the accumulation of such stressful experiences contributed to the development of mental health and physical symptoms that impeded adaptation following resettlement. The present study seeks to understand the factors which contribute to this distress in four similarly situated refugee populations. More specifically, it analyzes the escape narratives of 40 Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong elders who fled their countries to resettle in the United States (U.S.). In doing so, it describes how motivational elements leading to the escape, the dimensions of the escape experience itself, and varied factors complicating the escape, all culminate in a semi-chronic distress often manifesting itself as chronic physical and mental health symptoms.

Background

Population mobility is characteristic of people throughout the world and is generally a consequence of both "push" and "pull" factors (Sussman & Settles, 1993). Push factors emerge in the area of origin, and can be comprised of economic stagnation, political oppression, forced resettlement, or otherwise intolerable living conditions. Pull factors emerge in the country of

destination, and can be comprised of economic opportunities, political freedom, flexible asylum policies, proximity of destination and the like. Intervening obstacles can also affect the process of migration, and may include tangible, personal, or emotional factors (du Toit, 1990). While the “push-pull” model has commonly been associated with an economic analysis of migration, and has to some extent been replaced by analysis of immigrants as transnational actors, the push-pull framework continues to provide a useful structure for analysis of individual and family escape decisions.

The large scale pushing and pulling of refugees from Southeast Asia to the U.S. and elsewhere began in the mid-1970's and continued for approximately 25 years. More than two million Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, and Hmong refugees fled in the years after the withdrawal of the U. S. government from Saigon. They left behind countries that had been decimated by war, political violence, and genocide as well as their homes, farmlands, occupations, and extended family members. Many were unsuccessful in their attempts to find safety. Approximately 500,000 Vietnamese “boat people” were lost at sea (Cargill & Huynh, 2000), while many other men, women, and children disappeared in the jungles or drowned in the muddy waters of the Mekong River. Others made it out of harm's way but found themselves crowded into dangerous refugee camps, often for years, prior to resettlement. Poverty, disenfranchisement, alienation, fear, and dependency on international organizations for basic assistance were the stressful realities of daily life in the camps of Thailand, Malaysia, and Hong Kong (Long, 1993; Mortland, 1987). The crowded, demoralizing conditions of the camp and the lack of physical safety created the conditions for ongoing traumatic stress and mental illness (Mollica & Jalbert, 1989). The narratives of elders who lived to tell their life stories are filled with recurring themes of family separation, loss, conflict, and resilience (Detzner, 2004).

While many of those who fled were eventually resettled in other Southeast Asian countries, Europe, or Australia, the vast majority found their way into the U.S. The U.S. became a primary destination for resettlement because of the collective responsibility that policy makers and citizens felt towards those who supported the U.S. during the conflict and the immigration policy that emerged after the fighting was over. The 1980 Refugee Act created the original base for current U.S. refugee policies. According to Meade and Blotevogel (2001), the three objectives of the policy were to 'base humanitarian admissions on criteria developed by the United Nations that are internationally recognized; create a predictable and manageable flow of refugees; and include a resettlement program' (p. 18). The 1990 Immigration Act created the Temporary Protected Status, which acknowledges certain groups should be allowed to reside temporarily in the U.S. in cases of war or natural disaster. The 2000 U.S. Census estimates that there are over two million Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, and Hmong living in the U.S. (Ronningen, 2004), with around 70,000 living in the state of Minnesota (Hmong Cultural Center and Hmong National Development, St. Paul, MN and Washington D.C.), the site of the larger study from which the narratives for this paper were derived. While the Vietnamese significantly outnumber the other groups nationally, with more than one million, the Hmong are the largest Southeast Asian group in Minnesota. With the largest urban population of Hmong residents in the country, St. Paul is considered the 'Hmong capital' of the U.S. today.

The difficult conditions prior to and during the escape, as well as in the refugee camp, affected individuals, families, and the ethnic communities after relocation (Long, 1993). For example, Southeast Asian elders who participated in a social adjustment program in Minnesota reported experiencing an average of 4.4 traumatic events including witnessing the death of family members, the destruction of home and possessions, and systematic torture (Robinson,

1987). The participants presented themselves for treatment of physical health problems (41%), problems with family functioning (33%), social and emotional health problems (29%), and other health problems (22%). Many others avoided western health professionals. Psychosomatic complaints were widespread in this population (Fox, 1984) and particularly pronounced in the elderly (Mouanoutoua, 1989; Sutherland et al., 1983; Yu et al., 1988). This study aims to develop a framework for understanding the lived experiences revealed in escape narratives of elderly refugees as a way to understand the nature and sources of individual, family, and community distress that often hinders successful integration of refugee populations.

