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Seeking balance between the past and the present: Vietnamese refugee parenting practices and adolescent well-being

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the resources that Vietnamese refugee parents use in raising their adolescent youth in exile and how they, and their adolescents, regard their experiences of different parenting styles. The study is based on 55 semi-structured interviews and several focus groups performed with a small sample of Vietnamese refugee parents and their adolescent children. Three main themes from the interviews were identified: the role of the extended family and siblings in bringing up children; language acquisition and cultural continuity and, finally, religion and social support. Our findings suggest extended kin are involved in the raising of adolescent children, providing additional family ties and support. Parents regarded Vietnamese language acquisition by their youth as facilitating both communication with extended kin and cultural transmission. Several parents stressed the importance of religious community to socialising and creating a sense of belonging for their youth. Vietnamese refugee parents seek a balance between Vietnamese values and their close extended family social networks, and the opportunities in Norway to develop autonomy in pursuit of educational and economic goals. Together these parenting practices constituted a mobilization of resources in support of their youth. These findings may have important implications for future research on resiliency and the role of these strategies as protective factors mediating mental health outcomes. They may also have implications for treatment, in terms of the types of resources treatment can access and for prevention strategies that maximize key cultural resources for Vietnamese refugee youth.

Keywords

Vietnamese; Refugees; Parenting; Well-being; Resilience; Qualitative method

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1. INTRODUCTION

Parenting is universally important in shaping child and adolescent well-being. Research consistently shows that parenting practices and styles are linked to the behavioral and emotional development of teens (Driscoll, Russell & Crockett, 2008; Supple & Small, 2006). The literature on refugees and parenting in exile frequently emphasizes the vulnerability of this particular group. Refugee parents face stressors associated with the experience of torture, trauma and the separation or death of family members. While in exile, families also experience changes to family roles, language difficulties and different cultural expectations of behaviour (Allen, Vaage & Hauff, 2006; Gonsalves 1992; Lamberg 1996). In addition, refugee parents face similar challenges with their children and adolescents as experienced by parents of the mainstream receiving culture which can include parental mental and physical health problems, social isolation, poverty and children's behavioural problems (Lewig, Arney & Salveron, 2010).

Less attention has been devoted to the resources refugee parents use in the parenting role in exile and the measures they take to support their children. Vaage et al. (2009) found that the self-reported mental health of second-generation Vietnamese adolescents was better than that of an ethnic Norwegian comparison group. The results can point to the potential positive benefits in youth resilience. The results may also to some extent be biased due to factors such as cultural differences in reporting emotional and behavioural problems.

Resilience refers to a dynamic process characterized by positive development despite significant adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000). In our material one third of the parents had some level of psychological distress at arrival in Norway in 1982, and war trauma was significantly associated with mental health problems (Hauff & Vaglum, 1993). Parents poor mental health following traumatic experiences has been found to be related to mental health situation of their children, and parents communication pattern about traumatic experiences can have consequences for the well-being of their children (Montgomery, 2010). On this background there is a need for a better understanding of the cultural resources that may explain this resiliency outcome among Vietnamese youth.

With regard to parenting styles, acculturation and adolescent wellbeing, researchers have recognised that parenting practises vary across cultures, and that immigration and acculturation processes affect both parents' childrearing styles and parent-child relationships (Bornstein & Cote, 2006; Ying & Han, 2007b). Research on immigrant families indicates that the acculturation process influences the emotional and behavioral outcomes of first-, second- and higher generation immigrant youth. Inevitably, acculturation also influences the behavior of parents including their parenting behaviors and relationships with their children (Ho, 2010; Kao, 2004; Pong, Hao & Gardner, 2005). Thus acculturation influences youth well-being directly and also indirectly through its effects on their parents. In order to detect and highlight the fluctuations in acculturative experiences within a family context, narrative and qualitative approaches have recently been called for (Chirkov, 2009; Tardif-Williams & Fisher, 2009).

Previously, the intergenerational relationships among Vietnamese refugee families in exile have been addressed. In particular, the challenges associated with value discrepancies between traditional Vietnamese family obligations versus autonomy and individualism in Europe, North-America and Australia have been described and analyzed (e.g. Kwak, 2003; Kwak & Berry, 2001; Nguyen & Williams, 1989; Phinney et al., 2000; Rosenthal et al., 1996; Vedder et al., 2006). Value disagreements have been observed as producing family disharmony or "acculturation gaps" (Birman, 2006) and might adversely affect adolescent's adaptation beyond the family context (Berry et al., 2006; Kwak, 2003; Vedder et al., 2006).

The literature indicates a direct association between parental acculturation and quality of the intergenerational relationship (Kwak, 2003; Ying & Han, 2007b).

However, to our knowledge, only a few studies have explored the cultural resources and strategies that might promote resilience within families in exile (Kibria, 1993; Conchas & Peres, 2003; Pan, 2011; Zhou & Bankston, 1994). Key resources and social environments used by refugee parents have largely been unrecognized in previous research that has focused on cultural and contextual understandings based on European and North-American cultural assumptions about parenting (Ungar, 2006). Contextual knowledge that is sensitive to cultural diversity is needed due to increased levels of immigration, globalisation and the mixing of cultural groups (Berry, 2008; Kirmayer, 2006; Ward & Kagitcibasi, 2010). Adolescent well-being cannot be separated from the health of the family and community where they belong (Guzder & Rousseau, 2010), and is important for gaining a deeper understanding of effective interventions (Armstrong, Birnie- Lefcovich & Ungar, 2005).

