FROM BURMA TO DALLAS:

THE EXPERIENCE OF RESETTLED EMERGING ADULT KAREN REFUGEES

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ABSTRACT

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Across the globe, millions of people have been forcibly displaced giving them a shared experience with other refugees. However, their journeys are differentiated by the sociohistorical circumstances and personal developmental stages that contextualize each experience. Every refugee has a story to tell. This qualitative study explores the stories of emerging adult Karen refugees who have resettled in Dallas, Texas, and examines what their shared experience entails. The Karen are the second largest ethnic group in Burma recognized for their strong ethnic identity and decades of in-country conflict. After fleeing Burma, many Karen refugees have spent most or all of their lives in refugee camps in Thailand. Thousands of Karen have left the Protracted Refugee Situation with the option of third-country resettlement in the United States. Through transcendental phenomenological methods this study seeks to understand the shared experience of eight participants who are now in their emerging adult stage of life. They were all born in Burma or in a Thai border camp, lived in the Thai camps for over ten years during their childhood, and then resettled to the United States. Through phenomenological reduction, clustered themes emerged giving meanings to the textural descriptions. These meanings took shape through the structural variation of continual flight occurring in the three stages of origin, Protracted Refugee Situation, and third country resettlement. The synthesis of these descriptions makes up the essence of the now emerging adult Karen refugee experience. The overall essence provides us with new knowledge and understanding of the Karen refugee experience phenomenon which informs previous theoretical research done on refugee studies and emerging adulthood as well as prior empirical work on the Karen people.
I think when the people in Burma stop thinking about whether or not they're free,

it'll mean that they're free. -Aung San Suu Kyi
“The word phenomenon comes from the Greek *phaenesthai*, to flare up, to show itself, to appear. Constructed from *phaino*, phenomenon means to bring to light, to place in brightness, to show itself in itself, the totality of what lies before us in the light of day.” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26).

Dedicated to the Karen refugees in Dallas. May this study help bring your experience to light.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This qualitative phenomenological study presents the shared lived experience of eight Karen refugees from Burma who resettled to the United States. Four of the participants were born in Burma and four were born in one of the refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. Each of the participants in this study then lived in either the Mae La or Umphiem camps on the Thai-Burma border during their childhood formative years for over a decade before resettling in the United States. They relocated to Texas with the assistance of two different resettlement agencies and continue to reside there now after at least five years. The participants are in the emerging adulthood stage of their lives (18-25 years of age) and live with their families while either working or going to school.

This study employs a transcendental phenomenology research methodology in order to communicate the authentic voices of each participant. Utilization of the phenomenological method requires setting aside prejudgments and allows for the research to seek a new understanding of the emerging adult Karen refugee journey (Creswell, 2007). The objective of the transcendental methodology is to focus less on interpretation and more on the participants’ descriptions, and to actualize the overall essence of the participants’ experience. In accordance with the phenomenological research method, this study addresses one major research question: What is the shared experience of emerging adult Karen refugees resettled in the United States?

To inform the answer to the research question and to discuss the overall essence of the phenomenon, refugee experience theories are examined and utilized. Further contextualizing the participants’ understanding of the phenomenon, the investigation distinguishes their shared experience from prior research concepts on Karen refugees and of Karen identity. Finally,
theoretical understanding of the emerging adulthood life stage is applied in the analysis to investigate the participants’ experience within the context of their age and developmental phase.

**Background of the Study**

The global challenge of forced displacement is at an unprecedented state and is expected to continue to grow in the next decade (UNHCR, 2012). In 2011, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees reported working with 10.5 million refugees. Two thirds of those refugees are living in long-term exile in a protracted environment with little hope of returning to their country of origin, which includes the Karen refugees in Thailand. The refugee camps along the Thailand-Burma border are some of the worst Protracted Refugee Situations in the world (Loescher & Milner, 2005). The camps have been in existence for almost three decades, and as a result, many of the Karen refugees have been born and raised in the camps. The Thai border camps have been described as “human-warehousing” and offer refugees little opportunities while advancing a dependency on aide (Brees, 2010; Zeus; 2011).

Without prospects of repatriation or local integration, resettlement is the only durable solution left for the Karen refugees, but the number of resettlement locations is not enough to make a significant contribution (UNHCR, 2012). The UNHCR estimated 805,000 refugees in need of third-country resettlement in 2011, but only found places for ten percent. The UNHCR is trying to involve more countries in resettlement programs; in 2010 only four countries resettled refugees: Australia, Canada, Sweden, and the United States. The United States resettles more refugees than any other country (UNHCR, 2012). From 2008-2012, over 322,800 refugees arrived in the United States (ORR, 2008-2012).

The largest country of origin of resettled refugees in the United States is Burma, accounting for over 24% of the arrivals. Burma is made up of several different ethnic groups that
do not speak mutually intelligible languages, and the largest displaced group is that of the Karen. Resettlement in the United States for the Karen has been a “mixed-blessing;” it provides opportunity beyond the refugee camp, but with countless obstacles to overcome in a new country and little assistance from government agencies (Kenny & Kenny-Lockwood, p.1, 2011).

In accordance with the phenomenological methodology of the study, it is important for researchers to immediately acknowledge their personal background to the study (Moustakas, 1994). Beginning in 2007 as a volunteer at a resettlement agency, I assisted a Karen refugee family resettle in the United States. My understanding of the Karen refugee experience prior to the research was centered upon what I had witnessed in my role as a mentor to the family and will be bracketed from the study.

**Rationale for the Study**

The primary scholarly intention behind the study is to bridge the gap in refugee studies’ literature between theory and context. Much of the literature on refugees tends to be atheoretical, so there is a need for critical theoretical reflection and proper documentation on the experience of refugees (Healey, 2006; Black, 2001). The phenomenological study shows how the Karen refugees’ meaning of their experience informs the theorists and the researchers. Incorporating a conversation about an overall refugee experience is of worth to distinguish variations not only of an ethnic group, but of specific age groups. Therefore, another intention is to fill the gap of paralleling refugee experience with life-span development. Acknowledging that the shared essence is being described at a certain period of their life developmentally is important when exploring the meaning of the experience.

Despite the sizeable number of Burmese refugees, little research has been done to comprehend them and the focus of the refugee experience today is still on other international
populations (Agier, 2008). Further justification for the study is to bring voice to the marginalized refugee population and bring awareness specifically to the Karen refugees whose needs have intensified in recent years (Mitschke, Mitschke, Slater, & Teboh, 2011). The conflict between the Burmese government and the Karen is acknowledged by many analysts as the longest-running civil war in the world, but it has become a “forgotten story” (Challenger, 2008). The Karen people have a significant history and a strong ethnic identity that if ignored or not acknowledged in the United States could cause misunderstanding and lead the Karen refugees to question their own worth. There is very minimal research published on the specific challenges experienced faced by the Karen refugee population (Mitschke et al., 2011). The findings of this study can be used to better appreciate the journey of the Karen people and their barriers upon resettlement in order to empower them to share their story as a part of their new community. Understanding common experiences through phenomenological studies can be beneficial for educators and policymakers (Creswell, 2007). Formal school teachers can use the information to assist in their multi-cultural classrooms making the Karen youth feel more welcome. Meanwhile, refugee resettlement agencies can use the shared experience study to better understand their clients, which is needed, considering the number of refugees from Burma who continue to be resettled. If received attention, refugee studies research could have an impact on policy that directly affects the lives of millions (Black, 2001).

Moustakas contends, “In a phenomenological investigation the researcher has a personal interest in whatever she or he seeks to know; the researcher is intimately connected with the phenomenon” (1994, p. 59). My personal motivation for this project was to seek a better, authentic understanding of the Karen refugee experience that I had become intimately involved with, yet was still viewed as an outside observer. The agency where I volunteered could offer
little cultural or historical background of the Karen people and they only had access to one Karen speaker. The transcendental phenomenological research method provides the opportunity to gain direct insight of the actual experience, and as a result, the knowledge I fain will allow me to be a better servant of humanitarian assistance.

Lastly, this study is further compelled by international current events. The world is caught up in the reforms and the promises for an open state that the Burmese government is making. The first elections were held in 2011 after twenty years and democratic leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, gained a seat on the parliament following her release from house arrest (BBC, 2012 November). Since then, the government has signed a cease fire agreement with the Karen and hundreds of political prisoners have been released. In 2012, President Barack Obama became the first United States president to visit the country and he cautiously applauded the changes (Spetalnick & Mason, 2012). The importance of this research is critical as the Karen ethnic group has gone through an over 60 year long fight for autonomy and ethnic rights, which they have yet to achieve.

Many fear that the world’s enthusiastic approval of reforms will create increasing pressure to repatriate hundreds of thousands of Karen refugees and the Thai army has already urged such actions (Gray, 2012; Nanuam, 2012). Meanwhile, news organizations have reported that a State Department official spoke at Mae La in January of 2013, announcing the United States’ plan to end its Burmese refugee resettlement program in June, 2013 (Francisco, 2013). It is important for international governments and resettlement agencies to move forward with prudence and recognize that resettlement may still remain the best durable solution until conditions are right for the refugees from Burma. In 2012, human rights advocates accused China of wide-scale forced repatriations of thousands of Kachin refugees back to Burma while
the foreign ministry claimed they went on their own accord (Wong, 2012). Bangladesh is also forcing the repatriation of thousands of Rohingya refugees and not allowing for any new to arrive. In January of 2013, both Thailand and Singapore refused refugees fleeing Burma and allegations have been made that Thai officials are selling the refugees to traffickers who then transport them towards Malaysia (Hookway, 2013; Fisher, 2013). Meanwhile, government fighting is still being reported with the Kachin group in Burma, and tens of thousands of Rohingya continue to flee the Rakhine state of Burma (BBC, 2012 October).

**Organization of the Chapters**

This manuscript is divided into six chapters that are designed to conceptualize and contextualize the research question, delineate how the research was conducted, and present and discuss the findings of the study. Following the introduction, chapter two provides theoretical frameworks with which to couch the participants’ experience in addition to relevant empirical research and historical literature related to Karen refugees. Chapter three explains the transcendental phenomenological approach to the study and details the data collection and analysis process. The qualitative findings of the study are presented in chapter four. The chapter answers to the research question by reducing the lived experience of the emerging adult Karen refugee participants to an essence synthesized from the individual textural and structural descriptions. The findings are used in chapter five in a discussion with previous literature in relation to emerging adult Karen refugees. By comparing the phenomenon of the Karen refugee experience to the theoretical findings and previous Karen studies, a deeper meaning of their shared understanding is developed. Chapter six concludes the thesis with implications of the study and suggestions for practical applications of the findings.
Key Terms Defined

Myanmar or Burma?

The first key term to define is the most complicated because the meaning behind the decision of Myanmar or Burma is significant. The name Myanmar is taken from the literary form of the language while Burma is derived from the spoken form (Dittmer, 2008). Behind the two names are different historical experiences and political meanings. Burma has been ruled by military dictatorships for four decades. In 1989, Burma was renamed Myanmar by The State Law and Order Protection Council (SLORC), the reigning military dictatorship. The political renaming came in the wake of the 1988 coup by the military junta and has left a divide. The United Nations, ASEAN, China, India and Japan refer to the country as Myanmar, while the European Union calls it Myanmar/Burma. However, the United States, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom still refer to it as Burma so as not to acknowledge the military dictatorship that renamed the country. The recent arrival of democracy has rekindled the debate, and although the name “Burma” was banned in 1989, Suu Kyi has continued to call it Burma and linguists within Burma are doing so as well (Fuller, 2012).

In this study, the country is referred to as Burma with respect to the Karen participants. The SLORC regime that changed the name to Myanmar committed countless human rights violations against the Karen and was the reason for the first surge of displaced Karen (Louscher & Milner, 2005). The decision also reflects the genuine voice of the participants of the study because they all refer to the country as Burma. When asked in the follow up interview about the two names, all but one participant was vaguely aware that it was the government that had changed the name and all of them declared that they would continue to call it Burma.
Other Salient Terms

- **Karen**: The term “Karen” includes around 20 subgroups of peoples with the two dominant groups being the Sgaw and the Pwo (Thawnghmung, 2008). They are the second-largest minority in Burma and are widely dispersed across Burma with estimations of populations from three to seven million.

- **Refugee**: For the purpose of this study, the term “refugee” shall refer to the definition established by the UNHCR at the 1951 Refugee Convention. A refugee is a person who: owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (UNHCR, 2010, p. 16)

- **Protracted Refugee Situation (PRS)**: A Protracted Refugee Situation is defined by the UNHCR as one: in which refugees find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo. Their lives may not be at risk, but their basic rights and essential economic, social and psychological needs remain unfulfilled after years in exile. A refugee in this situation is often unable to break free from enforced reliance on external assistance. (UNHCR, 2004, p. 1)

The measurement for a PRS is one where refugee populations of over 25,000 people have been in exile for more than five years.
• Resettlement: Resettlement is one of the three durable solutions for refugees in order to meet the fundamental needs of the refugees (UNHCR, 2011). The term defined by the UNHCR:

the selection and transfer of refugees from a State in which they have sought protection to a third State which has agreed to admit them – as refugees – with permanent residence status. The status provided ensures protection against *refoulement* and provides a resettled refugee and his/her family or dependents with access to rights similar to those enjoyed by nationals. Resettlement also carries with it the opportunity to eventually become a naturalized citizen of the resettlement country. (p.2)

• Transcendental Phenomenology: The qualitative methodological approach of phenomenology has a philosophical basis drawing from the writings of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and further developed by Clark Moustakas (Creswell, 2007). It is an approach that focuses on the shared experience of persons and discerns the features of the phenomenon to arrive at an understanding of the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

• Emerging adulthood: The term emerging adulthood refers to the age period among young people from their late teens through their twenties that exists in industrialized countries (Arnett, 2004).
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents a thematic review of the literature that organizes the core subjects represented in the studies and presents their findings within those embracing themes (Moustakas, 1994). This thematic approach is identified by Moustakas as one of four major kinds of phenomenological literature reviews. The thematic sections are designed to provide a foundational background built with previous relevant studies vis-à-vis the different aspects of the emerging adult Karen refugee experience. The chapter begins with clarification of the definition of refugee and an explanation of the durable solutions available for refugees. Theoretical groundwork on the phenomenon of “the refugee experience” is then unpacked in order to provide a conceptual comparison of the participants’ experience. Following the essentialized experience, the chapter contextualizes the Karen refugee experience by reviewing the significant historical-political background and the course of Karen refugees from Burma to resettlement is examined with relevant prior research on the Karen. Adding further context to the phenomenon, the age group of the participants is taken into consideration and the phase of emerging adulthood is expounded upon in order to provide a conceptual framework to analyze the phenomenology of Karen refugee identity.