Research Methods

Procedure

The escape narratives are embedded within the life histories of 40 Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong elders which were documented for a larger study of Southeast Asian families (Detzner, 2004). Formidable barriers such as language, fear, isolation, and post-traumatic stress made access and trust important issues in developing the life history accounts (Mollica, et al., 1987; Rogler, 1989). The informants were selected with the assistance of ethnic leaders from the four Southeast Asian cultural groups. The leaders were identified by the first author during two years of part-time fieldwork in cultural, service, and educational organizations designed to assist elders adjust through socialization and education. Potential informants were approached based on the leader's knowledge of their current situation, prior trauma, and potential interest in participating in the study. In constructing the study population, attempts were made to balance several demographic categories and characteristics. Individuals with severe traumatic distress or debilitating mental or physical health problems were considered inappropriate as potential participants. Ethnic leaders

explained the study and the confidentiality guidelines to potential participants and obtained permission for the researcher's to contact those who expressed a willingness to be interviewed.

Sample Characteristics

A total of 40 participants were recruited for this study, 10 from each of the four Southeast Asian groups. Five females and five males were selected in each cultural group. Purposeful sampling was used as a way to ensure that each group and both genders had an equal voice without regard to proportionate distribution in the population. Attempts were made to represent diversity within cultural groups including age range, time since arrival, previous economic status, and prior urban or rural residence patterns. The mean age across the sample was 66 years, with the youngest participant being 48 years old and the oldest being 83. The mean number of years living in the U.S. was seven, with the range from one year to more than 13 years.

Forty-four percent of the participants were married, followed by 28% who were classified in the 'other' category, indicating uncertainty about current marital status because their spouses were missing and they did not know if they were living or dead. Nearly 17% of the participants were widowed, 9% divorced or separated, and 3% never married. The mean number of children living at the time of the interviews was six, with the range from one to 13. It is important to note that many family stories revealed early infant deaths, the loss of children in the war, and recurring family separations. Nearly two-thirds of the informants lived in multi-generational households that included widows and widowers, spouses, adult children, grandchildren and "others". More than one-fourth lived in nuclear households with their spouse and children. A few widow or widowers lived with their adult children or with friends.

Life Histories

Using life histories as a research approach facilitated access to the participants, as many participants had a powerful story to tell and wanted to tell it. Life history researchers have employed a variety of methods to develop an insider's perspective on the events, socio-historical context, and meaning of everyday life experiences (Bertaux, 1981; Dollard, 1935; Erickson, 1975; Langness, 1965; Langness & Frank, 1981; Turner & Bruner, 1986; Watson and Watson-Franke, 1985). Because Southeast Asian cultures and families have historically placed elders in the prestigious roles of wise person, teacher, advisor, and keeper of the past, life histories seemed to be culturally appropriate and potentially helpful to informants. The in-depth interviews affirmed the choice of this approach, as the participants repeatedly told interviewers that they wanted their stories to be made known as a means of leaving a familial, cultural, and historical legacy for the younger generation, a desire of elders that may transcend cultural boundaries (see for example Lieberman & Falk, 1971; Myerhoff, 1992). This is consistent with the views of Merriam (1980), who found that the elderly have a powerful urge to revisit and to place in context the experiences of their lives. Additionally, social gerontologists emphasize the therapeutic benefit elderly people obtain by recalling their personal histories in a conscious and interactive life review process, which is encouraged by a progressive recall to consciousness of individual and family experiences (Baum, 1981; Butler, 1963; Myerhoff, 1992). Within the context of the present study, fieldwork conversations with elders and with the ethnic group leaders revealed that the chance to recount their stories was a powerful incentive for participants. The life history approach helped to connect the researchers with a difficult to reach population that had no previous experience as participants in an academic study.

The Process of Interviewing

Eight bicultural interview teams were formed to conduct interviews with research participants. The teams were composed of gender-matched cultural “insiders” and “outsiders.” For example, a female European-American graduate student studying families was paired with a female Hmong sophomore student studying pharmacy to form a team. A male European-American graduate student studying families was paired with a Lao male undergraduate student studying engineering. Each of the four female and four male graduate students had previous research experience and were in either their second or third year of graduate work. The four male and four female Southeast Asian undergraduate students were hired to work as co-interviewers, translators, interpreters, and cultural ambassadors. All of the undergraduate students were bilingual in English and their native tongue, were experienced as translators, and participated in both extensive training before the interviews, and debriefing after the interviews were completed. As members of the four ethnic communities, their own experiences and insider knowledge informed and enlightened the interviews and analysis of the narratives. Each participant was interviewed in their home for approximately two hours on three separate occasions. All interviews were tape recorded and translated into English. The interviews focused on family and childhood, middle years, and later years. The escape narratives were gathered during the final interviews.