Although Vietnamese families display a great variation in background, social class, religion and education, the contrast with Nordic families is large when it comes to egalitarian parent-child relationships and prevailing norms of gender equality (Liebkind, 1996). For South East Asians, “the self” and “the family” are concepts that are integral to each other and thus are “collectivist” relative to the prevalent values of autonomy, independence and “individualism” existing in Nordic countries. In addition, many immigrants have traumatic experiences before and during the process of leaving their countries of origin leading to higher levels of depression within these groups making adaptation more difficult (Hauff, 1998a; Liebkind, 1996). In this paper we seek to address the following research questions:

1. How Vietnamese refugee parents and their adolescents living in Norway reflect on their experiences of differences in parenting styles
2. What resources do Vietnamese refugee parents use in bringing up their children in exile?

2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

2.1 Participants

The families were selected from a longitudinal prospective survey initiated by the second author in 1982. In that study, a cohort of 145 Vietnamese refugees from South Vietnam were studied on arrival to Norway in 1982 (T1) and followed up in 1985 (T2) (Hauff, 1998a). The cohort was re-examined in 2005/2006 after 23 years of settlement in Norway (T3) when 80 of the original 145 refugees were found and consented to participate in follow up interviews (Vaage et al., 2009, Vaage et al., 2010).

A qualitative study (T4) was initiated by the first author in 2006. From the original cohort, eleven families were invited to participate of which nine accepted. The two families that declined to participate gave the explanation that they were too busy to set aside time for the study. Inclusion criteria included an adolescent between 15–20 years old who was living at home at the commencement of the study. Families representing urban and rural Vietnamese background, different places of residence in Norway, different socio-economic backgrounds, and varying levels of education, employment and involvement in Norwegian society were included. Six families were members of the Catholic Church, two were Buddhist and one family practised Confucianism. The qualitative study involved a total of 18 parents and 14 adolescents from the nine families. Altogether 55 interviews were carried out (many participants engaged in more than one interview session). In addition, many of the adolescents discussed topics by e-mail and telephone when required.

2.2 Procedures

Prior to the first family interview, an interview guide was composed and discussed with a reference group that consisted of Vietnamese men and women who had been living in Norway for many years. The interview guide contained questions related to intergenerational relationships, activities and daily life of the families and questions related to the familial and societal network and resources that families could access. Participants in the reference group were recruited through Vietnamese associations that represent both the interests of adolescents and adult Vietnamese refugees in Norway. All reference group members were highly competent in both Norwegian and Vietnamese language and culture.

Some topics and questions in the interview guide were rephrased on advice from the reference group. Particular concerns emerged regarding the phrases “family disagreement” and “family conflict” as the reference group observed that Vietnamese families do not easily speak about disagreements within their families, and direct questioning on these topics by a stranger might generate scepticism and hesitation to give information.

The reference group recommended an interpreter who also acted as a research-collaborator and organizer of interviews. Her personality and knowledge of Vietnamese expectations when we entered a Vietnamese home ensured a relaxed atmosphere. She contributed to discussions and reflections on the interviews afterwards. Her background as a boat refugee, having lived in Norway since early adolescence with her family, and her many years of experience interpreting was of great benefit to the study.

The families were contacted by the interpreter and meetings were arranged. All parental interviews took place in the homes of the families at the weekend. The interview usually started in Norwegian and often shifted to Vietnamese when the parents were explaining details or when more sensitive issues were discussed. Parents chose if they preferred to be interviewed as a couple or separately. The interpreter participated in all the interviews with the parents while some of the interviews with the adolescent were carried out alone by the first author. Some parents had problems expressing themselves in Norwegian. Repeated interviews were carried out in order to gain a dynamic and deeper understanding of the topics. At the first meeting four couples were interviewed separately and five couples were interviewed together. Among the four couples interviewed separately, two couples had problems in their relationship and chose not to have the spouse present. Two other couples had practical reasons for not being interviewed together. Adolescents could also choose if they preferred to be interviewed with their siblings. For practical reasons, most of the adolescents found it more convenient to be interviewed alone, as it was difficult to gather the siblings together at the same time.

Interviews varied from 1 to 3.5 hours. Careful notes were taken during the interviews, as the reference group indicated tape recordings would negatively impact the candour of the interviewees as they would be concerned about the final use of the tapes. Immediately afterwards all notes were computerized to ensure that all details and content were documented in the manner they were presented, seen and phrased by the participants. The interpreter also wrote a summary of the interviews. Reflections on the interviews were shared continuously between the interpreter and the first author.

In the follow up interviews, conducted one and two years later, all parents were interviewed individually in order to better examine gender differences. These interviews directly followed up the issues covered in the first meeting. It proved to be an excellent opportunity to reflect with the families on the dynamics of family relations over time. Repeated interviews are recommended in order to capture whether or not the informants have changed their opinions, how families have resolved issues since first contact, and most importantly if

and how people have reflected on previous problems or concerns brought up a year earlier (Hilden & Middelthon, 2002). This provides valuable information on family dynamics over time.