Refugee Status and Durable Solutions

This study takes as its focus, the Karen in Burma who fled to the Thai border and are now classified as refugees. It is important to define the population because once determined a refugee, a special legal status applies to them and they are entitled to rights and benefits of “international refugee protection” (UNHCR, 2005, p. 4). The presence of a general definition of refugee did not occur until the United Nations General Assembly adopted a refugee definition after the Second World War, after which a world refugee protection system was established with the
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1950 (UNHCR, 2005, 2012). The 1951 UN Refugee Convention was designed to respond to the effects of population movements from the aftermath of World War II and establish the rights of refugees. The 1967 Protocol formally removed the geographic restriction and temporal restriction that related the 1951 Convention to the events occurring during the war in Europe (UNHCR, 2005).

The 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol are still the basis of establishing refugee status and the cornerstone of the international refugee protection system (UNHCR, 2005, 2012). The UNHCR defines a refugee as any person “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself the protection of that country” (UNHCR, 2010, p. 16; UNHCR, 2005). The refugee definition was followed by the 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention that addressed the experience of the wars of liberation and decolonization which occurred in Africa during the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, because both detail that persons fleeing threats resulting from the situation in their country of origin, may also be recognized as refugees (UNHCR, 2005). In the context of mass entry where people seeking international protection arrive at a high rate, like the Karen refugees into Thailand, there is recognition of refugee status for groups. In this situation, those arriving in the group can be deemed refugees by the information to the circumstances in the country of origin, Burma.

By 2011, a total of 148 countries had ratified the 1951 Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol, but Thailand is not one of them (UNHCR, 2013). However, Thailand is a member of the Executive Committee of UNHCR, so they have to abide by some of the stipulations on
refugees and refugee trends (Brees, 2008). Once determined as refugees by the UNHCR, they are entitled to rights and international refugee protection (UNHCR, 2005). Most importantly, refugees have protection of non-refoulement, meaning the safeguard against returning to the country where they may face persecution (UNHCR, 2005).

The established framework of the three durable solutions to refugee problems includes voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement (UNHCR, 2012). Voluntary repatriation is achieved by returning to a home country, but for many refugee populations like the Karen refugees, repatriation is not an option because conflict continues in their country of origin. Repatriation decreased in the 21st Century and reached a twenty year low in 2010. The solution of local integration refers to settling permanently in the country where the refugee has found protection. In 2005, states agreed to proactively work toward local integration, but many host countries, such as Thailand, have continued to resist local integration for refugees. The final durable solution of resettlement occurs when the refugee relocates “to a third country which offers the refugee permanent residence” like the Karen refugees in this study (UNHCR, 2012, p. 12). Third-country resettlement was introduced to the Thai refugee camps in 2005 and has helped decrease the population at the camps. However, there still remains a steady flow of new entrants. Consequently, resettlement assists in the refugee situation, but cannot be the only durable solution due to the number of resettlement places and refugees. In 2011, UNHCR estimated that 805,000 refugees needed third country resettlement, yet only 10 percent were given that opportunity. The United States resettles more refugees than any other country and along with Australia, Canada, and Sweden, made up hosting 94 percent of all refugees resettled in 2010.
The United States ratified the 1967 United Nations Protocol in 1968 and Congress enacted legislation for compliance by passing the Refugee Act of 1980 (Martin & Yankay, 2012). This act established a geographically and politically neutral definition and made a distinction between refugee and asylum status. The United States Admission Program (USRAP) identifies individuals and groups who are of “special humanitarian concern” to the United States and are eligible for refugee resettlement considerations (Martin & Yankay, 2012, p.2). After the refugee is interviewed and security and medical checks are approved, a resettlement agency assists the refugee applicant with housing, employment, and other services upon arrival. Refugees are required to apply for legal permanent status one year after they are admitted to the United States, and can apply for citizenship five years after their arrival date. The leading country of nationality for refugee admission to the United States over the last three years was Burma with over 51,800 arrivals. In 2011, Texas became the leading state for refugee residents admitted in the United States for the first time since the data has been made available. Dallas is the second largest destination for resettled refugees in Texas and the majority of the arrivals from 2009 to 2012 were from Burma (Texas DSHS, 2009-2011).

The Refugee Experience

Refugee studies are multidisciplinary, ranging from sociology, geography, anthropology, psychology, education, healthcare, and policy and grew considerably in the latter part of the twentieth century (Black, 2001). There are interdisciplinary refugee studies journals and a vast amount of refugee studies that focus on various refugee populations and specialist topics. In geographer Richard Black’s article chronicling the history of the field of refugee studies, he explains, “the totality of research in refugee studies still remain, in many respects, less than the sum of its parts,” and may be seen as lacking in theoretical grounding (Black, 2001, p. 58).
However, there is existing earlier theoretical work that enriches both the emerged field of refugee studies and the disciplines from which refugee studies have branched.

Some refugee studies’ experts contend that refugee research needs to be approached in a general and comparative perspective looking at patterns within the refugee experience (Kunz, 1981; Stein, 1981). Egon Kunz developed one of the earliest frameworks on refugees that provides a reference point for theoretical reflection (Black, 2001; Stein 1981). Through his analysis of past refugee movements, his kinetic model (1973) followed by his exile and resettlement theory (1981) aim to lay foundations for a workable theory for refugee motivation and movements. He argues the need for conceptual clarification of a reoccurring refugee phenomenon with identifiable causalities, flight patterns, and outcomes instead of distinctly different historical occurrences and specific refugee groups (1973).

Kunz gives the term “vintages” to each of the distinct refugee groups that leave a country at a particular event or political historical time (p. 137). Kunz classifies two kinetic types of movement for the various vintages, “anticipatory refugee movement” and “acute refugee movement” (1973, p. 131). The anticipatory refugee leaves the country of origin with some preparation and before the absolute deterioration of the political situation and may be mistaken as a voluntary migrant. Anticipatory refugee movements have little pull factor and instead follow more of a “push-permit” model where the refugee leaves and seeks out the first country willing to take him or her in (p. 132). On the other hand, acute refugee movements arise from political or military change that results in mass flights or spurts of group exits. The acute refugee’s purpose is to reach safety in a neighboring country and the emphasis is on escape. Kunz refers to the country of asylum as “midway-to-nowhere” due to the period of waiting with an uncertain future (p. 139). The initial push motive is overwhelming, and following that, there may be pressure in
the country of asylum. The refugee may either fall into a “push-pressure-return” pattern where
the refugee is able to return to the host country, a “push-pressure-stay” pattern where the refugee
receives permission to stay in the country of asylum, or a “push-pressure-plunge” pattern where
the refugee accepts an offer of settlement overseas which Kunz deems more of a plunge than a
pull (p. 134). The three kinetic acute refugee movements described by Kunz echo the three
durable solutions outlined by the UNHCR (2012).

Kunz extends his refugee theory to areas preceding and succeeding flight (1981).
Regardless of whether the movement is anticipatory or an acute refugee situation, the social
relationship with their country of origin falls into three categories: “majority-identified”
refugees, “events-alienated” refugees and “self-alienated” refugees (pp. 42-43). Majority-
identified refugees are firm that their convictions are shared by compatriots and are against the
government while identifying themselves with their country. Events-alienated refugees are those
who are marginalized because of discrimination and events. Although they desire to be identified
with the nation, they know that they have been alienated from their country and rarely wish to
return. The self-alienated refugees are exiles with no wish to be identified with their country of
origin because of philosophies or personal reason. Kunz has determined that these three
categories have two different attitudes toward flight and their homeland. The first attitude is the
reactive-fate group, usually comprised of majority-identified refugees or event-alienated
vintages, and are characteristically the refugees of wars and revolutionary changes. Reactive-fate
groups flee their country reluctantly, but perceive their situation as intolerable. The second
group, conversely, usually produces their own refugee situation because of overriding ideologies
inconsistent with that of their country of origin, and if their actual departure was not caused by
harassment or fear of persecution, then they could be considered voluntary migrants.
After flight, Kunz categorizes six different ideological-national orientations that refugees have which affect their resettlement: “restoration activists,” the “passive hurt,” “integration realists,” “eager assimilationists,” “revolutionary activists,” and “founders of Utopias” (1981, p. 44). In addition to their orientation, the host related factor that has the most influence on resettlement is cultural compatibility of the new country including, but not limited to, language, values, and lifestyles. In addition to cultural compatibility, population policies and social receptiveness also factor into host country resettlement. Kunz uses his conceptual findings and classifications to outline fifteen different postulates for refugees that predict refugee movement.

Building from Kunz’s work, political scientist and refugee studies specialist, Barry Stein (1981) wrote a framework on “the refugee experience” (p. 320). He remarks that refugee problems are neither temporary nor unique and that perspective, results in being prepared for future refugees. He calls for more comprehensive research in order to look at refugees everywhere from a broad perspective and to look at their experience as a recurring phenomenon. Based on previous research and theory, he delineates a nine stage outline of the refugee experience:

- perception of a threat; decision to flee; the period of extreme danger and flight; reaching safety; camp behavior; repatriation, settlement or resettlement, the early and late stages of resettlement, adjustment and acculturation, and residual states and changes in behavior caused by the refugee experience (p.320).

Each stage will not be extrapolated in this review, but it is important to highlight some of the concepts. Stein uses Kunz’s model of kinetic model to talk about the first three stages. He goes on to say that the refugee camps are the most poorly analyzed stage and characterizes the stage by segregation from the host population, a lack of privacy, overcrowding, and a restricted area to
conduct life. He also notes it is in the camp that the “enormity of what has happened” catches up to the refugees and the focus is on what is lost. Refugees then build a dependency, become apathetic and have feelings of incompetence. He describes departure from the camps similar to the three durable solutions, but assigns increasing complexity for the refugee. Stein suggests that returning to the home country is the least difficult for the refugee’s well-being, settling in the country of asylum as second, and then relocating to a third-country as the most challenging.

Stein’s assertions regarding resettlement follows a pattern of adjustment over time that he analyzes in four stages: 1) the initial arrival period of the first few months, 2) the first and second years, 3) after four to five years, and 4) a decade or more later (p. 325). Key points Stein makes from these stages include confronting what has been lost and encountering a new culture, and then recovering what is lost and rebuilding, including moving from their initial placement and changing schools or jobs. Stein writes that after four or five years the refugees have completed the major part of their adjustment and then after ten years a certain stability is achieved. Both Stein and Kunz are theorizing on refugees that Stein calls “traditional” refugees and are refugees that have a high socioeconomic status (Stein, 1981, p.330; Kunz, 1981). Stein mentions the “new” refugees from less-developed countries and explains that their resettlement will be more demanding because of the difference in culture, but he does not indicate that it alters their experience up until resettlement (p. 330).

More recently, anthropologist Michel Agier wrote a book on “the refugee experience today” where he analyzes the universal dimensions of this phenomenon that he claims all who have experienced exodus share (2008). Agier writes that a new population is being formed out of these wars that never come to an end, and that lacking homogeneity the world of refugees is a “political encumbrance” no matter in what country they arrive (p.11). He divides the experience
into three stages: the stage of destruction, then that of confinement, and then the moment of action for the right to life. These three moments constitute the experience of refugees into an existential community. The stage of destruction includes the ravaging of land, houses, and the “irreducible mark” of physical and moral wounds (p.4). The next stage of confinement is the time spent waiting in transit cities or camps, followed by the search for the right to life. Agier calls the refugees of today different from those Kuntz was analyzing who carried an ideological message and sense of honor. Today’s refugees have an “accumulation of loss, rejections and flights” whose only outcome is to be accepted as victims (p. 24). Each refugee, according to Agier, carries a gap created in their life made up of distance and waiting and the experience of being undesirable and placeless.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who has used Agier to help augment his studies, theorizes the life of a refugee is one of “human waste” (2004, p.77). He claims that refugees are stateless people who are stripped of their identity except “that of stateless, placeless, functionless refugees” (p. 76). Inside the camp, the refugees have no useful function with no realistic prospect of incorporating into the country of arrival. Bauman describes that the gates and the armed guards define the refugees’ identities and that “all measures have been taken to assure the permanence of exclusion” (p.78). Bauman contends that the refugees’ prospects of becoming acknowledged members of human society are remote and he writes, “Once a refugee, forever a refugee” (p. 79). He concludes that refugees are refugees everywhere and are indefinite outsiders. Neither Agier’s nor Bauman’s work mentions refugees from Burma even though by the time their books were published, there were over150,000 refugees in camps on the border of Burma and 140,000 refugees in Thailand border camps who had been there for twenty years (TBC, 2004).
“Inescapably Relevant Context”

Essentialism in refugee theory and “the refugee experience” has not gone unchallenged by academics (Ager, 2009; Malkki; 1995). Critics argue that the phrase, “the refugee experience”, alone suggests a homogenized account of the thousands of forced migrants globally throughout time discounting the cultural and political factors that affect their multiple experiences (Ager, 2008; Malkki; 1995). Forced population movements have “extraordinarily diverse historical and political causes” and involve people who end up “in qualitatively different situations and predicaments” (Malkki, 1995, p. 496). Anthropologist Liisa Malkki argues that the term refugee has analytical usefulness not as a “type” of person, but as a “descriptive rubric” that includes a word of “personal histories” (1995, p. 496). She remarks that in many studies of refugees, the numerous issues that underscore the “inescapably relevant context” of refugees are sometimes considered “background information” and are deemed beyond the scope of theory (p.496). Black suggests our goal should be situating studies of particular refugee circumstances “to illuminate these more general theories and thus participate in the development of social science, rather than leading refugee studies into an intellectual cul-de-sac” (2001, p. 66). Taking these concerns into consideration and avoiding such a cul-de-sac, the literature reviewed in this section is exclusively focused on the Karen.