Results

The life history accounts of 40 Southeast Asian elders were analyzed for the basic elements, dimensions, and characteristics of the escape experience. Thirty-nine of the 40 life history narratives contained distinct escape stories. These narratives present unique generational insights into the events and emotions surrounding a defining moment in their family's history. Some stories contained many details while others offered the barest of facts and recollections. For the purposes of

analysis and description, these narratives are consolidated into the following three categories: (a) motivational elements leading to departure; (b) dimensions of the escape experience; and (c) complicating factors affecting the escape.

Motivational Elements

Participants were motivated to escape for a variety of interrelated push-pull reasons. These reasons include: (a) a sense of responsibility for the family; (b) being forced out; (c) a desire to reunite with family; (d) economic deprivation and desire for an improved quality of life; (e) previous knowledge about means or routes of escape; and (f) anger at fellow countrymen.

Sense of responsibility for the family. Seventy-five percent of participants (n = 30) considered themselves to be the head of the family household. Regardless of ethnic background or gender, this status conferred responsibility on the participants for the safety and well-being of an extended family group. For example, a Vietnamese widow was unable to escape with her two daughters because she lacked the funds required to bribe government officers who processed the documents. She recounted what she did to find a way out for her daughters before escaping herself:

I didn't have [enough] money to give it to them, so I had to find some other ways. I sold everything that I owned to get some money for my daughters so they could escape. Even though my heart was full of sadness when I sent my daughters away, I knew they might die at the ocean. But because of their future, I had to take a chance and send them to the open sea to find their freedom.

Similarly, a Laotian male helped to insure the safety of his family by bribing officials during the escape. He stated:

I came with my sister...and three cousins. We crossed the Mekong River [and] almost died. For three days they locked us up. We couldn't go anywhere. I don't know whether they wanted the money or wanted to kill us. After that, I paid someone to go get my family. I was in the refugee camp for two months before I sent someone to get my family. I paid a soldier.

These examples illustrate how the elders felt an intense sense of responsibility for the safety of their family members, and the efforts they made to assist in their escapes.

Being forced out. Across the sample, 62% of participants (n = 24) experienced forced migration under duress. Examples of circumstances leading to forced migration included imminent arrest, capture, or death. One Hmong soldier was forced to leave as a result of a changing political situation in Laos. He described how General Vang Pao, a key Hmong leader, had already escaped to Thailand leaving the city of Long Cheng under the control of invading Vietnamese forces. This is the situation that confronted them:

We couldn't stay in Laos, because we were soldiers and not a farmer. If we stay, they gonna kill us soldier all. A couple weeks before we made an escape, we decided to stay and farm. So I was hiding all my guns, but a lot of people say that I can't stay. Sooner or later the communists will find out my past history and I might get killed or tortured.

Another Hmong soldier recounted the danger confronting those who supported the American efforts shortly before his departure after Laos fell to the Vietnamese:

Some of the Hmong already fled in 1974 and 1975 after the country lose the war, but some like myself, we couldn't escape. So we had to stay with them until we find a way to escape. The reason that we had to flee from our country is that the Vietnamese soldiers tried to eliminate all the people who had helped or worked for American army. When the

soldiers found out that I was a soldier for the American army, they came to arrest me, but we already escaped before they got to my house.

Other circumstances leading to migration included the anticipation and fear of oppression by the new government, overwhelming economic deprivation, and the loss of home and livelihood after the war.

A desire to reunite with family. Almost half of the participants (n = 18) had one or more family members who had already successfully fled prior to their own escape effort. Some family members were separated prior to or during the escape attempt or when they were placed in refugee camps, or when they were resettled in different countries and places within the same country. Several participants had family members living on three different continents. With kinfolk missing or relocated elsewhere, elders experienced an acute sense of personal and psychological discontinuity as they found their esteemed place within their families and communities eroded. The mental and physical health issues that coincide with these separations and losses will be discussed later.

Economic deprivation and desire for an improved quality of life. Almost 40% of participants (n = 15) indicated that migration was primarily instigated by elements of choice. The most common theme was economic deprivation and the search for an improved quality of life. Many participants left behind their land, animals, or small businesses as they moved from one part of their home country to another in search of safety. Almost all of the men and some of the women lost important roles as breadwinner or head of the household after the escape, as they were no longer able to support their families. For example, one Vietnamese businesswoman recounted her decision to leave her country following the North Vietnamese take-over. She stated:

I wasn't able to continue my business [of buying and selling land]. The life for me was very difficult. My son didn't get enough health care and good education. So I felt if we stay in Vietnam, we won't have any good opportunity to do what we want. So I told my sister, who came to the U.S. in 1975, to sponsor me.