All the adolescent subjects participated in follow-up interviews. While some found it possible to meet in person two or three times, others preferred to communicate by telephone or e-mail. Over the four years the researchers had contact with the adolescents, many of them moved out from their parent's homes in order to study or travel. Communication by e-mail was both very efficient and successful in terms of outcome and ensured the continued participation of the adolescents. The total number of interviews at T4 from 2006-'2009 was 55. Communications by e-mail were not considered as interviews for the purpose of the study.

2.3 Focus groups

In order to discuss the results in the individual interviews further, two focus group sessions (T5) were arranged with the parents in December 2008. The groups consisted of mothers and fathers and had five and seven participants respectively. A list of case examples was prepared by the researcher, the last author and the reference group. These case examples, that illustrated situations that the families could recognise, were constructed based on key themes from the individual interviews. The intention of developing these case examples was to make it easier for the participants to talk and express opinions in a group context. The focus group discussions elaborated on the themes identified and confirmed their relevance. A similar focus group for adolescents was arranged in September 2009. Four adolescents were gathered to discuss similar cases as their parents had discussed previously. In this way it was possible to collect opinions and arguments about the same cases from two generations.

2.4 Analysis

The study material was analyzed by the research group. The material was read hermeneutically as a back and forth process between the parts and the whole (Kvale, 1996). Key themes were identified by studying the research notes in detail. Each segment was considered using the questions "What is this segment about" and "How is it like, and not like, other segments" in order to derive meaning. Various accounts were compared with each other to identify themes that were common in the data set (Green & Thorogood, 2009). Key issues were discussed with the research group and the interpreter who assisted during interviews. Repeated interviews provided opportunities to further explore the themes with the participants and understand the nuances of meanings expressed. The ways in which participant responses constructed aspects of reality in collaboration with the interviewer were considered (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). Several themes from the interview material were identified. Of these, three themes were selected as they were represented most frequently in interviews with respondents. These were: the role of the extended family and siblings in bringing up children, language acquisition and cultural continuity and finally, religion and social support. These themes were discussed among participants at the focus group meetings and provided member checking through elaboration on the themes and confirmation of their relevance (Seale, 2004). After the focus groups, the first author and the interpreter selected quotations illustrating key themes. The quotations were checked carefully to ensure that the meanings were preserved in the form that they were presented by the participants. All names mentioned below are pseudonyms.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Reflections over parenting styles

Parents discussed the challenge of creating a balance between different child raising methods. The methods they experienced in their own childhood were sometimes at odds with the child raising methods they observed in Norway. Except for one couple who brought a four year old child along when they sought refuge in Norway, all mothers and fathers interviewed became parents after their arrival in Norway.

Parents account of their own upbringing in Vietnam—Many parents described the method of parenting they themselves experienced in Vietnam as “strict disciplinary learning”. Thanh, father to two adolescents, explained:

“In Vietnam, raising children consists of shouting at and hitting the child if it is disobedient or does anything wrong. Here in Norway it is just talking and talking. To discuss and negotiate with children is very far from how people of my generation were brought up”.

Another father, Hiem, recalls that obedience was a primary goal of parenting in Vietnam:

“Raising children in Vietnam can be compared to a military system. You have to work a lot, learn to tolerate having someone above you and not question the messages and instructions you receive”.

A father, Bao, recalls from his upbringing in Vietnam that being disobedient and not listening to the instructions of the parents could have dramatic and long-lasting consequences:

“In Vietnam there were not many opportunities. If you were lucky you could get an opportunity to go to school, and then you would have the possibility of making yourself a life. Those pupils, who passed their exams well, could proceed to further education, while the others would be referred to military service. This could decide if you would survive or die or have your life destroyed”.

From his own childhood, Tuyen recalled a particular episode that has remained important to him throughout his life:

“One day during my childhood I happened to overhear my father weeping in the room next door. Both curious and frightened over this uncommon behaviour, I held my breath and listened carefully at the door. My father was talking with my 15 year older brother. He told him that he strongly regretted that he hit and punished me for disobedience earlier that day. I could hear my father was afraid that he had been too hard with me. I was so happy to have overheard the conversation. How could I have known that my father loved me if I had not heard this?”

Dilemmas of parenting in exile—Although in the example above, Tuyen acknowledges the importance to his own personal development of having heard this conversation, he still finds difficulty in showing affection and talking with his own adolescent son. Tuyen compares the difference in circumstances between his own childhood with those of his children and the parental dilemmas that occur due to these differences:

“For children and adolescents here in Norway there are so many choices, and I don’t know really what to encourage them to do. Irrespective of what they choose, I know that they will not become poor if they make a single wrong decision. However, to make a wrong decision in my adolescent years could lead to catastrophic consequences”

Although the range of choices available to his children in Norway occasionally cause Tuyen to find it confusing on how to counsel them, he is relieved that society in exile is a lot safer than that which he experienced in his adolescent years in Vietnam. He appreciates that in Norway decisions can be taken, for example, regarding choice of education that may fail, but that these decisions do not necessarily lead to lost opportunities.