The Karen people reside in southeastern Burma and western Thailand (Mirante, 2009). The term “Karen” is actually an English term taken from the Burmese term “Kayin” (Buadaeng, 2007, p. 76). Exact numbers vary due to the lack of census statistics, but there are thought to be between eight and ten million Karen in Burma, making them the second-largest minority in the country (Thawngghmung, 2008; Mirante, 2009; Buadaeng, 2007). The Karen are chiefly made up of the Pwo Karen and the Sgaw Karen, but the term Karen encompasses around twenty different
subgroups of people. The Karen speak at least twelve mutually unintelligible dialects, the largest being the Pwo and Sgaw, which comprise 85% of the Karen language (Mirante, 2009; South, 2007, Thawngmung, 2008). The Sgaw Karen mostly live in the hill region and are Christian and animists, while the Pwo are Buddhist and live mostly in the lowlands (Thawngmung, 2008). Research reports that anywhere from 15 to 30 percent of the Karen are Christians, 5 to 10 percent animist, while the remaining Karen are Buddhists (Thawngmung, 2008; South, 2007). However, despite the smaller percentage of Christians, they have historically held more Karen leadership roles (Thawngmung, 2008). Less than one-quarter of Burma’s Karen actually live in the Karen state in Burma, while others live in Burma’s Eastern Pego division and the Tenasserim division. Another 400,000 Karen people reside in Thailand, with over a hundred thousand living there as refugees (Mirante, 2009). The Karen people rooted in Thailand are distinctly different than the Karen of Burma and do not share the same history or national consciousness of ethnic identity (Buadaeng, 2007).

**The Karen in Burma**

The term Karen in Burma can be traced back to 1886 when the British conquered Burma (Walton, 2008). Prior to colonization there were scattered groups of Karenic languages living on the margins of the Burmese, Mon, and Shan kingdoms (Buadaeng, 2007). Ethnic classification and boundaries made by the British divided the colony into solidifying different ethnic identities and propagating ethnic tensions in Burma (Walton, 2008). The British military who adopted a policy of recruiting only Chins, Kachins, and Karens in 1925, viewed the process as a way to preserve internal security, while the Burmans, which was the majority ethnic group, understood it as facilitated oppression (Walton, 2008). The clear “divide and rule” policy of the British and the imposition of Karen unity and identity were divisive in practice (South, 2007; Kunstadter,
1979, p. 159). In the eyes of the Burmans, to be identified as Karen was to be “associated with colonial rule and loyalist sentiment” (Cheesman, 2002). Karen soldiers were used to block Burman rebellions and fought with the British soldiers against the Japanese and their Burman allies in World War II (Buadaeng, 2007; Walton, 2008). The privileging of ethnic minorities as soldiers had lasting effects, and the decades of Karen loyal service to the British left “a legacy of hatred, mistrust, and deep conflict” between the Karen and Burmans (Buadaeng, 2007, p. 79). Finally in 1941, the Burmans fought for what they believed would be independence alongside Japan’s invasion, placing them in direct combat with the Karen and other ethnic minorities (Walton, 2008). Only one year later, the Burman nationalists, “disillusioned with their de facto role as a Japanese colony,” cooperated with the British and the Karen to drive the Japanese out by 1945 (Walton, 2008, p. 894). In 1946, the British granted Burma independence with no initiatives of how the Karen and other ethnic minorities would integrate (Walton, 2008).

The Karen proposed that Burma become comprised of autonomous ethnic states and that the Karen state would be under British protection or within the British Commonwealth, but the British did not support the proposal (Buadaeng, 2007). The Panglaon Conference of 1947 included delegates from the Shan, Kachin, and Chin states who agreed to federate with Burma for at least the first ten years, satisfying the British, but the Karen nationalists boycotted the conference (Walton, 2008; Buadaeng, 2007). Days before the conference, existing Karen organizations and Karen nationalists met and formed the Karen National Union (KNU) and did not sign the agreement and continued to ask for self-determination and an independent Karen State (Buadaeng, 2007). Independence Day, January 4, 1948, marked the end of freedom for the Karen people and the beginning of the Karen insurgency and armed conflict between the KNU and the Burmese government that has never ceased (Buadaeng, 2007). Open fighting began in
1949 with the *tatmadaw* (Burmese government) that has ebbed and flowed for over five decades (Buadaeng, 2007). Today, the KNU is still Burma’s largest rebel group functioning with the desire for a Karen nation state (Buadaeng, 2007).

During the military coup in 1962, the tatmadaw launched a war against the people of Burma and the Burma Socialist Program Party seized power with an authoritarian constitution (Aspden, 2008; Silverstein, 1996). Years later, another military junta, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), gained power in 1988 after mass uprising and over 3,000 deaths, and enforcing “government by the gun,” and began the worst oppression in Burmese history (Aspden, 2008; Silverstein, 1996, p. 87). The SLORC used the denial of civil rights and a well-armed militia to implement their Four Point Program, and put National Leagues for Democrats’ leader Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest (Silverstein, 1996). In the 1990s, disagreements between the Karen and the Shan rebel groups resulted in even more fighting (Brees, 2008). In 2004, a ceasefire was reached between the KNU and the tatmadaw, but forced labor, burning of villages, taxation, rape, and killings continued to be reported in the Karen state and the ceasefire unraveled (Ranard & Barron, 2007). There was also a heightened clash of forces between armed ethnic groups and the tatmadaw after the general elections of 2010 (UNHCR, 2012).

**Karen Refugees**

Despite the continued armed struggle, there is still a sizable number of Karen living in government-controlled areas who have learned to tolerate the negative effects of the Burmese government (Thawnghmung, 2008). There are also over an estimated 200,000 Karen who are Internally Displaced People (IDP) in Burma as a result of armed conflict or from being forcibly relocated by the military (Thawnghmung, 2008). Some Karen IDPs have resettled into areas and villages controlled by ceasefire groups, some are still in hiding, and over 17,000 are in IDP...
camps along the Burma border (Thawnghmung, 2008; TBC, 2012). Hundreds of thousands of displaced Karen have left the country to become refugees on the Thai-Burma border (Thawnghmung, 2008). In December 2012, The Border Consortium recorded over 128,783 refugees living in the Thai camps and 78 percent of that population was Karen (TBC, 2012).

The Karen refugees began fleeing to Thailand in the 1980s during the SLORC militaristic reign. In response to the fleeing population from Burma, the first semi-permanent camp on Thailand’s border was established by the Karen in 1984 after the tatmadaw’s intense counterinsurgency and the takeover of an important KNU military base (Oh, 2010; Lang, 2002; Ranard & Barron, 2007). When the approximately nine thousand Karen refugees arrived in February of 1984, the Thai government offered a humanitarian gesture to grant temporary sanctuary with hopes that the fighting would die down and the refugees would return (Lang, 2002). The 1990s brought a greater arrival of Karen, especially in 1995 when the capital of the Karen resistance, Manerplaw, fell to the Burmese army and a large number of educated and mainly Christian Karen political leaders, educators, and citizens fled to the Thai border (Brees, 2008; Ranard & Barron, 2007). During 2010, there was an arrival of 16,000 to 18,000 people at Thai border camps (UNHCR, 2012). Sporadic fighting persists in south-eastern Burma and the number of camp residents continues to grow (UNHCR, 2012).

Since the late 1990s, Thailand has referred to the refugees in their border camps as “displaced persons fleeing fighting” and not “refugees” (Lang, 2002). Furthermore, instead of denoting refugee camps as such, the Thai government calls them “temporary shelters” (Lang, 2002). The terminology used by the Thai government reaffirms the temporary status the Thai wish the Burmese to have, and also conveys their status as illegal entrants under Thai law (Lang, 2002). The Thai government mandates Burmese refugees to remain in the refugee camps for
protection, while those refugees outside camps are considered illegal (Brees, 2008). Most of the illegal Thai immigrants could be considered refugees under the international standards because refugee law is based on the reason of flight and not based on the place of residence within the host country (Brees, 2008). However, under Thai immigration laws, any unregistered asylum-seekers and self-settled refugees outside the camps are categorized as illegal migrants, and are given no support or protection and are at risk of being arrested, detained, and deported (UNHCR, 2013). There are anywhere from 100,000 to 150,000 Karen who are illegally living in Thailand outside the camps in the Bangkok and Mae Sot area alone (Thawnghmung, 2008).

Non-refoulement was a principle put forth in Article 33 of the 1951 Convention and has developed into customary international law “binding even on States who are not party to the 1951 Convention and/or the 1967 Protocol” (UNHCR, 2005, p. 14). Thus, Thailand is encouraged to follow the principal of non-refoulement and continue to protect the Karen and other refugees from Burma in their border camps. Other rights and benefits beyond protection against refoulement also include protections against physical security, access to courts in the country of asylum, basic physical and material needs, freedom of movement, education, and reunification with family members when possible (UNHCR, 2005). Refugees also have obligations to the host State, particularly following the laws of that country (UNHCR, 2005). However, recent reforms in Burma may lead Thailand to pressure for forced repatriation (Gray, 2012).

Part of the reason behind Thailand’s current discourse and actions, including why it has not ratified the 1951 Convention or the 1967 Protocol, is because Thailand considers itself a historically special case due to the long history of migration and providing asylum for refugees. In order to maintain a large margin of discretion to manage these influxes, they refuse to sign the
order (Lang, 2002 Oh, 2010; Brees, 2008). An unprecedented entry of refugees began in 1975 from the Indochinese states of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, while Thailand was involved in the drama of Cold War realignments and rivalries on its border (Lang, 2002). During the first 1975-78 period, 228,000 displaced people arrived with the largest amount being the Hmong people from Laos (Lang, 2002). The problem gained international attention at the Geneva Conference on Indochinese Refugees convened by the United Nations in 1979 (Lang, 2002). Today, twenty percent of migrant workers in Thailand are still from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam (Martin, 2009).

Currently, Thailand hosts around 84,900 registered refugees from Burma and an estimated 62,000 unregistered refugees in the nine camps along the Thai-Burma border (see Appendix A) (UNHCR, 2013). The Karen ethnic group are the primary inhabitants of these camps at close to 80% (TBC, 2012; Oh & Stouwe, 2008). Mae La, near the Thai town Mae Sot, is the oldest and biggest camp wedged into a long narrow strip of land in front of a steep mountain with currently 41,115 inhabitants (Ranard & Barron, 2007; TBC, 2012). Umpien Mai, located south of Mae Sot, is the second largest camp with close to 15,000 refugees (TBS, 2012). The Karen refugees are entirely dependent on aid agencies and The Border Consortium (TBC) provides basic food monthly along with household supplies and building materials annually (Thawnghmung, 2008; TBC; 2012). Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) deal with health, sanitation, and women’s issues (Thawnghmung, 2008).

Since they began arriving in the 1980s, registered refugees from Burma have been confined to nine closed camps (UNHCR, 2013). The refugee camps along the Burmese border in Thailand are considered one of the most Protracted Refugee Situations in the world (Loescher & Milner, 2005). The UNHCR defines a Protracted Refugee Situation as one “in which refugees
find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo” and identifies the major Protracted Refugee Situations in the world by “the crude measure of refugee populations of 25,000 persons or more who have been in exile for five or more years in developing countries” (Loescher & Milner, 2005, p. 13). The decades of restricted confinement have increased their dependence on assistance and created many social and psychological concerns (UNHCR, 2013). The lack of work opportunities for Karen refugees who have lived in the camps for decades causes duress on the refugees (Ranard & Barron, 2007). Life in the refugee camps can often be boring, constrained, and uncertain, but it does offer a temporary safe haven (Thawnghmung, 2008). Research indicates that education is free of charge in the camps and universal enrollment is encouraged (Thawnghmung, 2008). All camps have primary and some have secondary schools where teachers are drawn from within the refugee community and paid modest salaries by NGOs (Ranard & Barron, 2007). The overcrowding, poor facilities, shortage of resources and other camp conditions make education difficult inside the camps (Ranard & Barron, 2007).

After months or years of forced migration and the displaced Karen running for their lives, it is crucial for the refugees who have taken flight to be able to try and belong to a community somewhere (Tangseefa, 2006). The need for community has translated to solidifying the Karen identity. In the refugee camp, it is the image of the common enemy and the narrative of suffering that has united the Karen. (Hortsmann, 2011). There is no motivation or real possibility to become integrated into the Thai larger society, so their ethnic identity remains intact and develops. Warehoused together in a protracted refugee environment (Zeus, 2011), they develop nostalgic notions of Karen home, tradition, and culture (Hortsmann, 2011). The camps serve as sites where Karen nationalist sentiments are preserved and history and culture transmitted.
(Thawngshmung, 2008). The Karen language is used in school allowing the younger generation of Karen to imagine themselves as a part of a “yet imaginary nation-state” (Zeus, 2011, p. 266).