While the loss of a traditional role was particularly difficult for the men, this female informant was one of several women in the study who found herself serving as the primary breadwinner after the death of a husband or separation during the conflict.

Previous knowledge about means or routes of escape. Fifteen percent of participants (n = 6) explained how their decision to flee was based on information they received from others about successful escape routes and the resources required to make an attempt. Methods of obtaining this information varied. Some heard about the escapes through word of mouth from prior escapees who had been forced to return because they had been rejected by the country of asylum. One participant listened to broadcasts on a salvaged radio left behind by retreating Vietnamese forces. Knowing that others had successfully escaped was a motivational element to their own subsequent leave.

Anger at fellow countrymen. The narratives of 10% of participants (n = 4) exhibited anger at fellow countrymen as a motivation to escape. This anger was directed at those who were seen by participants as having collaborated with the enemy, or having brought war into their village. For example, a Hmong woman, widowed as a result of the conflict and forced to flee for her life, verbalized her anger by stating:

To be honest, I am not mad at the Vietnamese and Laotian but at the Hmong people. It is all the Hmong's fault. These are the people who worked for the Vietnamese. These

Hmong wanted to gain position. They thought that by helping the Vietnamese they could live in Laos with powers.

While this type of anger was not described frequently, it was nevertheless a motivational element which was experienced across ethnic groups and genders.

Dimensions of the Escape Narratives

The participants' narratives revealed eight dichotomous dimensions of the escape event which affected and framed their experiences. These dimensions included: (a) planned vs. impulsive; (b) self-initiated vs. advised; (c) chaotic vs. orderly; (d) individual vs. group; (e) assisted vs. unassisted; (f) dangerous vs. ordinary; (g) obstructed vs. unobstructed; and (h) incremental vs. complete escapes. The actual escape event was typically multi-dimensional with elements from several of these overlapping dimensions coming into play during a process that might last several years.

Planned vs. impulsive. Planned escapes differed from impulsive escapes in that there was an expressed desire to leave the country prior to the actual departure; references were made to making a plan for the escape; or an actual detailed method of flight was created to be implemented when auspicious or imperative. Impulsive escapes, on the other hand, were those characterized by sudden leave-taking with no prior formulated plan or route. Almost 60% of participants (n = 23) engaged in planned escapes. The formulation of an escape plan appears to be linked to level of formal education, resources, and gender. As the group with the highest levels of formal education and economic resources, eight out of the 10 Vietnamese participants planned their escapes. Across the entire sample, only four of the 19 males engaged in planned escapes, while half of the 20 female escapes were planned. Most Cambodian and Hmong escapes were impulsive rather than planned.

Self-initiated vs. advised. Self-initiated escapes were motivated and executed by participants with little or no advice or assistance from others. In contrast, advised escapes were those in which the participant was instructed or persuaded by others to flee. Across the sample, 56% of participants (n = 22) engaged in self-initiated escapes, 36% (n = 14) engaged in advised escapes, and less than 8% (n = 3) provided insufficient information to categorize. Gender seemed to contribute to this particular dimension, in that nearly 50% of all the females (n = 9) followed the advice of others to flee, while only 26% of the males (n = 5) did the same.

The experience of a Cambodian woman who engaged in an advised escape provides a moving example of the consequences of her decision to flee without most of her children. She left her three youngest children in the care of her brother while she accompanied her daughter (who had just given birth) back to her home village in another part of the country. Her efforts to rejoin the children were thwarted by the closure of the airport due to severe bombing and heavy casualties. She described the situation confronting her at that time:

I got really scared. I did not know what to do. In the evening, one captain told us that we needed to move to an island. We couldn't stay here because the people in Phnom Penh already raised the white flag to give in to the Khmer Rouge. He told me to get my belongings together. They were going to evacuate the women first.

After boarding a battleship with an estimated 700 others, the woman left for an unknown destination. After struggling with the consequence of following the advice of others to leave, she described her fears and sadness following the long voyage that brought her to the Philippine Islands:

I went to sit on the seashore eating my bread and looked to the sea. I thought to myself, I'm getting a long way away from my three children. I missed them very much and I will

never see them again. I had a great sorrow from having separated from three young children.