Another father claimed that his way of dealing with the dilemma of how to parent has been to encourage his adolescents to be reflective and develop the skill to think for themselves. He has enjoyed discussing different issues with his children. He explained:

“I can for example ask them where their jeans are from, or where the butter is made... other times I have tried to encourage them to explore issues more deeply, like the reasons behind different social phenomena, for example the existence of polygamy in certain societies, or the consequences of women not learning to read etc.”

Similarly, other parents explained that they have concentrated on raising their children to become self-reliant and make their own decisions. Parents, who had several children, stated that during their years living in Norway they had changed their style of parenting. First they had tried to emphasise obedience, and had a lot of rules, closely monitoring their children's activities. In time, they came to view their children as lacking self-confidence as a result of this parenting style. They then changed their style and encouraged practices whereby their children would think for their selves and become self-reliant. Parents encouraged their children's autonomy in the public sphere i.e. education and work life and their interdependence in the private sphere.

Another father said he has observed many times that Norwegian parents praise and acknowledge their youth for their good effort. He said that this is uncommon amongst Vietnamese parents. He adds that it is difficult for Vietnamese parents to express love and emotions to their children:

“I try to show my emotions and acknowledge my own son. Because I work in a school I observe that Norwegian men are a lot more open than I am. In Norway, a father and his son can talk about a lot of issues that I simply cannot raise with my son”

Several of the fathers interviewed felt that they are lacking a language in which they can talk about sensitive and emotional things. For example, Tuyen describes how he finds his son very sophisticated and intelligent, and thinks that his son might display greater insight and knowledge into the topics that he wishes to discuss than he, Tuyen, might as the parent. Tuyen and the other fathers interviewed find this very frustrating because, in many respects, it makes young people a lot more powerful than their parents. Six of eight fathers were afraid that this can create disrespect within the generations, leading parents to fall back on child raising methods by which they themselves were raised. A father addressed physical punishment in this context and states:

“I promised myself long time ago that I would never punish my children in a physical way. However as a father of a teenager it is sometimes very frustrating and I can understand what other Vietnamese parents talk about when complaining that "child raising does not work as well if you don't hit."

Adolescent's reflections of their parent's styles of parenting—Overall, most parents expressed a wish for a closer and more open relationship with their adolescents, but found this difficult to establish. Among the adolescents however there was more variation. While a few participants stated a wish for a closer relationship, others wished to avoid as much contact as possible with their parents. Some adolescents had ceased hoping for a

closer relationship and described the relationship with their parents as “being on a tightrope”. Several adolescents explained how they observed their parents struggle to change. One of the adolescents, Peter, said:

“They have understood that here in Norway parents actually speak with their children, but they don’t know how to proceed themselves. So they continue to give orders instead of speaking”

Adolescents also expressed opinions about the difficulties their parents have in finding a balance between the parenting styles they had known prior to arriving in Norway and those they observe in Norway when raising their children. Thomas stated that having Vietnamese parents living in Norway could be compared to being raised by grandparents. He considers his relationship to his parents to be “average”. He claimed that many different things determine the quality of the relationship between parents and children including personality, past experiences, environment and the social climate of where the family lives. Thomas elaborated that Vietnamese parents in Norway are trapped between different child raising models:

“If the parents have a friendship-like relationship to their children, they will not manage to raise them.... On the other hand if they have a too authoritarian relationship, they will not succeed in establishing any contact and communication. Then the children will not listen or learn. In this case, it is plausible that “reflex reactions” will occur and make the parents become even more authoritarian.... It will work against its purpose, and the children might react by becoming even more remote.”

In several interviews, both adolescents and parents often considered the adolescents to be more competent and knowledgeable about Norwegian society. This hampers the counselling and authoritative role the parents feel they should take. In addition, these parents have experienced parenting practises in Vietnam where parents are supposed to have control over more aspects of their adolescent children’s lives than they can now have in exile. Although many of the parents wish to have a close relationship where they and their children are comfortable expressing feelings and opinions to each other, they have difficulty in finding a feasible way of obtaining this. Significantly, this struggle is equally recognised among both parents and adolescents.

3.2 Parental resources and strategies

These narratives describe a struggle to find a harmony in how best to parent adolescents. Most parents were brought up under authoritarian parenting styles characterised by receiving commands and orders. In exile they have had to accept new ways of negotiating with their adolescents and more direct communication with them. Many parents, especially fathers, feel challenged by having less knowledge about the culture and society they live in exile than their children. Adolescents also recognised this position and explained that it makes parents fear “loosing face” and thus hampers communication. We inquired about resources parents use to overcome this intergenerational challenge. The resources we will highlight do not include all strategies and actions taken, but focus on those used most frequently. These resources included involving both immediate and extended family as additional resources in parenting, maintaining a focus on Vietnamese language acquisition for adolescent children, and seeking family attendance at, and social ties to, a religious community.

3.2.1 The role of extended family and siblings in the upbringing of youth—We have previously discussed how uncles, aunts and cousins in particular become influential in the acculturation process of the immediate family (Tingvold et al., 2011). We find a similar pattern of engagement from extended family members in almost all aspects of parenting.