There have been few empirical studies done within the refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border and most are medical studies or educational studies (Oh & Stouwe, 2008; Zeus, 2011; Oh, 2010). One study by Oh and Stouwe (2008) conducted in six of the seven predominantly Karen camps found that because the Karen are the majority of the over 140,000 people at the nine camps, they tend to dominate, often excluding other groups. The Karen have shown themselves to be more inclined to reinforce tradition and promote a certain version of Karen culture rather than embrace diversity, especially through education. Camp education committees are dominated by Christian Sgaw Karen with no participation for other groups. There is an emphasis on the Sgaw Karen as the language of instruction in the refugee camps, creating educational disadvantages and an exclusionary effect for non-Sgaw speakers.

Researchers Su-Ann Oh (2010) and Barbara Zeus (2011) both completed studies on education in the Thai refugee camps. Oh reported on the education system of schools in the camps and the seventy schools in the seven predominantly Karen camps, as well as the eleven schools in the two northern Karenni camps (2010). Oh found that refugees in the camp have limited social and educational opportunities because of the restrictions imposed by the Thai government. She examined the impact of the Thai governmental regulations on the livelihoods of the refugees. Guidelines on structures having to be semi-permanent cause poor infrastructure in schools while exclusion of expatriate staff members causes a limited staff with a high turnover rate. Oh found that students at camp schools were realistic about their limited employment and education opportunities. Due to restriction on employment outside of camp, jobs and further education were limited, so the relevance of schooling in the camps was questioned by the
students. Zeus also found that young people in the refugee camps find themselves with little prospect of furthering their studies and focused on their extremely minimal access to higher educational needs (2011). She claimed that refugee youth face the complexities of adolescence “with few opportunities to gain skill required for a healthy transition to adulthood” (p. 258).

With a monotonous environment and a life of restrictions at the camp, she argues for youth to have rights to higher education in Protracted Refugee Situations.

**Resettled Karen**

The military regime in Burma prohibits the first of the two durable solutions to be considered, while The Royal Thai Government refuses the Burmese refugees to participate legally in their nation, so for decades the Karen have been warehoused in the border camps (Roland & Darlington, 2010). In 2006, UNHCR negotiations were met with favorable outcomes and the limited opportunity for third-country resettlement was expanded, becoming a major initiative.

Recently, there are a small number of emerging research studies done on third-country resettled Karen refugees in the United States and Australia. One such study is by researchers Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny (2011) based on ethnographic research and interviews with adult Karen refugees in the Mae La camp and after resettlement in the United States. Their research found that the main impetus to resettle was to avoid spending the rest of their lives in the refugee camps. Resettlement to the United States was the quickest way to reach that goal, and they made the decision for that reason, not because they necessarily desired to live there. The second most common reason for leaving the camps to the United States was because family members had resettled to the United States already. For Karen refugees with children, the prospect of
providing them with an education in the United States was also considered motivation for resettlement.

Upon moving to the United States, Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny (2011) described Karen refugees resettled in cramped apartments of disrepair in a north-eastern city of “Westville” with 100,000 residents. In the study, Karen resettled refugees experienced substantial difficulties in the initial stages of their resettlement, living in meager accommodations while struggling to retain their traditional values. The school-aged Karen refugees kept to themselves and very few kept up with their education and soon quit with no formal education credentials entering factory jobs instead. The study’s main findings focus on two aspects that characterize the Karen resettlement in the United States. The first feature of Karen refugee resettlement is secondary migration. Within 18 months of the refugee arrival to the north eastern city, 25 out of 69 resettled Karen had left for other cities or other states and after three years, 64% of them had left. Secondary migration can be problematic because their new location may be ill-prepared to deal with their arrival, and the benefits they are entitled to as refugees do not follow them to where they move. The second important finding of the study featured relations with church and state. The Karen refugees were welcomed into several churches in the city and the Christian community played a large role in the Karen refugee resettlement. The support fostered integration with Americans, but refugees felt obligated to attend church services and tension was caused with refugee resettlement agencies as particular churches became especially involved. Overall, the researchers conclude that the Karen had made significant progress and did not become dependent on public assistance; however they did not stay at initial resettlement sites, and settlement patterns coalesced on pre-existing ethnic networks (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011).
Another recent study was done to explore Karen refugee women’s experiences who resettled to Australia (Watkins, Razee, & Richters, 2012). The study, drawn from ethnographic observations and interviews in Australia from 2009 to 2011, suggested that general literacy was a barrier for the Karen women and difficulty with the English language was the principal problem they faced. Communication difficulties were linked to feelings of stress and helplessness. The Australian government already recognized English ability as a critical factor and provided language instruction through a government program. The researchers cemented language proficiency as an essential resettlement component and found that a sensitivity to the refugees’ background, culture, and gender was needed in this education. The Karen women valued education and wanted to contribute and “give back” to their Australian community (p. 138). The researchers argue for training to sensitize educators to the complex issues of refugee resettlement and develop strategies for enhanced communication.

One research team conducted a study of twenty-one adult Karen refugees resettled in a large metropolitan city in southwestern United States regarding their psychosocial needs (Mitschke et al., 2011). The researchers found Karen refugees relied on other Karen people for help and community support and they formed an informal safety net for arriving refugees. The findings also indicated a number of Karen refugees expressed feelings of disillusionment from their expectations of how their lives would be compared to the reality of life in their resettled city, and some even mentioned the desire to go back to life in the refugee camp. Several Karen families discussed the lack of financial resources, especially for food, and donations of commodities were seen as indispensable. They expressed the desire for a “better life” and to care for themselves without government assistance (p. 496). Other primary issues raised were lack of job opportunities as well as accessibility to affordable healthcare as ongoing concerns for the
participants. The language barrier was identified as the most pervasive impediment to operate in the United States and the participants felt confused, lost, and frustrated. Many Karen refugees stressed the importance of education for their children and insisted it was their primary reason for coming to the United States. The emphasis placed on education shows that the Karen community is externally motivated and many sacrifices have been made for their children to benefit from the public schools’ system. Lastly, the study found that there were major concerns regarding violence in the city. Not only clashes amongst other ethnic groups in apartment complexes were discussed, but also break-ins and assaults. The researchers found the Karen refugees remained motivated to succeed and were resilient through the challenges that resettlement had brought.

After resettlement, the continuation of Karen nationalism upon resettlement is not uncommon amongst integrated resettled Karen who work to raise public awareness of Karen culture and Burmese repression (Thawnghmung, 2008). Notions of a homogeneous pan-Karen identity are fostered in the growing diaspora among refugee and exile communities, especially in North America, New Zealand, Australia, and on the internet (South, 2007). A global communication network has been formed to share information about the Karen and educate others about Karen history (Thawnghmung, 2008). Driven by protecting a sense of self and community in a distant land, resettlement communities are often the source of strident Karen ethnic identity rhetoric (South, 2007). One researcher who completed a folklore study with Karen refugees both in Thai camps and resettled Karen refugees in New York State developed a “profound respect for the Karen’s determination to maintain their sense of cultural and ethnic distinctiveness” (MacLachlan, 2006, p. 26). The resettled Karen subjects in New York continued to perform their national identity through traditional dance during community events because it
helped them to construct a notion of a larger togetherness and a unified Karen nation (MacLachlan, 2006).

Karen Identity

A reoccurring element in the findings of empirical studies researching Karen refugees and the most distinguishing feature that attracts anthropological and sociological studies about the Karen people is their strong sense of ethnic identity (Thawnghmang, 2008; Ranard & Barron, 2007). Taken as a whole, the Karen are not bound by characteristics typically used to designate an ethnic group because there are considerable differences of language, religion, ideology, and region between different Karen sub-groups (South, 2007; Cheesman, 2002). Yet, fieldwork amid Karen in Burma, and among refugees in Thailand and beyond, indicates that the majority of people do identify with a distinct Karen identity (South, 2007).

According to Karen researchers, the formation of the Karen label is based on missionary observations and a “politically expedient colonial classification” (South, 2007, p. 56). When the British colonized, they solidified ethnic identity and propagated ethnic tensions in Burma as previously mentioned (Walton, 2008). During British colonization, missionaries from Britain and America arrived to convert the Burmese to Christianity, which played a substantial role in solidifying early Karen identity (Keyes, 1979; Cheesman, 2002). The Karen’s high conversion rate attracted missionaries, who built churches and schools for the Karen people (Buadaeng, 2007). The missionaries introduced a new religion in the construction of Karen, and Christianity not only offered a new cultural faith, but also helped break through previous social constraints (Keyes, 1979). Myths transformed by missionaries became historical accounts, including the Karen migration from Babylon, and were endorsed by British colonial government (Buadaeng, 2006). Karen text was developed in the mid-nineteenth century by American Baptist
missionaries and the Karen National Association (KNA) was founded in order to explore their history and define themselves as a nation (Keyes, 1979; Buadaeng, 2007). Indeed, it is the Christian Karen elite who have held the most privileges and sought to impose a homogenous idea of “Karenness” on the diverse society, and Christian organizations are still driving forces in the reproduction of Karen identity today (Cheesman, 2002; South, 2007, p. 55; Horstmann, 2011). Even though the Karen’s special social place in Burma was temporary and ended after colonial rule, the missionaries’ efforts can be seen as a significant contributor to Karen identity, and partly the cause of the Karen’s rebellion after Burma’s independence (Keyes, 1979).

Based on a study of colonial-era authors, historical transcripts, and Karen texts, researcher Nick Cheesman narrows down the three significant concepts of the constructed Karen identity in Burma as oppressed, uneducated, and virtuous (Cheesman, 2002). Karen texts establish a long-term narrative of oppression and trace their historical oppression back to the migrations from Babylon, to Central Asia, to Burma. The discourse of persecution continues as the atrocities against the Karen and wars of “genocidal intent” by the Burmans during the latter eighteenth century are documented. Colonizers helped spread the message of oppression as they produced ethnocentric writings in favor of “the loyal Karens.” Throughout the conflict following independence and tragic human rights’ situations, Cheesman argues that journalists and aid workers currently continue to perpetuate the oppressed model and prolong the ethnic-nationalist struggle.

Working in tandem with oppression, the second qualifier of Karen identity, according to Cheesman’s comprehensive analysis, is that they are uneducated, but searching for education (2002). This traces back to a mythologized story of a “golden book” that had invaluable knowledge and was lost, and the Karen have suffered as a result. Karen texts maintain that the
Karen were previously sophisticated, educated people and ancient scripts were said to have been destroyed by the Mon and the Burmans. Thus, the Christian missionaries played an integral role of literacy in the goal to regain knowledge. Karen place a high value on education dating back to the mid 1800s when Christian missionaries set up schools (Ranard & Barron, 2007). The narrative of losing their education explains why they were oppressed, and obtaining education is a way to return them to their former urbane position. The discourse on education emphasizes a call for progress through a recorded literature and history, and youth are still urged to work towards educating their people (Cheesman, 2002).

Lastly, the Karen, made worthy by European attention and Christian salvation during colonization, ascribed themselves with a moral supremacy. Cheesman’s third characteristic of Karen identity as “the virtuous” means that their national identity is superior and un tarnished by neighbors or other groups. The Karen have been historically noted as clannish and practicing endogamy and have politically advocated to remain apart. Their moral superiority impels identity assimilation and affirms their right to an independent territory for which the Karen are still fighting.

A study recently completed by researchers Roland and Darlington (2010) sought to list the characteristics of displaced Christian Karen through research conducted with participants at Mae La and with resettled participants in Australia. Their findings concluded that the aspects of Christian Karen identity include education, faith, community, and nationalism (Roland and Darlington, 2010). Education was mentioned as the primary reason given to migrate, and all of the participants took advantage of the educational opportunities that Australia offered. The study only focused on Christian Karen and faith was recorded as being a major aspect of their identity. Findings showed that church was “central to their life” in Australia and helped them cope with
change (p. 23). Sharing and the concept of a Karen community was the third characteristic outlined. Their findings showed that Karen share resources and put aside individual goals for the collective need of the community as well as the desire to preserve Karen culture. The study listed nationalism separately from Karen community as the final aspect of Christian Karen identity. As other studies had shown, the importance of maintaining Karen nationalism was stressed in order to continue their sense of duty to their homeland and hope for a free Karen nation.

**Emerging Adulthood**

Most conventional studies have made the abuse of human rights and Karen identity solely representative of the Karen, but changes in the Karen experience with time and age have been left unexplored (Thawnghmung, 2008). Focusing on a specific age group to study in a qualitative investigation is important because the nature and types of conflict in Burma have transformed over six decades of civil war and have thus been experienced differently by various generations of Karen in Burma (Thawnghmung, 2008). Karen lifestyle, encounters, and survival strategies have varied (Thawnghmung, 2008). Many Karen refugees were born in refugee camps and have lived their entire lives there, not experiencing armed conflict or the Four Point Plan (Thawnghmung, 2008). They are entirely dependent on basic needs and have little knowledge “beyond the barbed wire surrounding them” (Zeus, 2011). Thus, the Burmese refugee situation and the restriction of movement has created a “deadlock situation” that does not allow for self-control and self-development (Oh & Stouwe, 2008, p. 590). Thai refugee camps subject youth in their formative years to question their own identity and self (Zeus, 2011).

The idea of development stages and critical periods of growth can be attributed to psychologist Erik Erikson (1950) and his lifespan theory (Arnett & Tanner, 2011). Erikson theorized that the human personality develops according to critical steps (Erikson, 1993). He
outlined a human life cycle and distinguished a normative sequence of eight psychosocial stages that give an understanding of how we interpret who we are at different times in our lives. The population of Karen refugees that I have chosen to work with are participants from ages 18-25 years old. Following Erikson’s model, they have experienced their childhood and their adolescence and are now in their young adulthood.