Chaotic vs. orderly. Chaotic escapes were those that involved imminent danger, confusion, disorder, and little opportunity for assessment of the situation or a calculated choice of options. Orderly escapes, on the other hand, featured fewer immediate life-threatening conditions, more order and less panic, and the time and opportunity to make informed decisions. Almost 70% of participants (n = 26) engaged in orderly escapes. The remainder experienced chaotic escapes, including a Hmong woman who fled after the Vietnamese attacked her village. Her story provides a poignant example of the urgency driving these experiences. She stated:

When the Vietnamese came, you left your buffaloes and horses behind and you miss your livestock very much. You try to kill them for food but you can't eat all the meat so you just leave them behind. You only have enough time to gather your children, hold on their hands and put them on your back. Then you run away.

Eighty-five percent (n = 11) of those who engaged in chaotic escapes were either Hmong or Cambodian and made their hurried exit during periods of heavy fighting and invasions.

Individual vs. group. Across all cultural groups, there was a clear preference for fleeing as a group with friends or family members. An overwhelming 92% of participants (n = 36) utilized group efforts during their escapes. The sizes of the groups varied, ranging anywhere from three family members to a battleship filled with approximately 700 people. Some stories of group escapes indicated shared leadership, while others recounted the heroics of single individuals as they led family groups with as many as 20 men, women, and children to safety. For those who traveled in a group, fear of separation during the escape was a significant complicating factor. Though actual separation during the escape occurred in only a few cases (n

= 5), for those who were affected, the repercussions were far reaching. A Hmong man described how his family was separated:

When we came to a town, they left us four [people] there because I was sick and couldn't catch up with them. Some of my children had died and some [had] already left me behind. So I feel sad about myself and heartbroken. That's why I decided to leave, even when I was not strong enough to drag my wife and my daughter-in-law and her son across the river.

Of the three individual escapes, two involved males and one involved a woman. Both males were Hmong, and both revealed that they escaped individually in order to avoid suspicion by the Vietnamese. Of all the participants, a Laotian woman who escaped individually was rather unique in that she used a passport to leave the country.

Assisted vs. unassisted. Assisted escapes were aided in some way by someone outside the participants' immediate group of escapees, whereas unassisted escapes did not involve any outside aid. Although some required only minimal assistance, a striking 87% of participants (n = 35) were assisted in some way during their escape. The nature of the assistance and the degree to which it was helpful to participants varied. For example, a Hmong woman had engineered an escape with a group of others. They traveled by foot for days and reached the Mekong River. She explained:

We do not have any tubes so we carry from the jungle bamboos for two days before we reach the Mekong River. We drill holes through the bamboos and tie the bamboo around our armpit then we go into the water. The bamboo floats so that your arms are free to peddle with your feet in a walking motion. Just when we approach the Thai border, the Thai people bring a boat for us. We tell the Thai that we will not be needing their boat,

[but] the Thai pull us up to the boat by the arms. We reach the other side of the riverbank.

Whatever money that we have the Thai take them all.

This case suggests that some assistance provided to escapees was unwanted, and possibly harmful, adding to the danger rather than alleviating it.

Dangerous vs. ordinary. A dangerous escape was classified as one in which there was an imminent threat of bodily harm or death from nature, man, or land mines. In contrast, an ordinary escape lacked such hazards. Across the sample, 56% of participants (n = 22) participated in dangerous escapes, 33% had ordinary escapes, and approximately 10% (n = 4) provided insufficient data to be categorized. As one might expect, dangerous escapes were directly linked to the amount of fighting and bombing taking place in the geographic area of the potential escapee at the time. The escapes of Hmong and Cambodian participants were overwhelmingly categorized as dangerous. A Hmong mother n recounted the danger she encountered during her family's flight:

When we ran over, two daughters and four sons came. We run all the way up Phuv Biab (the tallest mountain) and the Vietnamese shoot and shoot all the way up Phuv Biab.

They use long-range cannons and a plane. They shoot and shoot till everyone ran all the way up....

Participants who experienced dangerous escapes also faced either tangible natural dangers or the fear of them. For example, a Cambodian woman recounted her fears as she escaped in an overcrowded boat:

I thought what if there is not enough drinking water or what if the ship runs out of gas?

We would probably all die, because the sea was too big and I could not see the land. If

there was a storm we would probably die. I saw a lot of sharks swimming close to the ship.

For this participant, an additional danger was posed as soldiers on the ship began to rebel in opposition to those in command. Violence was averted and order restored with the help of the other passengers.