Parent's perspectives: Several parents said that extended family members were often active in raising children and adolescents in Vietnam. A mother, Tham's, description of her own childhood showed how the extended family often is a vital help for parents. Her own mother relied on help from an aunt:

"My mother wasn't exactly a child raiser type, so in that task she needed help from my aunt. It is not uncommon that other extended members are active in helping to raise children, and it is a lot easier when many relatives are present to correct and raise the children."

As a mother in Norway she herself required help from her extended family when her son became involved in a youth gang with other members from immigrant backgrounds. The gang members hung out on the streets and in shopping malls and were accused of causing vandalism in the neighborhood. Tham explained:

"Many of the boys in this gang were allowed to stay out late and they were not monitored by their parents. When we [her husband and herself] understood how serious this situation was getting, we decided to move to another city where my husband and I have many relatives"

When the parents in this example realized that they had to move to another location, they decide to move closer to relatives because they knew they could access support and help. Uncles and aunts were utilized as resources. They opened their homes to the adolescent boy in trouble and took on an additional parenting role. In interviews, the adolescent boy claimed to very much appreciate his parents' decision to move and claimed that "he was saved" by the change of location and the support of his family.

Adolescents from several families described close relationships with aunts and uncles, particularly if they lived near by. Aunts and uncles help their siblings with the upbringing of children. The adolescents interviewed considered cousins as being as close as a sister or a brother. In times of difficulty, the parents interviewed turned to extended family members for help and advice. When lacking extended family in Norway, some families attached themselves to other Vietnamese families they met in exile and entered into negotiations with them to determine how the families should relate to each other in terms of seniority and obligations.

Adolescent's perspectives: A daughter, Maria, reflected on the topic of extended kin and who has "a right" to be involved in raising children. When comparing Norwegian and Vietnamese families she stated:

"If an uncle, or another adult, starts to teach a child or tell it what to do, a Norwegian adolescent could easily reply: "You are not my father!". In a Vietnamese context you cannot say something like that. Uncles have a right to speak to children and correct their behavior. One reason why uncles and aunts get so involved is because they want to make sure that they have given an advice. Everybody feels committed to give advices."

The role of siblings: Some adolescents emphasized that older siblings could also take on parenting roles and responsibility for younger siblings. The adolescents interviewed claimed that parents tended to raise the oldest child differently from the younger ones. Older siblings are often enlisted to help in raising the younger children. One adolescent, Peter, said:

"My parents are a lot stricter with me than my two younger siblings. They want me to be an ideal for my two brothers. Somehow... in the Vietnamese way of thinking, if the oldest child performs badly, the younger siblings will also perform badly. Because of that parents are stricter with the first child and more liberal with the next ones. My two younger brothers are allowed to do a lot more than I did at the same age; they are not being nagged as much, and

are punished less for doing things that are wrong. I know that if I had done similar things I would have been punished”.

The oldest child can often be seen as a mediator for the parents by taking on a parent-like supportive role with younger siblings. One adolescent boy explained it like this:

“My oldest brother helps me and my sister and younger brother a lot. It spans from everything from homework to practical help. The oldest child is often a role model for the younger ones”

Parents can call on the assistance of the oldest child and have them carry out specific tasks for their younger sisters and brothers. This indicates that oldest children can act as an extra resource that strengthens the parental function. Participants explained that sibling birth order was seen as more important in their upbringing in Vietnam than when living in Norway.

3.2.2 Language acquisition and cultural continuity—Parents explained that the use of Vietnamese language created a means whereby adolescent children would value and keep in close contact with Vietnamese relatives living abroad and older Vietnamese relatives living in Norway.

Parent’s perspectives: Access to relatives was seen as a kind of safety net for both children and adolescents. Huyen, a mother, said:

“If we [husband and wife] in any way have been strict with our children, it has been in making them learn to speak, read and write Vietnamese. The language is the code to communication to our other relatives living in Germany and the U.S.A. It is important to remember our roots, because those who lose their roots, they lose a lot. In order to function in a society, you first have to function in a family”

Implicit here is that language is not only a means of communication, but also creates a connection between adolescents and others. She relates the ability to perform in society to the command of language, and that by mastering the language; children will experience a connection to their family and an appreciation of their position within the family. Functioning within the family system is seen as a prerequisite to functioning successfully as a member of the community where collectivistic values are shared.

Suong, a mother of two adolescents, described how every summer the family organised their vacation around the Vietnamese language school for youth. As a reward for attending, the children were taken for two weeks vacation in Southern Europe after the close of the summer school. She said that it has become important to her children to be in command of the Vietnamese language:

“When the Norwegian school year was over in June, my children went to Vietnamese summer school for 4–6 weeks. They did not like it then, but in the last few years they have thanked me and their father for pushing them to learn Vietnamese. It creates a balance in their lives, and it is important to know where you are coming from”

The choice of language used at home was an issue of debate among parents. Parents were generally strict that Vietnamese should be spoken inside the house, while Norwegian should be spoken in the public. Parents often reflected deeply on this issue and were concerned about how the language spoken influenced their parenting style. A father, Thinh, described his efforts to make his children speak Vietnamese:

“We want our children to speak Vietnamese when they are at home. However, this is impossible to maintain, because the children find it more natural to communicate in Norwegian. We prefer them to speak Vietnamese because the language has to do with respect and it sets a standard for how to behave.”