Jeffrey Arnett acknowledges Erikson’s theory of human development; however, he contests that the life span described no longer reflects “the real-life experience of people today” (Arnett, Hendry, Kloep, & Tanner, 2011). Arnett gives theoretical grounding for a distinct classification of a life stage that characterizes the experiences of 18-29 year olds, titled emerging adulthood (Tanner & Arnett, 2011; Arnett, 2004). Arnett argues that this period of life is a historically recent one that requires the new term “emerging adulthood” because it is not simply a time of adolescence, nor one of young adulthood as described by Erikson (Arnett, 2004; Erikson, 1993). The years from the late teens through the twenties are years of profound change and importance in industrialized countries characterized by change and exploration of possible life directions (Arnett, 2002; Arnett 2004). For today’s youth in America, that the Karen are now a part of, “the road to adulthood is a long one” (Arnett, 2004, p. 3).

To be a young American today means experiencing excitement and uncertainty along with new freedoms and new fears (Arnett, 2004), and these freedoms and fears could be magnified for Karen refugees after living in a Protracted Refugee Situation. After having limited options in the camp, the emerging adult refugees will be exposed to an even wider scope of possible activities (Arnett, 2002). Created partly by the steep rise in marriage and parenthood in the past half century, emerging adulthood is also a consequence of less restrictions pertaining to gender, economics, and higher education (Arnett, 2004). Society grants emerging adults
responsibilities gradually and postpones historical transitions to adulthood like marriage, children, and a home (Arnett, 2004). Thus, emerging adulthood is usually a time of various possibilities in different paths, explored worldviews and “unprecedented freedom” (Arnett, 2002; Arnett 2004, p. 7).

According to Arnett, there are five essential qualities of emerging adulthood. First of all, emerging adulthood is the age of identity exploration (Arnett, 2004). Emerging adults are more independent from their parents and most have left home, but they have yet to enter stable adult life commitments like marriage or long-term jobs (Arnett, 2004). The interval emerging adulthood period is the best moment for self-exploration in a variety of areas, especially love and work. Erik Erikson associated the identity versus role crisis in adolescence. However, he also mentioned a “prolonged adolescence” in young people of industrialized societies (Arnett, 2004, p. 8). Arnett argues that this prolonged period applies to many more young people than when Erikson wrote decades ago. Mainly focused on adolescence, identity research shows that identity achievement has rarely been reached by the end of high school and continues through the twenties. The identity explorations during emerging adulthood are for play and to gain a broad range of life experiences before becoming more focused and settled down.

Along with identity exploration, emerging adulthood has also been found to be the age of instability in industrial countries. Emerging adults feel that they need a “Plan” that will take them from adolescence to adult life, but the Plan during their explorations will demand many revisions (Arnett, 2004, p. 10). With each revision of the Plan, they learn about themselves but not without difficulty and disruption. Instability comes from not having a stable place of residence, rarely knowing where they will live from one year to the next beginning at the age of 18 (Arnett, 2004). For half of emerging adults, one of their moves from 18 to 25 will be returning home to live with
their parents. Moving around and making revisions to the Plan makes emerging adulthood a notably unstable time.

Most young people in America leave home at age 18 or 19 and with that, emerging adults become much more self-focused. In fact, Arnett contends that the third essential quality of emerging adulthood is the most self-focused age of life (Arnett, 2004). The focus on themselves allows them to develop skills and build an adult foundation of their adult life. The goal of emerging adulthood self-focus is to gain self-sufficiency to be ready for more permanent commitments.

While focusing on the self, emerging adulthood is also a period of feeling in-between. The emerging adult neither has the restrictions of adolescence nor the responsibilities of adulthood. The in-between is the feeling that they are on the way to adulthood, but are not there yet. In a variety of regions and ethnic groups in the United States, Arnett (2004) finds three criteria for succeeding as an adult: accepting responsibility, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent. Emerging adults are in the process of gradually developing these three qualities.

Lastly, emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities (Arnett, 2004). Many futures are open to emerging adults and it is an age of hope. Typically, emerging adults have left their families, but are “not yet committed to a new network of relationships and obligations” (Arnett, 2004, p. 16). While emerging adults take family influences with them, it is the time that they can make independent decisions about how they wish to live and transform themselves into who they want to be. Arnett asserts that this age of possibilities is most important to those who grew up in difficult conditions like a troubled family environment.
Arnett clarifies that emerging adulthood it is not a universal period, but a period that exists only in some cultures and only quite recently (Arnett, 2002; Arnett, 2004). Emerging adulthood exists mainly in industrialized countries of the West, along with some postindustrial Asian countries (Arnett, 2004). However, one research study on emerging adults concluded that there are considerable variations of emerging adulthood even in modern Western societies based on assorted elements such as self-agency, health, and economic and social changes (Hendry & Kloep, 2010). Thus, the period may not have been one the Karen refugees would have experienced to the same extent, but they have resettled in the United States during their emerging adult years and it is through this perspective that they share their experience.

Collectively, the core themes work to form a contextual puzzle with which to analyze the emerging adult Karen refugee experience. The theoretical underpinnings of Kunz (1976; 1981), Stein (1981), Bauman (2004), and Agier (2008) present a general understanding of the universal refuge experience. The historical significance of the Karen in Burma and the formation of a national identity offers insight into the Karen people. Previous empirical studies conducted on the Karen provide a guideline for recent findings on Karen refugees. Meanwhile, Arnett’s (2004) emerging adult life stage provides a standardized development stage that has distinct characteristics. Each thematic section reviewed presents a piece which is necessary to understand the essentialized experience of refugees, the particular socio-historical context of the Karen, and the age group that this study takes as its focus.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study is derived from the primary objectives of the study: to convey and comprehend the experience of the Karen refugee, and to understand the phenomenon through the shared perspective of a specific period during the Karen refugees’ life span. A qualitative research approach is able to obtain thorough knowledge of the Karen refugee population’s experience and achieve the goal to “hear silenced voices” as Creswell explains (2007, p.40). Through qualitative inquiry, participants will be able to share their stories, and to seek a complex and profound understanding of the issue (Creswell, 2007).

Specifically, a phenomenological method directs the qualitative process as it remains committed to conveying the true meaning of the Karen refugee’s lived experiences and keeping their thick descriptions central to the study (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology is an approach based on the shared meaning of persons and determines the features of the phenomenon to arrive at an understanding of the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology ideally allows for a depiction of not only what the Karen refugees experienced, but how they experienced it (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). This chapter first defines the study’s phenomenological design and brackets the researcher’s perspective in the epoche. The site selection, participants, data collection, analysis procedures, and methodological limitations of the study are also elucidated.

Phenomenological Framework

According to Creswell (2007), the phenomenological method should be an effective approach in examining the emerging adult Karen refugees because of the necessity to understand the participants’ common refugee experience. Creswell explains that it is vital to obtain a deeper
understanding of the shared journey of a group of individuals in order to develop practices or at
the very least, create an awareness that may benefit the population (Creswell, 2007).

Used as early as 1765, the technical meaning of phenomenology was defined by Hegel as
“the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one’s immediate awareness
and experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). It is the process of stripping down the phenomenal
consciousness and finding an absolute knowledge (Moustakas, 1994).

There are primarily two different approaches to phenomenology and this study utilizes
transcendental (or psychological) phenomenological method that was developed by Clark E.
Moustakas (Creswell, 2007). Instead of the interpretive process that is found in hermeneutic
phenomenology, Moustakas’s transcendental phenomenology was chosen for this study because
it focuses “less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on a description of the
experiences of participants” with commitment to the true lived experience of the Karen refugees
as possible, without taking on the researcher as mediator role that is present in hermeneutics
(Creswell, 2007, p. 59).

Moustakas credits philosopher Edmund Husserl (1913) as the pioneer of phenomenology
and describes his ideas on transcendental phenomenology as entering “new realms of philosophy
and science” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 25). Husserl indeed sought to find a new science, covering the
field of experience (Husserl, 1969). Transcendental experience does not rely on a “speculative
synthesis”, but rather a phenomenological reduction to an overall essence (p. 11). Unconcerned
with empirical facts, Husserl stresses the pure meaning of experience and the “infinitude of
knowledge” prior to deduction (p.12). The emphasis of meaning in the transcendental
phenomenological design ideally allows for the reduction of the Karen refugees’ common
experience into the essence of their journey from their pure perspective (Creswell, 2007).
Moustakas believes phenomena as the basis for knowledge and echoes Husserl’s belief that any phenomenon is a starting point for investigation (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology emphasizes “a science of pure possibilities” that when carried out makes possible “the science of actualities” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 28). Thus, rather than analyses or interpretation, phenomenology is committed to descriptions of experiences. Moustakas asserts the importance of description,

Descriptions retain, as close as possible, the original texture of things, their phenomenal qualities and material properties. Descriptions keep a phenomenon alive, illuminate its presence, accentuate its underlying meanings, enable the phenomenon to linger, retain its spirit, as near to its actual nature as possible. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59).

With an emphasis on description, the core process in transcendental phenomenology that facilitates derivation of knowledge is the Epoche, Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction, and Imaginative Variation. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). Transcendental phenomenology includes identifying the phenomenon to study, bracketing out one’s experiences in the epoche, and collecting data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The researcher analyzes the data by reducing it to significant statements and combining those statements into themes (Creswell, 2007). The researcher must develop a textural description and a structural description of their experiences developing the overall essence of the experience (Creswell, 2007).

**Epoche**

Moustakas incorporates Husserl’s concept of epoche, or bracketing, which requires the researcher to set aside preconceived knowledge and take on a new perspective toward the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Epoche is a Greek word meaning “to refrain from judgment, to
abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things” (Moustakas, 1994, p.33). This is the first step in the transcendental phenomenological process. It is in the Epoche, that the “everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and phenomena are revisited, freshly naively, in a wide open sense, from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego.” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). Moustakas sees the step as a preparation for deriving new knowledge but also as an experience in itself, a process of setting aside prejudices and predispositions to allow events and people to form a fresh consciousness, as if for the first time (Moustakas, 1994).

According to Moustakas, we must be “present to ourselves and to things in the world, that we recognize that self and world are inseparable components of meanings” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 28). I recognize myself as a thirty-two year old white woman in Northwest Ohio who is dedicated to making people more aware of the refugee population that has resettled in the United States, including the Karen. I have lived in several different states and also abroad, but most of my life I have spent in Texas. To truly eliminate my preconceived ideas about Karen refugees, I have to go back over five years ago when I had never heard of the Karen people and knew nothing about the country of Burma. Although I cannot really go back to September 2007 and erase the experiences and learning I received since then, I can trace and describe my preconceived ideas in order to conscientiously evaluate and attempt to exclude the references from which the knowledge came, so that I can be as objective and unbiased as possible in the interpretation of the experiences presented in this study (Moustakas, 1994).

When I volunteered to mentor a refugee family through a refugee resettlement agency in Dallas, the only bit of information I received prior to meeting them was that they were a seven member family coming from Burma. It was through weekly visits that I learned that they had
actually travelled here from refugee camps in Thailand and had spent much of their lives there, or in the case of the two youngest, their entire lives. I also quickly realized that they did not speak Burmese, but rather the Karen language. Over the past five years, I have remained a part of their lives and helped them when I could. I didn’t know the history of the Karen ethnic group in Burma, but I knew that the family had been persecuted and that they fled to Thailand for protection. The only prior knowledge I had of Burma was the very little I knew about the Burmese woman, Aung San Suu Kyi, locked up in house arrest. I did not know any details about Burma nor the people of Burma, but I did know the family that I mentored did not call themselves Burmese and instead called themselves Karen with pride. Often times when I asked about different food, holidays, or cultural ways of life, they would explain simply with one word “Karen.”

Over the years, my interactions with the family certainly built a foundational knowledge or at least angle from which I understood the Karen people. I concluded that their past was a perilous one, their time in the refugee camp difficult and limiting, and their resettlement to the United States from the refugee camps brought an enormity of adjustment. I knew that understanding what was going on around them was hard and confusing. I knew they came here for a better life, which might have seemed questionable when I had to help after their father was severely injured when beaten by a gun in a mugging. While assisting the children with their schoolwork, I formed the opinion that the education in the refugee camps was lacking and realized that the children in the family had a weak educational foundation beyond English.

My understanding of the Karen refugee experience was based on what I had seen of the family I had worked with face to face in Dallas. I was not privileged to an observation of their life at the refugee camps, so my construction of knowledge of refugee camps was the very few
times the family mentioned it and media’s limited coverage of refugee camps around the world. Basically, I understood them to be very dire and unhealthy situations. Last year, I had completed some research specifically on the Burmese refugee camps in Thailand and also on illegal Thai migrants, but that was mainly on educational aspects. I had also previously researched Karen nationalism and had an introductory understanding of the importance of Karen identity.

Before conducting academic research for this study, I certainly had a direction put in my mind that I needed to acknowledge in giving myself a chance to return to an original vantage point (Moustakas, 1994). I had formed an empathetic and distressed view of the Karen experience and I recognized that I needed to set aside these prejudgments in order to open myself up to be an unbiased and receptive phenomenological researcher. In reviewing the literature, I attempted to discard the sympathetic lens during my readings. I searched to find the history and the previous research prepared on the Karen people bringing “an unfettered stance” to the study (p. 96).

Upon completion of prior research, my knowledge of the refugee experience and the Karen people expanded. With this expansion of information, my understanding of their history manifested a sympathetic understanding of their plight. I interpreted colonization and missionary influences constructed a particular identity also developed a sense of mistrust amongst Burmans and possibly an idea of exceptionalism within the Karen people that was part of the cause of their initial insurgency. I acknowledged my bias that colonization had set the Karen up for failure and bracketed the thought away from the research, so that the true vantage that the participants understood could be represented. Throughout the interview process I continued to try and keep my research unprejudiced. This was important because three of the participants in the study were part of the family who were the foundation of what I had previously known before researching
the Karen refugees. I maintained a journal throughout the research and made entries before and after each interview. This helped to remain aware of preceding connections I had to the participants and the subject matter, or to state any preformed thoughts so that I could acknowledge and address them, and enter the interviews with clear vantage point.