Obstructed vs. unobstructed. Obstructed escapes were hindered by a variety of external complicating factors, including encounters with armed enemy forces, the presence of buried land mines, or capture with imprisonment and forced labor. Almost half of the participants (n = 18) experienced obstructed escapes. The Vietnamese participants (n = 5) were the only ones to describe such obstacles as 'failed attempts' at escape. For three of these participants, success came only after two previous failed attempts. For the Hmong, obstacles were described more in terms of being apprehended by others. Gender was a significant feature in the obstructed Hmong cases in that all the males described their experiences as being 'captured', while all females defined theirs as having 'surrendered.' For example, a Hmong woman described her surrender during the Vietnamese invasion of Laos. She stated:

We move and move again. When the Vietnamese came, we ran and we encountered much hardship. We ran to the jungle and dig wild potatoes for food and we eat leaves and trees and we ran for six months. Then we come back to surrender to the Vietnamese.

While describing a similar story, a Hmong male stated:

We stay in Xieng Tong for almost two years, and then a battle was going on there. So we have to move to live in Long Cheng for a year until the country lose the war to Vietnam. We then have to flee away from the village and town and live in the jungle until the

Vietnamese soldiers caught us and took us to live in the town where a lot of people were settled there.

An unexpected obstacle encountered by one Cambodian woman and one Vietnamese man was that of being turned away by the intermediate refugee camps during their escape. As might be expected, a link was found between dangerous vs. ordinary and obstructed vs. unobstructed escapes. Of the 22 dangerous escapes, 82% (n = 18) were also classified as obstructed. When the element of gender is considered, it is clear that obstructed escapes were three times more likely to be experienced by men than by women.

Incremental vs. complete. The final dimension of the escape narratives was temporal in nature and classified as either an incremental or a complete escape. Incremental escapes progressed in stages or took place over time. In contrast, complete escapes, once initiated, progressed through to completion rapidly and without interruption. Across the sample, 59% of participants (n = 23) experienced incremental escapes; eight participants reported escapes that took in excess of three months; and one participant, a Hmong man, escaped over a period of five years. Incremental escapes occurred most often among Hmong or Cambodian participants and were not part of the experience of any Vietnamese participants.

Complicating Factors

There were several factors which complicated the escape experiences of many participants. These factors included: (a) physical demands; (b) psychological demands; and (c) the experience of multiple losses.

Physical demands. More than half the participants (n = 22) made direct references to the harsh physical demands of their escape. Physically demanding experiences appeared to be equally distributed across cultural groups and genders. The physical toll of their experience was

described in terms of sleeplessness, hunger, exhaustion, and the like. When recalling her experience, a Cambodian woman stated:

We had to walk through the mud about knee high and the water came up to my thighs. I had to carry one of my sons who was about nine years old because he was very sick and too weak to walk. By the time we got to 007 camp [in Thailand], I was very sick to move or do anything.

Psychological demands. Almost 70% of participants (n = 27) described the difficult psychological effects of the escape experience. In describing feelings, they used such words as 'lonely', 'afraid', 'angry', and 'sad'. Some eloquently conveyed the psychological stress under which they were forced to function. For example, a Cambodian male described the distress associated with his experience of serving in the military alongside his 18 and 20-year-old sons:

When the country dropped the weapons, the Red Khmer came in and we put down our weapons also. They took my two sons and killed them. They came to get me but I ran and hid for three years and eight months. I didn't see what my wife was like or my children that were still alive were like.

For five months after the Vietnamese take-over of his country, another participant searched for scattered family members and then planned their escape. He described the moment when he finally found them:

My children couldn't recognize me and I could hardly recognize the children. When we were separated, it was so sad. I thought my children were dead [and] they thought that I was dead. We never saw or heard any information about each other. I asked where is your mother? After I saw her, I couldn't say anything. So we sat down and look at each other's faces.

Multiple losses. In addition to physical and psychological demands, some participants also recounted experiencing multiple losses including family separations during their escapes. The experience of loss transcended cultural groups and gender. Family members who were left behind or killed were the most significant losses. A large number of participants (n = 30) left members of their immediate family in the home country, and all left behind extended family members. Eight participants had a family member who was killed or died during the escape, with half of them having witnessed these deaths. For example, a Cambodian father recalled the murder of his daughter and stated:

She died when the Vietnamese came in and killed them all. They tied them up with a string in a line. They said if they let one free they had to free them all. They couldn't do that. We all ask [but] they said they couldn't. She didn't do anything wrong [and] I saw her [die]. They shot two rockets. They all died.