The connection between the use of language and expected behaviour was also addressed by one of the mothers, Trang. In her second interview Trang explained that she had always been strict about the use of Vietnamese language when speaking with her children and raising them:

I do not get the right feeling if I use Norwegian language when I raise my children”

Adolescent’s perspectives: The adolescents interviewed confirmed that many parents were strict about learning Vietnamese. Some adolescents recall that the Vietnamese language lessons, often organised as extra classes after the regular school day was over, were demanding. However one adolescent boy, Tom, described how the struggle his parents put him and his siblings through has been rewarding for him later in his life:

“My parents were preoccupied about us getting to know our roots. To handle the language was a central thing to them. I can remember all the nagging about this when I was growing up, often we had conflicts, but I am thankful that my parents were so firm in doing this. Sometimes I even wish I had been pushed even harder”

A daughter, Yen, confirmed that when the Vietnamese language is being spoken, the closeness or distance of the relationship between the people speaking is communicated through how they grammatically address each other. Expectations of behavior follow from the use of language and give direction to the interaction between the people speaking. As a result older people do not discuss problems with younger ones. Yen reflected on her communication with her parents in Vietnamese and stated:

“When my parents wanted to get separated last year, they refused to speak with me about it even though I am 21 years old now and an adult. They just said that the separation was a case between them, an “adult issue”. In this decision, not talking to me about it, they try to be an ideal for me and my siblings. There is a sharp divide between the generations”

This example illustrates that the choice of language spoken also informs the relationship between the generations. Parents in exile maintain a sharp divide between themselves and their adolescents. This becomes particularly evident to the adolescents when the Vietnamese language is being spoken. In many of the interviews adolescents show a willingness and a capacity to understand their parents’ decisions and way of handling life.

3.2.3 Religion and social support—Several parents who practised Catholicism explained that they wanted their children to be active within the Catholic Church. They felt that their attachment to the church was positive as it was a place where families get together, socialise and where children learn how to relate to others. It creates a sense of belonging for the children that parents recognised as important. Some of the interviewees had extended family members attending the same church, which meant that going to church also involved socialising with extended family members.

Parent’s perspectives: One mother said that it is not only the matter of passing on the Catholic faith to her youth that is important, but also the sense of belonging that is engendered when the Catholic Church functions as a connecting point for the family:

“I hope my children shall become good Catholics in the same church to which I and my relatives belong”.

Going to church together with their children was an activity many parents wished to do on a regular basis. Some families experienced conflict over participation in church service. Children, especially when approaching the time of adolescence, often refused to attend. In some families this was resolved by the compromise that adolescents attended only the regular church service on Sundays. In return they were allowed to skip church activities (study groups, prayer meetings and family get-togethers) that take place on weekdays. This example shows that parents may enter into negotiations with adolescents. It demonstrates flexibility by combining past and present parenting styles, that allows a consideration of the young person's perspective that in turn leads to a solution to the impasse.

In interviews, parents explained that their children's connection to the Catholic Church, which has a large number of Vietnamese members, would help them to stay out of trouble as it is a source of social control and value reinforcement. The Church facilitates the use of the Vietnamese language and a closer attachment to Vietnamese values as many extended and nuclear family members attend the same church. The example above may also illustrate that the Church is receptive to offering activities attractive to adolescents.

One mother claimed that her children's attendance at the same church as herself provided Vietnamese language training in addition to religious faith and participation in a religious community. As she was struggling to learn the Norwegian language, the children's attendance helped to resolve some of the language problems within the family. The mother expected that the youth would feel more attached and loyal to Vietnamese values as result. These values were highly appreciated by older extended family members. The mother complained about her adolescents' lack of interest and poor attachment to the Catholic Church:

“It is a really bad point of departure for the children, when they do not feel any attachment to the church. And for me, as their mother, it has not been easy to pass on the catholic faith in a small town where there only are Lutheran churches and no Catholic churches. The closest Catholic Church community is a two hour drive away”

Adolescent's perspectives: Attendance at the Catholic Church was a topic discussed within the families interviewed. One adolescent boy did not share his parent's commitment to the Catholic Church, but in order to please them, he agreed to go with them to church service on Sundays. The parents were not content with what they regarded as low participation, and tried to convince him to attend many other activities taking place within the church.

He felt that his parents monitored how he spent his leisure time more than he liked. For example, he had always been very interested in art and drama, and during the previous few years he had many prominent roles in a theatre group. His parents disliked this activity and tried to stop him from further involvement. The Church community had started an art group for children and the adolescent boy was asked to help with the instruction of the group due to his previous experience and he did so. He felt he received respect and admiration from the Church community members for having this teaching position. As a result his parents changed their opinion about his interest in art and drama. He stated:

“Slowly my parents started to change their point of view about it. I think it is because the Church accepts the art and drama that I teach. It made them stop commenting negatively about it. Myself, I do not practise the Catholic faith so much, but I have a social connection to the Church”.