Moustakas states that “In a phenomenological investigation the researcher has a personal interest in whatever she or he seeks to know; the researcher is intimately connected with the phenomenon.” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59). That is true for me with this work. I feel connected to Karen people and am loyal to bring awareness to their experience, but I want to make sure it is truly their voice and not my interpretation of their journey. The epoche helps to enter a pure place, so that as a researcher, I can ascertain trustworthiness and embrace what the participants’ life experiences truly offer. Now that the epoche has challenged me to “create new ideas, new feelings, new awareness, and understandings” (p. 86), I can approach the next step of the transcendental phenomenological reduction process open to new knowledge.

**Site Selection**

In order to select a site for phenomenological studies, the researcher must find a “criterion” sample where individuals have all experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, p. 120). Although in a phenomenological study it is not necessary for all participants to be located at a single site, the more diverse the individuals are in a phenomenology, the more difficult it is for the researcher to establish the common experience and overall essence. Thus, I chose to keep the study confined to one city where the refugees had been resettled, Dallas, Texas. This site was purposefully selected primarily because of the connections I already had to that refugee community. Over the last two years, more refugees were settled in Texas than in any other state (ORR, 2011-2012). Dallas county has three large resettlement agencies and is the second largest
destination in state for refugee resettlement and at least 7,369 refugees have arrived in Dallas from 2009-2012 (Minora, 2012; Texas DSHS, 2009-2011). In addition to first arrivals, Dallas county is the largest magnet in the state for second migration refugees (Texas DSHS, 2010-2011). Burmese refugees have been the largest resettled group in Texas and in 2011 the largest percent of the Burmese refugees went to Dallas county (Texas DSHS, 2011). At one elementary school, Burmese students make up one sixth of the entire student population (Weiss, 2012). The Karen have settled into three major apartment complexes in Dallas county, two in central Dallas and one in east Dallas near Garland, Texas. Purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research, meaning the site and individuals are selected for study because they can inform the understanding of the question (Creswell, 2007).

Participants

After receiving approval from the Human Subjects Review Board in the beginning of June 2012, from Bowling Green State University (see Appendix B), I started recruiting participants for the study in Dallas, Texas. According to Creswell, it “is essential that all participants have experience of the phenomenon being studied” and one typical issue of phenomenological studies is actually finding a number of participants who have experienced the same phenomenon (2007, p. 128). In order to find these individuals, I employed a deliberate criterion snowball sampling recruitment method for the phenomenological study. Snowball sampling identifies cases of interest from people who know other cases of interest, while criterion makes sure all cases meet the criterion for the study and ensures quality assurance for the phenomenological study. I started with the members of the Karen family that I met in 2007. After explaining the study, the three family members who met the criterion agreed to participate. I also gave the family flyers explaining the study so they could share the opportunity to
participate in the study with their friends (see Appendix C). They were able to recruit four individuals willing to participate in the study, although later one declined the opportunity to participate. Meanwhile, my summer internship was at a refugee resettlement agency where I met a young man who fit the criterion of the study and who agreed to participate. Also through my internship, I was reconnected to a Karen whom I had previously met, and after giving him the criteria of participants I was looking for, he gave me the contact information for another individual who agreed to participate. I gave each participant a small token of thanks in order to show appreciation for their time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Birthplace</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Refugee Camp</th>
<th>Age when Resettled</th>
<th>Years in U.S.</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Var Lee</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Burma</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Mae La</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Factory worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamal</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Mae La</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Factory worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gre Bin</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Mae La</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Factory worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Say</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Burma</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Mae La</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Factory worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Mae La</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Factory worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Win Win</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Umpiem</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>College student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mint Aye</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Burma</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Umpiem</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Factory worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poe Dah Bue</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Burma</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Umpiem</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>High school student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The number of participants for phenomenological studies varies but Creswell recommends at least five people (2007). This particular study includes eight participants who are listed and briefly described in Table 1. This table describes each participant’s self-selected pseudonym, sex, age, birthplace, prior refugee camp experience, the age they arrived in the United States, the years they have lived in the United States, and their current occupation. These demographics assist in establishing an individual contextual depiction of their shared lived experience.

**Data Collection**

The data collection process began in June 2012, and data analysis and member checks were completed in February 2013. Conducted in Dallas, the fieldwork portion of this research project consisted of in-depth interviews, which is the ideal method of data collection in phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). The initial interviews were conducted in the summer of 2012, and follow-up interviews took place in the fall of 2012.

**Initial Interviews**

After the consent form was read and any questions about the study were answered (see Appendix D), each participant who had consented to partake in the study was involved in a semi-structured, one-on-one, audio recorded interview. The eight interviews lasted between 40-90 minutes and varied in location based upon the participants’ selection. I encouraged the participants to choose the location themselves and consider where they would feel most comfortable. Three of the interviews were located at a coffee shop nearby their apartment, three selected the community public library, one chose a book store café near his home, and one chose to interview at a neighborhood Karen market where we sat in the store’s back office.
Interviews began with demographic questions to ease the participants into the interview process and to help build their confidence in their ability to speak English. The interviews were semi-structured and explanations and conversations were promoted and questions varied in order as the participants replied. Each interview included the two primary questions recommended for phenomenological studies: “What have you experienced in term of the phenomenon?” and “What influenced and affected your experience of the phenomenon?” (Creswell, 2007, p.61). The participants were encouraged to respond honestly, and open-ended questions and comments were used to attempt to evoke a comprehensive and real account of the participant’s experience (Moustakas, 1994).

The two broad questions that must be asked in a transcendental phenomenological study query the participants on what has been experienced in terms of the phenomenon and what has influenced the experience of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). These questions were asked as well as other questions leading to a “textual description” of the experience (p. 61). Although there were twenty five questions listed (see Appendix E), the interview often organically led to new questions.

Follow Up Questions

Before horizontalizing the data, I did some preliminary analysis in order to form initial findings that would lead me to follow up questions with my participants so that I could get an even deeper understanding of the shared experience. Phenomenological studies include close participant involvement, often consisting of multiple interviews and member checking (Creswell, 2007). All eight participants agreed to a second 30-60 minute interview that was conducted over the telephone three to four months after the initial interview. The follow-up was semi-structured
and included five open-ended questions that allowed for reflection and description from the participants if they were willing to give it.

**Data Analysis**

Organization of the data began when audio files from each of the interviews were transcribed and the material was studied for emerging themes (Moustakas, 1994). Follow-up interviews were again conducted with all of the participants based on an initial coding of emerging themes and on findings in order to offer further explanations and expand on descriptions that needed clarification.

Once follow-up interviews were conducted, the audio files were transcribed. Both the primary interviews and the follow up interviews were then analyzed according to a modification of method suggested by van Kaam (1959, 1996), and presented by Moustakas (1994). The method was chosen because it provides a structured analysis including guiding questions for reduction and relevancy (Moustakas, 1994). Using the complete transcription of each participant, every expression relevant to the experience was listed. This step is called horizonalization. Horizonalizing the data is to regard “every horizon or statement relevant to the topic and question as having equal value” (p. 118).

The next step was to determine the invariant constituents through reduction and elimination by asking, “Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it?” and “Is it possible to abstract and label it?” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). Statements were discarded that did not meet the requirements, as well as overlapping expressions, leaving “horizons” that were the invariant constituents of the experience (p. 121). From the horizonalized statements, the “meaning or meaning units” were listed and clustered into the four core themes (p. 118). Continuing to follow van Kaam’s
modified analysis model, the core themes went through a credibility check during which each
invariant constituent and accompanying themes were reviewed by asking, “Are they expressed
explicitly in the complete transcription?” and “Are they compatible if not explicitly expressed?”
(Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). Each theme was deemed explicit and compatible to the participants’
experience.

After the invariant constituents and themes were validated, a “structural description” of
the experience was constructed based on the vantage points and the imaginative variation of the
“dynamics that evoked the textural qualities” (p. 181). The structural qualities were developed
into four distinct structural themes. Integrating the invariant constituent themes and the
imaginative variation themes, individual descriptions of the experience were then constructed
which included verbatim examples from the interview. Synthesized from the individual
descriptions and the textural-structural descriptions, a composite description of the experience
was developed. The composite description characterized the group as a shared whole and
represents the overall essence giving meaning to the phenomenon of the emerging adult Karen
refugee experience (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2007).

**Trustworthiness**

The use of the terms *reliability* and *validity* in qualitative research are less appropriate
than for quantitative studies; instead Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify the goal of qualitative
research to be one of “trustworthiness” (Merrick, 1999, p.27). Creswell explains “validation” in
qualitative research as an attempt to assess the “accuracy” of the findings described by the
participants (Creswell, 2007, p. 206). Strategies employed in order to achieve such accuracy and
trustworthiness included developing a closeness to the participants and a prolonged engagement
during interviews to build trust. The transcendental phenomenological process of epoche helped
to clarify any bias from the onset of the study, while acknowledgement of my assumptions and past experiences helped to separate them from the participants’ input and the ultimate shared essence. I remained reflexive in order to continue the quality of accuracy by keeping a journal throughout the study. The use of horizontalization and the importance given to every statement during analysis, including detailed descriptions from each participant, also added value to the accuracy of the study.

In addition to these strategies to increase the credibility, I engaged in peer review as I went through the research process (Merrick, 1999; Creswell, 2007). Two members of my thesis committee helped to keep me dedicated to my methodology and to my participants’ true voices. To further ensure the accuracy of the participants’ voices, member checks were conducted. As suggested by Creswell, transcripts of the interviews, or the raw data, was not used during member checks, instead my preliminary analyses, including clusters of meanings, were reviewed during a focus group. The focus group included six of the participants who agreed to meet in January 2013. In order for active participation and for member checking, each of the six was given his or her own significant statements and the list of clustered themes. I briefly went over the data analysis process and the participants took time to look through their significant statements and were asked to notify me if any part of their experience was missing. All those who were present confirmed their statements with minor corrections of spelling. Then, I explained the textural and structural themes that emerged from the study and we discussed if it was a fair reduction of their experience. All six participants agreed and validated the findings and one participant made sure a subtopic would be emphasized as part of one of the themes.

The other two participants could not make the meeting and agreed to look over the findings via email. They were each sent an email with a brief explanation of the data analysis
process along with their individual significant statements and an outline of the textural-structural themes. Both participants were encouraged to email me back with additions or suggestions. Finally, each participant was individually emailed a copy of the thesis and was encouraged to email me any questions or suggestions prior to the official submission.

To increase the quality of the phenomenological method of the study, I was committed to accurately transcribe the interview, and in the textural-structural description I remained specific and not general or vague about the situation (Creswell, 2007). Further, I tried to understand the true philosophical tenets of phenomenology and sought to find the essence of the participants’ experience by using the systematic data analysis recommended by Moustakas.

Methodological Limitations

Researchers in phenomenological studies should not influence the answers or descriptions during the interviews (Creswell, 2007). However, due to the English ability of some of the participants, I often had to explain a word or give examples of what an idea meant. These examples or definitions could have possibly influenced some of their answers. Their English ability, or lack of confidence in their English ability, may have also abridged some of their answers. Although I did my best to make the participants comfortable and encouraged them to go on and explain what they meant, often times their answers were brief. I discovered later that this may also have been because of not having previously been asked many questions about themselves, and most were formulating their reflections and remembering experiences for the first time.

Triangulation usually includes multiple sources and methods of investigation, but the data collected for the phenomenological research project is solely based on interviews (Creswell, 2007). I did include the bracketing of my previous knowledge and participated in reflexive
journaling during the experience, but I did not have other sources of data to rely on. Because all
data was based on interviews, the answers were very personal experiences, explanations,
representations, and opinions and may not be factually true. However, it is the aim of a
phenomenology to reveal the participants shared experience of their journey.

Lastly, any qualitative study based largely on interviews offers limitations because of the
possible dynamic between the interviewer and the interviewee. In this instance, as a white
American woman, I may have uncontrollably elicited different responses than a fellow Karen or
perhaps a male interviewer. Although I reiterated that they could be completely candid, the
existing relationship I had with three of the participants could have also perhaps altered their
answers if they felt like they had to somehow please me with their answers.
CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This chapter begins by introducing the eight emerging adult Karen refugees with an individual description of each participant in order to contextualize each of his or her own experience. The transcendental phenomenology method entails the inclusion of each of the participants’ voices in order to give the reader insight into their individual textural-structural descriptions.

Together those eight voices were used to collectively answer the phenomenological research question: what is the experience of being a Karen emerging adult refugee in the United States? Through phenomenological reduction, horizons and invariant qualities emerged. The significant statements that make up the textural descriptions were clustered into core themes and are elucidated in this chapter. The chapter also considers the dynamics that induced the textural qualities that form a construction of structural qualities. The imaginative variations of the structural descriptions are broken down into structural themes which are expounded upon.

Based on the phenomenological reduction of the participants’ textural description (the what) and the imaginative variation of the participants’ structural description (the how), the composite textural-structural description concludes this chapter. The written passage provides the reduced essence of the participants’ lived shared experience.

**Individual Descriptions**

Prior to recounting the shared phenomenological understanding of the lived experience of an emerging adult Karen refugee, each participant’s contextual background is given. While individually the participants are from two different Karen groups, have two different religions, and come from two separate refugee camps, their collective shared knowledge corresponds and allows for phenomenological reduction.
Jamal

Jamal is a very quiet eighteen year old who likes to leave his apartment to play with his friends. He is Sgaw Karen and was born in the Mae La refugee camp in Thailand in 1994. His mother was pregnant with him when she made the long four day journey from Burma. He is the younger brother to Say and Var Lee, who are also in the study, and has two other older sisters and one younger brother. His younger sister drowned in a pool of water at the refugee camp when she was a baby and his oldest sister still lives at the refugee camp with her family.