Discussion and Implications

This study used life histories to examine the escape narratives of 40 elderly Southeast Asian refugees as a method to understand the lived experiences of refugees prior to resettling in the U.S. The elders' narratives were consolidated into motivational elements leading to the escape, dimensions of the escape experience, and complicating factors affecting the escape. The results indicate that the escape experience: (a) is motivated by a multiplicity of factors; (b) likely impacts resettlement; and (c) leads to a loss family continuity and distress after resettlement.

The Escape is Motivated by Many Factors

An analysis of these narratives indicates that escape experiences are far from being one dimensional, straightforward, or linear. The Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong participants in this study experienced as many as six different motivating factors, 16 dimensions,

several complicating factors, and multiple losses along the way. In most cases, the experience included several motivators, multiple dimensions, and one or more complications before a safe haven was found. While this multiplicity was evident throughout the narratives, there were also several cultural and gender patterns which emerged. First, as the group with the highest rate of formal education and economic resources, the Vietnamese participants more frequently engaged in planned escapes, and experienced obstructed escapes as their own failed attempts rather than the actions of others apprehending them. None of the Vietnamese experienced an incremental escape. Second, both the Hmong and Cambodian participants, more often than the other groups, experienced chaotic, dangerous, and incremental escapes. Across the group, there were also gender variations in the escape narratives. First, women more frequently experienced planned and advised escapes, and conceptualized obstructed escapes as a consequence of their own actions and of having 'surrendered'. Second, across gender groups, men were three times more likely than woman to experience an obstructed escape. A large majority of the obstructed escapes were also those which were classified as dangerous.

Given the complexity of the escape experiences described by the participants in this study, one natural question which emerges is how their experiences compare to those of other groups with different cultural, political, and geographic characteristics. In other words, can the escape experiences of other individual refugees or groups forced from their homes be characterized by a parallel set of motivational and multidimensional experiences? Or would their dissimilar characteristics create additional or very different motivations, dimensions, and complicating factors? The comparative examples briefly outlined below suggest preliminary evidence for similarities across refugee populations. Additional research is needed to develop the typology in more depth and detail across contemporary refugee populations.

Several recent studies offer evidence for similarity of escape experiences across populations. A recent study reported on the more than 20,000 Tibetan refugees who have been fleeing Chinese repression by moving into India during the past 40 years (Dolma, et al., 2005). Although the study focused on a very different population with respect to age of the participants and the geographic and weather related challenges they endured in the Himalayan mountain range, it identified many of the same dimensions of the escape experience as reported in this study. Like the Southeast Asians, Tibetan refugees were found to experience physical and mental hardships which had to be overcome by resourceful planning, knowledgeable guides, and persistence. Another recent study found that Kurdish, Iraqi, Afghani, and Pakistani migrants who were fleeing from war engaged in a similar, albeit more elaborate process of planned, advised, and assisted escapes to Greece and other European countries (Papadopoulou, 2004).

Similar experiences were also reported in a recent memoir of a Sudanese refugee in the best selling book What is the what? by David Eggers (2006). This memoir recounts the life-threatening challenges confronting Achak Deng, one of the lost boys of Sudan, as he and his 8-12 year-old peers walked across the deserts of east Africa. While the starvation, dehydration, exhaustion, and years of wandering that they experienced are quite a different narrative than those examined in the present study, a close analysis of their experiences reveals that the boys faced many similar physical and psychological hardships and escape dimensions as the elders in the present study, including danger, obstruction, chaos, and impulsivity as the group sought a safe haven. Yet another memoir titled Waiting for Snow in Havana describes the airlifting of unaccompanied Cuban children into the U.S. in the years after Fidel Castro's revolution (Eire, 2003). This memoir presents a detailed explanation of the circumstances and dimensions of the escape told from the very different perspective of a child. The airlift of Carlos Eire with many of

his age peers was characterized by planning, assistance, a relatively orderly departure, and it happened as a one time event. Most of the physical and psychological hardships for these children came after arrival in the U.S. without parents or supportive family members. While a few studies and contemporary memoirs of refugees are hardly conclusive, they do suggest a promising area of comparative research which can help to strengthen our understanding of the shared and unique circumstances of large population movements caused by war, ethnic conflict, and natural disasters.