The son of another family felt glad that the Catholic Church was absent in his hometown when he was growing up:

“Luckily for me there was no Catholic Church nearby... if there had been one, I am sure I would have been sent to Sunday school just like my cousins in the capital. They had seven hours of combined Vietnamese language lessons and training in the Catholic religious faith each Sunday”

Many social activities take place within the church, such as language training courses, art and drama groups for children, choir, study groups for adolescents as well as various social gatherings. For some parents, their children’s attendance at the church resolved problems within the family, and transmitted Vietnamese cultural values along with those values of the Catholic Church.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings suggest Vietnamese refugee families sought a balance between what were at times conflicting traditional Vietnamese and Norwegian parenting practices. In their own youth, parents were brought up in a tradition where great respect for older generations and their authority was the rule. While in exile they came into contact with different parenting practices that encouraged negotiation with adolescents and greater direct communication. To assist them in dealing with their new circumstances, Vietnamese refugee families drew from various cultural resources. Many parents emphasized language as a vehicle for cultural continuity through which values were transmitted and the social support of extended family was facilitated. The institution of the Catholic Church often provided children with Vietnamese language instruction, Vietnamese cultural activities, and other means of cultural continuity. The use of extended family resources constituted a mobilization of ‘social capital’ as they incorporate values and rules of behaviour that help in ensuring the positive and healthy development of the youth. These findings may have important implications for future research on resiliency that seeks to understand the role of these strategies as protective factors mediating mental health outcomes. They may also have implications for treatment and prevention of mental health problems, in terms of the types of resources treatment can access, and the maximization of key cultural resources in prevention strategies for Vietnamese refugee youth (Hauff, 1998b).

Our findings suggest parents strive to create a harmony between old ways and new by preserving the best of the past, their own experiences of being parented, and the strengths of their culture, while attempting to remain flexible with regard to the demands of life as a refugee in a new social environment. In their own upbringing in Vietnam, several participants had experiences of verbal admonishments, physical punishment and a “one way communication process” that is well described in the literature (Tajima and Harachi, 2010; Xiong, 2000). In exile, our participants observed different parenting practises among ethnic Norwegians, where parents grant their children more autonomy and engaged in negotiation with their children. These differences in parenting styles organize along Baumrind’s (1991) typology of parenting styles, with a traditional Vietnamese cultural preference towards authoritarian parenting styles standing in contrast to a Norwegian cultural preference for authoritative parenting styles.

Our study suggests that parents often draw on resources connected to their Vietnamese background and traditional cultural practices in managing the parenting role in their new intercultural context. A previous study described how parents involve extended family members in raising children, seeking their advice, help and support when needed, particularly in times of crisis. It also noted the influence of extended family on acculturation

processes at nuclear family level (Tingvold et al., 2011). The Vietnamese refugee adolescents often had many adults who assumed a monitoring and parental role in their lives. Older siblings in some situations acted as an extension of their parent's authority for younger siblings and were expected to take a supervisory role. Older cousins in some families also filled this older sibling role of a young person who was automatically trusted and turned to for help and advice by younger children. Research on the relationship between social networks and youth well-being suggests that network structures characterized by the added social support of close interactions with extended, rather than only immediate kin, help sustain healthier children (Kanaiaupuni, Donato & Stainback 2005), while the association between social support and mental health has also repeatedly been shown as important (e.g. Cohen & Wills, 1985; Dressler 1985; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). Vietnamese parents in our study made significant efforts to foster these relations. In fact, one of the reasons parents insisted that their children learn Vietnamese was to facilitate relations with extended kin and in particular, relatives with limited Norwegian language abilities. This insistence had secondary protective functions in that it ensured a connectedness to social networks where Vietnamese customs and values were communicated. These types of close relations to extended kin are not a common experience for ethnic Norwegian adolescents and should be considered in further research when inquiring into mental health issues. This active interchange of parents and the social environment in Norway also points to the notion of decentrality (Ungar, 2011). In understanding resilience, we must also look beyond individual characteristics to the roles of parents interacting with institutions and the broader social ecology of the young person for the source of resilience.

However, previous research has suggested that the protective effects of these types of close social ties in mental health outcomes are not uniform. These ties can also result in psychological costs, including a sense of indebtedness, obligation to follow advice, and conformity (Corin, 1985; Dressler & Badger, 1985) and their impact can differ by gender (Belle, 1983). Family conflict in such a cohesive community can generate additional stress. There can also be considerable pressure to act according to traditional cultural norms that adolescents may wish to disregard. Accordingly, some adolescents in this study described their relationships to aunts and uncles as problematic and interfering with their lives in a negative way. Vietnamese parents would often compare their own children with their cousins in order to make them strive harder to achieve personal and educational goals. Little is known about the circumstances in which these close ties function as supportive factors among refugee families, and how their benefits shift over time spent in exile, constituting an important topic for future research.