Jamal moved to Dallas, Texas, when he was 13 years old, on September 19, 2007. After living in the apartment complex that his family was placed in by their resettling agency in Dallas for two years, his family moved to an apartment complex in East Dallas that has a large Karen population. Jamal said that his brother and his father were Buddhist while in Burma, but became Christian in Mae La. Jamal is Christian and said that this was important to him because he knows that God has helped his family. He attended one year of middle school and then four years of high school in Dallas but has yet to graduate because he has not passed the Texas state academic tests. Even though he is not attending school this year, the state is allowing him to continue to retake the tests until he graduates. Jamal currently lives with the rest of his family and works at Swift Technology\(^1\) where his work involves taking apart cell phones. However, Jamal really likes to draw. His dream job would be drawing and producing animation. Jamal was the most nostalgic participant about the camp and misses it immensely. When asked what the most important thing to know about him was, he replied “That I lived in the camp.” Participating in the research study made Jamal “feel a little sad,” but he couldn’t offer an explanation as to why.

\(^1\) Swift Technology is a pseudonym given to the small technology factory in order for the participants to remain anonymous.
Var Lee

Var Lee, also Sgaw Karen, was born in Burma nineteen years ago and made the journey to Thailand when she was only two years old. She has an older sister still at the camp, an older brother (Say), two younger brothers (including Jamal), and the younger sister who died in the camp. She lived in the Mae La refugee camp for twelve years until they resettled to the United States when she was fourteen years old. She started high school as a junior and then was a senior for four years at two different high schools in Dallas. Similar to Jamal, she is presently not attending school, and she has yet to graduate because she has not passed the Texas state academic tests. She plans on continuing to take them until she passes. Var Lee said her parents were Buddhist in Burma, but became Christian in the Thai camps and she declares that in the United States she is “Anglican” although she couldn’t remember the word and guessed at the pronunciation. Var Lee explained that she knows religion is important to her because she prays a lot.

Currently, like both of her brothers, she works at Swift Technology on the line working with cell phone parts. She did not mention any further goals for her future, but she sews and likes to make purses out of reclaimed materials. Var Lee does most of the cooking and housework for her family and said her family is very important to her and that she likes to help her dad. She recently was married in December of 2012. Although she still resides with her family for now, she plans on moving out to live with her husband “soon.” Var Lee may seem solemn to others because she is quiet and serious, but she smiles when she is in the company of friends and told me that she loves to laugh. She shared with me that what she would want people to know most about her was her history, “like how did I live and where did I come from.” She said that when she participated in the study, “I felt like I was dreaming. If people ask me, I want to tell. Like,
nobody asks me,” because people had never asked her about her past before, and it made her happy to talk about all of her feelings.

Say

Say is a twenty-two year old Sgaw Karen who was born in Burma but escaped to Thailand when he was ten years old. He said he doesn’t really remember the trip but he had to walk in the mountains for three or four days and his mother had to climb the mountains even though she was pregnant. He has two older sisters, a younger sister (Var Lee), and two younger brothers (one of whom is Jamal). Say lived in Mae La refugee camp where the youngest sister died. He resettled to the United States on September 17, 2007, when he was 17 years old. He went to two different high schools for five years and was a senior every year. Like his siblings, this year he is not attending school, and because he failed his Texas state tests, has not graduated. He plans on continuing to take the state tests until he passes them and obtains a diploma.

In Burma, Say was Buddhist, but he converted to Christianity in the Thai refugee camp and he answered that now, “We are Christian.” followed by the comment, “We are good.” Say mentioned agricultural work while he was at the camp a lot more than the other participants who mainly described going to school. He is currently working at Swift Technology where he handles cell phone parts on the line. Although extremely quiet in a group or one on one, Say likes posing for pictures and pays close attention to his style. He is very low-key and uses the descriptive word “cool” a lot. He likes to drive people around in his family’s car and he is a huge fan of soccer. He wants to be a high-school teacher one day and he explained what is most important to him, “would be that I am a good person. A good person to my family.” He told me that he had never answered questions about himself before or about being a refugee and participating in the study made him feel “good,” but he could not explain why.
Christie

Twenty two year old Christie is Sgaw Karen and was born in the Thai refugee camp of Mae La and stayed there until she was 17 years old. Christie has one older brother, two older sisters and one younger sister all in the United States. She resettled to the United States on September 11, 2007. She attended five years of high school, but this year she is not in school. Christie wants to graduate but has yet to pass her Texas state tests, so she plans on retaking the tests until she graduates. Christie declared that religion was very important to her and that she is Baptist. She said her family was Buddhist while they were in Burma, but became Baptist in the camps. She did not know why; she just knew they became Baptist in Thailand.

Christie is also currently working at Swift Technology on a factory line and lives in the same apartment complex she first resettled in with her family. She expressed that she wants to go to college and become a dentist in the future. In her life, Christie said it is her parents who have affected her the most because she explained, “They inspire me.” When asked what is most important about her, Christie responded, “Where I come from and that I am a refugee.” She then added, “And my traditions.” With regards to participating in the study, Christie said that she liked it because “I like to explain my culture,” but it also made her feel “like I wanted to cry” because “I was remembering the past.” Christie was very soft spoken and thought a lot about the questions in the interview before she carefully answered them. Her words were minimal, but her face was extremely expressive and looked pained when she talked about Burma and the poverty she had experienced in the camps. Christie was by far the most curious about me. I spent a lot of time before and after the interview answering endless questions about my personal life, my education, how education works and how I came to know about the Karen people and why I cared.
Gre Bin

Sgaw Karen Gre Bin was born in Thailand twenty years ago in the Mae La refugee camp where he lived for fifteen years. Gre Bin has two older brothers and one older sister in Thailand, as well as three younger brothers who live in Dallas. Gre Bin resettled to the United States on June 7, 2007. He went to one year of middle school in the United States and four years of high school, graduating in June 2012. Gre Bin is Christian and said all of his family is and has always been Christian, even his “great great grandparents.” He valued education and enjoyed it both in Thailand and also in the United States. Gre Bin said “everything was fun” in the camps and that he misses “everything.”

Currently, Gre Bin is working at a different cell phone factory than the rest of the participants and is a line leader. He explained that his job is to communicate with the Karen employees, translate, and instruct them on procedures. Gre Bin lives with his family in the same apartment complex where he was first resettled. He explained that he plans on attending a two year business school in Dallas so that he can help other Karen refugees,

*I can create or build my own business. To create a shop or a food store. I know a lot of people who come on their own to America. They don’t understand in English [sic] when they come in stores and they are so nervous.*

Gre Bin was extremely energetic and very talkative. He answered questions quickly and with a good deal of arm movement. Last summer he was trained to be an interpreter so that he could help out other Karen in his community. He said that what was most important for people to know about him was, “I am really proud that I come to America and that I graduate high school. I am the first generation in my family that graduates in the high school of America.” Gre Bin told me

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2 Participants will be quoted verbatim in order to include their natural voices. Sic will no longer be used for incorrect grammar so as not to be intrusive.
that participating in the research felt “good” and he reasoned it was “because talking about your experiences is ok for other people knowing” and also “it feels good to talk to you or to talk to anybody” about the experience.

**Win Win**

Win Win is Pwo Karen and was born in the Thai refugee camp of Kamoka. He is the youngest and only boy in his family with three older sisters. Burmese soldiers crossed the border and burned his camp down when he was a baby, forcing his family to move to Umphiem refugee camp. He lived at Umphiem until he was 18 when he resettled to the United States on April 28, 2009. He attended two years of high school and graduated in 2012. This year was his first year at a community college in Austin, Texas, where he lives with two of his sisters. His parents moved to Abilene in order to work at a well-known chicken factory that offers living quarters for the factory workers. Gre Bin hopes to complete community college and transfer to a four year university, and one day become a geographer or a graphic designer.

Win Win is Buddhist; his family has remained Buddhist from Burma until now. He said he was never pressured to practice Christianity, but many of his friends became Christian at the camp. Win Win deduced they converted because they went to Sunday school there and that they “have more support from Christian family if they are Christian too.” Win Win is very articulate and he takes things in life seriously, including the interview and being part of the research study. He is very studious, determined and values education. Win Win was the only participant who did not mention playing or going into the jungle in the camp. To Win Win, education and continuing his education was his first priority and that it was most important for others to understand him. Win Win described the frustration he had at school with other students in the United States,
Maybe they don’t understand life. You know they don’t really have that knowledge. When you are in the camp and just how hard you have to try. The kids here...in my opinion the kids don’t really enjoy going to school. I enjoy doing in class but some of them say, “I don’t have a pen,” or “I don’t understand” even if they understand because they don’t want to do it.

He “liked” talking about his experiences during the study and he explained

because at least now I can tell to the people what I have been through. Especially here in the United States, most of the people they don’t really know if the refugee camps from Burma still exist. Also they don’t know what it is like growing up in the refugee camp. Some of the Americans they don’t really know the situation there. I feel like pretty good by sharing and I am proud of myself by sharing my experiences to other people.

Mint Aye

Mint Aye is Pwo Karen and was born in Burma but fled to the Umpiem refugee camp in Thailand when she was seven years old. She viscerally remembered what it was like to live in fear of the Burmese soldiers and spoke the most emotionally about them. Mint Aye is Poe Dah Bue’s older sister and has two older brothers and two older sisters. Her entire family is Buddhist and she could not recall whether or not anyone tried to convert her to Christianity. Religion is important to her family and she continues to attend a temple in Dallas. She resettled to the United States on August 27, 2008, when she was 16 years old, and still lives with her family in the same apartment where they originally moved.

Mint Aye went to high school from 9th through 12th grade but was unable to graduate because of her scores on the Texas state tests. She is not attending school this year, but plans on
continuing to retake the tests until she graduates. When I wished her luck on the next round of tests, she exclaimed, “Oh thank you! I need it. I really want to pass! I want to graduate! I am really trying!” Mint Aye is also currently working at Swift Technology on the line, but her goal is to be a nurse someday. When Mint Aye speaks, she does so loudly with exceeding enthusiasm and smiles and laughs frequently. For example, she practically shouted, “I love living here!” When I commented on how positive she seems she explained simply to me, “I try to be happy. I try to forget the bad life.” She said in order to understand her, one must know that “I want to go back to my country. I want my people to have peace.” She informed me that participating in the research study made her feel “a little sad” because “when I think about my country, I want to go back and I can’t go.”

**Poe Dah Bue**

Poe Dah Bue is Pwo Karen and was born in Burma, but his family fled to Thailand’s Umpiem camp when he was 5 years old. His memory of being poor in Burma took precedent over the fighting that was occurring. Poe Dah Bue is the youngest in his family with two older brothers and three older sisters, including Mint Aye. He resettled to the United States on August 17, 2008, when he was 14 years old. He has gone to high school for four years and is now a senior living with his family. Poe Dah Bue confidently assured me that he will pass all his state tests so that he will graduate this year and would like to be a doctor or an engineer.

Poe Dah Bue is Buddhist and told me religion was important to him. He informed me that people tried to convert him to Christianity in the camps and also here in the United States,

*People who have the bible, you know? They come to me. Every day like, these people come and knock on the door and say, Do you want to go to church? And how God is important and they talk about Jesus.*
Hoever, Poe Dah Bue has remained Buddhist in Dallas. Poe Dah Bue explodes with energy and moves around a lot when he talks. He cracks jokes and tells stories with much detail unlike the other participants. He is quite a memorable character and during our focus group he kept us all entertained. To understand him, he believes people need to know that “I believe in myself.... I always do my best, you know? I always try.” Participating in this study made him feel “thankful and grateful” because he is happy others will know about his people. He explained,

*Because we are the Karen people, right? Nobody knows about the Karen people. They ask, are you Chinese? If you go to school... I say no I am not, I am Karen. They say, oh you are Korea? I say no, I am not Korea. They don’t know my country, you know? That’s why.*

**Textural Description**

After the horizontalization of each participant, the significant statements were delimited to invariant constituents by reducing overlapping descriptions and keeping expressions that were salient to the experience. These invariant constituents were clustered into meanings and four core themes emerged:

1. Overcoming oppression and hardship
2. The quest for freedom and independence
3. Hope for a better life and opportunity
4. The need for belonging and community

These themes make up the textural description, what it was that the participants experienced. The methodology of transcendental phenomenology necessitates the inclusion of verbatim examples of the participant’s significant statements without an interpretive analysis. A discussion of these themes will be included in the following chapter along with the other findings.
Overcoming Oppression and Hardship

Oppression and hardship were the two most consistent and prominent sentiments expressed when participants described their experiences. These concepts were the focus of the participants’ discourse about what they left behind or had to overcome. In all eight participants’ experiences, their journey commenced in oppression, whether they were born in Burma or whether they were told the tales of oppression from their parents. For example, Var Lee personally knows that they had to leave to Thailand

because of my dad and the Burmese soldiers. They had to take their food and their animals to the Burmese soldiers like that. They almost killed my dad, but my dad ran away.

Var Lee’s brothers also expressed the peril that their family was in because the Burmese soldiers tried to force their father to become a soldier. Mint Aye said of the soldiers, “They are so bad. They don’t like people. They don’t have mercy.” And she recalled, “In Burma country we are not free to go to school. We have to run from Burma soldiers coming. If they see me they will kill me.” She lived in fear and was not even able to go to school. Meanwhile Gre Bin, who was born in Mae La, explained that his family

had to move to another country because if they stay there, the war is coming and because people can starve because they can’t grow the rice or do anything. Also, the Burmese soldiers they try to bully. yes.. and also they try to kill all the Karen people who still in Burma. So they had to flee away.

The oral history of oppression was reiterated by Win Win who explained that,

The Burmese military army, they just force them out. When they come to the village, they kill the animals without permission and even like they rape the women and they even kill
Win Win acknowledged that he did not personally experience the subjugation in Burma, but that it was the knowledge that his parents imparted on him.