The Escape Experience Can Affect Resettlement

The multiple accumulated stresses resulting from the escape provide an important context for the physical and mental health symptoms which have been found to exist in refugee groups following resettlement. For example, far from pathologizing such persons, this study suggests that it would be 'abnormal' for a human being not to exhibit such symptoms after experiencing what could have been an impulsive, chaotic, dangerous, and obstructed escape which was complicated by physical and psychological demands as well as multiple losses of family members. It is not surprising then, that in a sample of Southeast Asians in the U.S. who participated in a social adjustment program, social workers rated depression, anxiety, and worry as a problem in more than 90% of the participants, and hopelessness and isolation in 75% of the participants (Robinson, 1987). Similarly, it is no wonder that Southeast Asian elders were found to experience a greater proportion of physical health problems than other ethnic elders in a Chicago study (Yu, et al., 1988), and that severe depression and psychosomatic complaints were documented in almost 80% of the Southeast Asian psychiatric clients in another study (Fox, 1984). Given their increased likelihood of both having experienced and remembered their sometimes traumatic memories of escape, it is understandable why older Hmong adults in another study were found to

have more symptoms of depression than younger adults in the U.S. (Mouanoutoua, 1989). In fact, the process of somatization, which involves the demonstration of physical symptoms which are rooted in psychological distress, is a widely reported phenomenon among refugee populations in general and other survivors of trauma. This process is thought to be a physical manifestation of severe stress that has been viewed by some as an alternative to depression (MN DHHS, 1989; Rozee & Boemel, 1989; Westermeyer, et. al., 1987).

Since there are good explanations for the psychological and physical distress often found in refugee groups following resettlement, those who work with these populations are likely to benefit from understanding the characteristics of their escape. The distress of forced migration does not easily or necessarily fade away when safety is found in a host country. Instead, the nature of the escape is likely to remain vivid in the memories of individuals and become part of the contextual background of families as they adjust to life in their new homes. In some families, elders retell edited versions of the escape story over and over again to the younger generations as a way to explain how the family came to be in the U.S.

The Escape Experience is an Important Component to Loss of Continuity and Place for Elders

The elderly participants in this study were dislodged, displaced, and disturbed from a physical setting where all that was familiar and taken for granted was replaced by the unfamiliar. Escape from their country of origin meant leaving behind a well-known life and arriving on the soil of a new place without extended family, without grounding, and without the rich sources of nurturance that encouraged them to assume a place of leadership in family and community. Beyond simply leaving their physical homes, the participants also left the broader ecosystem in which they were central players in the concentric circles of influence within the family, clan, village, culture, and nation of origin (see for example Bronfrenbrenner, 1979). In the context of such physical and

psychological displacement, it is no wonder that the participants wished to affirm their experiences by telling their stories to researchers. This desire to tell the story can be highly beneficial for immigrants and their family members. A coherent family narrative of a family's history of conflict and escape has been found to help adolescent refugees reconstruct their family identity while in exile (Bek-Pedersen & Montgomery, 2006). The telling of the story can help refugees, particularly if they are elders, to re-establish what social cultural gerontologists have discussed as physical and psychological continuity in the context of displacement (see for example Detzner, 2004). The life review process can be quite powerful in the reconstruction of one's identity in the new context and can result in positive outcomes for both elders and their families (Baum, 1980-81).

So what can be done to help refugees, particularly elders, reconstruct a sense of continuity and place following forced relocation? Educational, religious, or service programs that draw upon the cultural knowledge and stories of elders can serve to elevate their position within the community and help to restore a semblance of continuity. Other efforts can include the establishment of oral history or reminiscence groups where elders tell their stories to one another and to the larger community. Perhaps the telling of the stories and the hearing of them by family members and the host community will promote tolerance for the older generation and for other refugee populations.

Concluding Remarks

Although 'push-pull' factors are useful in understanding broad migrations of populations, the examination of individual escape narratives in the present study indicates that the dimensions of leave-taking for refugees are far more complex. Not all who are pushed or pulled have the same experience before, during, or after their escapes. Those with resources, like a number of the Vietnamese, may be classified as refugees although they were not literally forced out, but rather they were in a position to make a thoughtful planned retreat because their economic or political

circumstances were no longer favorable. In contrast, many Cambodian and Hmong elders were pushed and pulled at the same time, and had to leave with little or no preplanning. Some were forced to move multiple times over a period of years before finally leaving the country. Of course, the circumstances in the country of origin at the time of departure affected the types and dimensions of the subsequent escapes. The hurried and chaotic escapes of many Cambodians living in Phnom Penh in 1975, as the Khmer Rouge emptied the city, were dissimilar from the Hmong clans hoping to elude detection by hiding out for years in the mountainous villages and jungles of Laos. The value of individual narrative studies of such populations is that they help us to see the individual people who are caught up in the complexities of large scale population migrations. With new generations of war induced refugees in our midst, the narrative voice of elders from a now distant war urge us to recognize that refugees from the same generational cohort fleeing from the same conflict, during the same time period, may arrive in the same destination with very different levels of distress.

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