Many parents in our study encouraged adolescents to attend religious communities, notably Vietnamese Catholic congregations. In addition to religious services, churches provided a place to meet and socialize with other Vietnamese families, and to share Vietnamese cultural activities, including youth language instruction. The practice of directing youth towards the church in order to keep them away from harmful environments is also well known among ethnic Norwegians. However, the churches the Vietnamese families attend consist of Vietnamese members only. Services are held in the Vietnamese language, and the church provides many social activities that both strengthen networks among its members and promote a connection with Vietnamese culture. Membership in a Vietnamese congregation facilitates cultural transmission of Vietnamese values. Bankston & Zhou (1995) observed how religious institutions can function as "foci" of social networks, and how ethnic churches in particular can function as a mechanism enabling ethnic minority youth to adjust to mainstream society. In their research with U.S. Vietnamese refugees, they found frequent church attendance lead to greater "Vietnameseness", that greater "Vietnameseness" made

young people more embedded in the network of supports and constraints of the Vietnamese community, and that this lead to behaviour conducive to upward mobility.

These interworkings of church and extended kin illustrate the principle of complexity in resilience (Ungar, 2011). Clearly, both are important sources of pooled resources in the lives of Vietnamese youth, generating what some researchers have termed “social capital” (Coleman, 1988) that contributes to youth well being (Gilbert & van Kemenade, 2006, Stephenson 2001). However, the impact of church and extended kin structures is largely determined through the nature of their social ecologies and their meanings. Zhou & Bankston (1994) discussed how Vietnamese cultural orientations function as a form of “social capital” that facilitates the positive adaptation of Vietnamese youth. Cultural orientation leads to immersion in the ethnic networks that surround the youth, providing them with resources that support the pursuit of established personal and educational goals. Their findings are echoed by our interviews with parents who emphasized the importance of their youth learning to function in an extended family and the larger Vietnamese community as a preparation and a support for functioning in the larger society. Our focus group session revealed that adolescents acknowledged the importance of their parents’ effort, in particular the pressure their parents exerted on them to learn Vietnamese and the close monitoring of their behavior in early adolescence.

These findings emphasize the contribution to youth resilience of social and physical ecology (Ungar, 2011), including community level variables such as social support, quality of neighborhood, schools, religious beliefs and activities (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 1988; Elliot et al., 2006; Hammen, 2003). Context determines which resources are facilitative of resilience. These resources in turn are often culturally determined (Ungar, 2008). This encourages us to think of resilience as related to culturally specific ways Vietnamese refugee youth well-being in Norway is enhanced (e.g. Luthar et al., 2000; Ungar, 2004; Ungar, 2008; Ungar, 2011; Wyman, 2003). Resilience in this Vietnamese sample derives from a combination of personal capacities and important environmental supports. These supports include the facilitative parental practices identified here that fostered several resilience factors well documented in the literature. These include healthy peer relationships, community cohesiveness, and commitment to learning at school, personal empowerment, self-concept and social sensitivity (Donnon & Hammond, 2007).

Parents appreciated the feeling of freedom and social security that they experienced in exile. In addition, parents were content with the public educational system that provides adolescents with opportunities to make a good life with a secure income. This contrasts strongly with the parents own experiences in their adolescent years in Vietnam. Only one parent expressed a wish to return to Vietnam, while the others expressed a definite wish to stay in Norway. None of the youth interviewed had been threatened with a return to Vietnam if behaving badly or disobediently. The parent’s stability and wish to stay on in Norway might also have an impact on their children’s well being and mental health. This supports resilience research that considers how institutions at macro level might facilitate resilience in vulnerable groups such as refugee families.

There is an increasing focus on identifying and implementing mental health promoting factors in contemporary societies (Fazel et al., 2011; Montgomery, 2010). Our findings indicate that refugee families may have developed strategies that promote the mental health of their adolescents. Mental health professionals working with refugee families are likely to benefit from an understanding of such processes within the family.

5. CONCLUSION

Studies of the mental health of refugee children and adolescents typically attend to the adversity of forced migration. However, previous research (Vaage et al., 2009) found that self-reported mental health of second generation Vietnamese adolescents in Norway was better than that of a Norwegian comparison group. To shed light on these findings, this paper explored the parenting strategies of Vietnamese refugees, including the cultural resources they access. The parents we interviewed sought a balance between the traditional Vietnamese parenting practices they experienced themselves while growing up in Vietnam, and the sometimes contrasting parenting practices of ethnic Norwegians that they encountered. This represented one element of a larger challenge as Vietnamese refugee communities seek harmony between the ways of their country of origin and their adopted cultures, within which the challenges of bringing up children in a new culture was just one part. Many Vietnamese parents facilitated transmission of Vietnamese cultural values through insisting on Vietnamese language training, viewing it as an important mechanism of cultural continuity, values transmission, and contact with extended kin. Parents often involved extended family members in the upbringing of children and used older siblings to help raise younger ones. This highlights a degree of connectedness and closeness among Vietnamese family members that was often extended through church membership and transformed into 'social capital'. These close social ties supporting established educational and personal goals, and parental emphasis on preservation of Vietnamese language and cultural activities as a means of transmitting underlying cultural values, may provide part of the explanation for findings of positive mental health among children of Vietnamese refugees living in Norway. Parents valued their freedoms in exile, and the educational and economic opportunities available to their adolescents in Norway, and encouraged adolescent independence and autonomy in education and work. Simultaneously parents seek a balance between the culture of their country of origin and the culture of their adopted country. This leads to an encouragement of interdependence by promoting values that emphasize the roles and responsibilities of extended family, and the use as a resource of close social ties to Vietnamese social networks.

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