The fight to overcome oppression continues in their shared experience of the refugee camp. Whether they were at Umpiem or Mae La, there wasn’t the discussion of life and death, but there was the hardship to surmount. Win Win experienced an intense hardship early on. He explained, “Before I live in Umpiem camp, we live in other camp too. The camp Kamoka. Over there. Because as I told you the army, the Burmese army. They came and set fire to our camp. They burned all the houses.”

The hardship for most was not as dramatic, but they all had hard times finding food and survived with very little. All participants explained that you had to find food and Gre Bin stated that finding food was his main worry. Say said, “In the camps we eat rice and bamboo.” While Christie explained “In Thai refugee camps, we had a hard time and a difficult situation. To go outside. If we go outside, we have to worry about the police.” She went on to describe her time in the camps as hard because her family was very poor and they did not have enough food and clothes or enough money for materials for school. The common theme of an almost painful monotony of camp was repeated by the emerging adult participants. Mint Aye explained, “When I live in refugee camp, I don’t do anything. I just go to school,” and later repeated again, “I didn’t do anything. I go to school.” Gre Bin echoed, “I live there 15 years and every day is mostly the same. Every day you just go to school and study.” The fear that the monotony would continue was voiced by Win Win when he said what would have happened if he had stayed, “you don’t have far for the education to go and you are just like, ‘Every day I am going to wake
up and do the same thing again again again.” To Poe Dah Bue, part of the hardship was actually paying for school, “If you live in camp you have to pay to go to school. A lot of people want to go, but you have to pay.”

For the participants, the feeling of oppression is even more far removed after resettlement as Christie explained that in the United States, “It is good here. You don’t have to worry about the enemy and the Burmese soldiers.” Or, as Poe Dah Bue points out that they “don’t have to be scared of police here...In Thailand if we saw the police we had run. We are scared that they would catch us. Here it is free so you can have a better life.” With some oppression overcome, hardship followed the participants to the United States while they were resettling in a few common ways. Mint Aye said about living in the United States, “The most difficult is English. I can’t speak English. It is difficult to understand the people and to talk to them.” Like Mint Aye, every participant stressed that the language barrier was the hardest obstacle when arriving. Jamal discusses why it was difficult when they arrived in Dallas, “Because we don’t know how to speak English. And don’t know how to go anywhere. We don’t know how to go somewhere.” Say also linked the inability to speak English with the feeling of helplessness in navigating their surroundings, “When I came to America first time, you know, it was hard for me. We can’t speak English. We can’t understand anything. We can’t walk outside. I don’t know how to go anywhere, you know?” Win Win expressed the cultural difficulty that the refugees encountered in addition to language, “Because like the culture, the people here. I am not being like. rude to the people here, but in my view. In my opinion, like some kid here they just don’t really respect their parents.” The participants all expressed that they had made it through the hardships, no matter what they were. Poe Dah Bue explained,
I will never forgot how hard I work. A lot of people is poor. A lot of people is refugee. I would never forget refugee. Like sometime when I go out in the street, and you see the people like poster like “help me”. I always give them money. You know? I like to help people. I understand, you know.

Whether it was the oppression felt through physical violence in Burma, the poverty of the refugee camps in Thailand, or the hardships of transitioning to the United States, the participants had thus far overcome them. In the focus group when we discussed the findings, Gre Bin pointed out that something they all had because of the theme surmounting oppression and hardships was “determination.”

The Quest for Freedom and Independence

Another meaning of their experience that emerged was the participants’ persistent desire for their own freedom and for a chance at independent movement and thought. This quest started early from their personal life in Burma or their people’s history they are taught. Mint Aye who was there until she was seven, mixed history with personal experience as she described,

*Before the Burma country, it was not Burmese. It was the Karen country. They have a civil war. The Burmese soldier and the Karen soldiers fight. The Burmese soldiers are so bad. They want to take all of everything. They treat our people to get out of my country. They want to take all my people.*

Say, who was there until he was ten, explained what he experienced in Burma, “*We are not the same people. They want to take control of the Burmese country. They have a lot of people, you know. We are a small people, Karen. You know?*” Poe Da Buh said, “*Burma is small, you know? They cheated us. Like this. Like before Karen, they had a country, you know? Like the before the country was not the Burmese name, you know? The Burmese try to get our country.*” So, he
explained that his family had to leave, “Because they can’t live in Burma. They want to live safe and have a free life.”

Their experience of the refugee camps were indeed safer as Gre Bin explained,

*Actually it was easy in the camps because the Burmese soldiers can’t come to the camp. Because at the border there is what they call KNU- like Karen people resistance. If the Burmese or any other nations if they want to bully the people, there is resistance. So, they can’t come into the camps.*

However, the participants all expressed that it was far from free. The description of constraint because of the lack of freedom of movement was predominant. Jamal discussed why he was unhappy in the camp, “Because when we live in the camp, we can’t go anywhere. Not outside. If we go outside, if the Thai soldier gets you, they are going to send you to the Burmese... anywhere outside the camp, they send you back.” The participants had a shared understanding of the forest as their outlet to freedom while in the camp. Even though they were not all allowed in the forest, they would go there and feel an independence not felt in the camp. Var Lee described her time in the forest as happy because you can “breathe very well” and Poe Dah Bue further described his experiences,

*In the forest? Both. My bad memory is you have to hide and you have to be scary from the soldier you know? But..if you went to the forest it is fun you know? You have like air. You have experiences. It is fun in the forest. You see everything...Staying in the camp is not free. When you go to the forest, you feel the air. It is fun.*

Although some described the hazard of getting caught, the forest was described as an opportunity for a bit of independence in the camp whether with friends or collecting bamboo or vegetables.
The lack of freedom felt at camp was beyond physical space. Var Lee explained her experience in the camp as one of no independence and no options, “It was like we just had to stay in school. We could not go to outside. If we go to outside they like put us to the jail. We cannot get a job there. We don’t have the money.” She clarified that in the United States, “We can go wherever we want. We can go wherever we want and we can do for ourselves,” but in the camp, “we cannot go to outside to try to find job. We cannot.” The participants did not feel in control of themselves or independent as Mint Aye stated, “When we be the camp. People don’t have power.” In the refugee camp, one thing they were free to be, unlike in Burma, was Karen. Win Win explained,

> They give us the free but when we raise our flag, we have to raise Thai flag as well. You can’t raise the flag higher or above the Thai flag…They didn’t persecute you and the authority there did not say, Ok you cannot be Karen. They didn’t tell us that. They gave you free life to live there as long as you don’t cross the law and the rules that they put there for you.

But mostly, they remembered their experience in the Protracted Refugee Situation compared to their life now and as Say commented thinking about the camp, “We don’t miss not having freedom. We don’t have freedom there.. in the United States, there is freedom.”

Like Say, each of the participants recognized the United States as an answer to freedom and independence. There was little negative sentiment regarding this core theme upon resettlement minus the inability to get around because of language. For example, Poe Dah Bue explained,
In the United States, it is free. They have democracy, right? When we live in camp... we live in camp and we don’t have much money. We are refugee there, you know. It is not free. We can’t go out. We live in a bad situation.

Obtaining a sense of freedom and independence in the United States was described by all the participants; Christie simply stated that she has “freedom of everything here.”

The participants all expressed a desire for independence. Beginning with the freedom desired by the Karen people to have an independent state that was unattainable in Burma to the yearning for freedom of movement and future beyond the border of the camps in Thailand, the United States gave them more control over themselves and offered them liberties that they were not before given.

**Hope for a Better Life and Opportunity**

In tandem with the quest for freedom, the participants all described the desire for a “better life” that motivated them through their journey and started when they escaped Burma. Christie explained that they fled to Thailand because “[in Burma,] they have to worry about the soldiers, the Burmese soldiers because they kill Karen people. They can’t live in Burma. They want to live safe and have a free life.” Jamal voiced, “If they stay in Burma. They don’t have jobs or a better place to live. No education.”

Poe Dah Bue offers an additional pull factor that led his family to move,

*In Thailand they have a refugee camp, right. They give out the food free at refugee camp.*

*If we live in our country, we have to buy, we have to plant, we have to do everything. No one gives us free. My mom thinks it is better to go stay in refugee camp and then we have school is free.*
Most of the participants lived in the refugee camps for over ten years and there was a sense of contentment that was not found in Burma. Jamal quietly admitted that he wished he was still there today because “Mae Lot camp, that was my place.” and he missed everything, especially his sister and his friends. Yet, when the possibility to resettle in a third country became available, they described that their family made the decision to move to seek the elusive “better life.”

The participants expressed that the absence of opportunity in the refugee camp was primarily because of education. Gre Bin explained why his parents decided to move from the camp to the United States and why he was excited,

> Because there is a good education here. It doesn’t matter for them, they did it for the children... I feel so excited. Yeah. Because I was just thinking if I live in Thailand even if I graduate from the high school, uhh, it's good, ok. But if I graduate from high school from here, it is of more value.

He continued explaining the difference in education, “Here it is a very huge difference. There you have to learn, but they teach you everything but they just record. They give you a report card, but you don’t get a transcript. There is no document.” Gre Bin understands the importance of documentation and accreditation to be able to have opportunities in the future. Like Gre Bin’s parents, every participant described education as their parents’ reasons for deciding to come to the United States. Say explained, “My parents tell me. Tell me you can get an education, you know? If you have education you can do very very good in the future, you know?” Mint Aye remembered people at her house saying, “If we come here it will be better than the Thailand. We can go anywhere [in the United States]. We would be free of war and have good education. If we come here we will get a better life in the future.”
Without the possibility of an accredited education or jobs, they didn’t see any opportunity or future for themselves. Win Win noted that the camps continued to grow so, “the situation is getting tighter and tighter. By the situation I mean the situation, is you have very limited opportunity, in education, and travelling.” He described the United States comparatively,

It is nice because if you are hardworking, you can do anything. You can get an opportunity to do whatever you like as long as you don’t cross the law. I would say it is like a good place. The opportunity and you can stand shoulder to shoulder to the people. Back there, you don’t have opportunity to like do whatever you want. Here you can do, you can have your own, from like doctor to engineer to like lawyer. You know anything? Which is like I love it. I love the place here. business, you can do anything.

The participants without second thought described life in the United States as “better.” Mint Aye explained, “When I live in my country, I feel like I need to get an opportunity. When I come here, I have an opportunity. I like to be here.” When pressed to reason why, many focused on the education and the jobs that can be obtained. Christie reasoned, “In here is better education... because in here is a developed country... because they give us a good opportunity to learn.” Poe Dah Bue echoed her respect for the education here,

America is the famous country. The education is high. The money is high. Our house is like poor in Thailand. It is bamboo, you know? I want to have a better life that is why. If I come here, I will speak English really good and I think I will have a better life. The education is also good. The education is good. We come to school and we get better.
His mention of material goods as part of the better life was often repeated. Var Lee just pointed at buildings when she was trying to describe why the United States was “better.” Mint Aye exclaimed,

**Yeah! I want to come here!** Because many people can be here and we heard the America is better than the Thai refugee camp. So we want to come here. When I heard we were coming here, I am sooo happy. If we be here we live a better place, a better house we will have. Where we live in the refugee camp, we had to live in bamboo house.

The wish for the elusive “better” life brought the participants’ families from Burma to Thailand with the dire hope for safety. After over a decade of life in Thailand and no opportunities for the refugees beyond the camp, the option of resettlement offered them new promise and education. Although some participants expressed nostalgia for the camps and missed living in the camps greatly, all participants almost mechanically answered that life in the United States was “better.”

**The Need for Belonging and Community**

The last concepts that surfaced from the Karen participants’ shared emerging adult refugee experience was belongingness and community. Christie, when asked what made up her identity, reasoned, “Being a refugee because we don’t have a country.” She felt like she does not belong anywhere because of her experiences. Burma did not offer an environment for the Karen people to openly be a community. Gre Bin explained that the Burmese soldiers tried to bully and kill all the nationalities that didn’t fight with them, but the Karen people had it the worst.

The border refugee camps made it possible for the participants to openly belong and allowed for the refugees to be taught in the Karen language and learn Karen history and build a community. Jamal described the refugee camp as a place where he had a lot of friends. Gre Bin
discussed parting with his community, “The last night before we came here, we just spent time with our families. All our relatives. We just came in one house and all the families and relatives. We just came to one house.”

The participants fondly remember the community. For example, Say described moving to Dallas,

When we get to United States, I remember my friends and my sister ..my older sister.. she had an older baby. I remember I will never see them again.. I remember.. I miss going to the forest together with my friends. We go together and live together.

Poe Dah Bue also talked about missing his friends,

In here.. In here we don’t have much friend. I don’t have much friend. In Thailand, you know? We have only Karen people, you know? So we doing, we are doing together. If we wants something, we can share it. In the United States, we don’t have really good friend. All the people, like Mexicans, they are only good when they are with their people. They are not really good with us.

Poe Dah Bue contends that he always wants to be a part of the Karen community specifically. “I just want to be Karen. I don’t want. I don’t want to become like, some people are Asian and some people are Mexico. I want to be only Karen.”

To combat the alienation of a new place, the Karen remain together as a community. Win stated how he experienced the community,

Before I came here there were Karen people already here. So, they just came and visit and they just tried to explain. So they say if you want to meet new Karen people, you just have to go here or there. They just like paid us visits to make us not to feel alone here.

Gre Bin further explained,
It is ok right now because a lot of Karen people are getting more education here. Because when they get here, they are less than 18 years old and they can go to high school and learn more English. They can understand the American culture and they can understand more English. And also they can explain to the other Karen people who don’t understand the culture and English, they can teach one to another.

The participants continued to rely on others in their community within the United States. Jamal answered why he said he was proud to be Karen, “Because we like each other. If we stay nearby as neighbors, we just know that if you need something right here, we help each other. We help each other.” The commitment to their people and helping each other in their community was unanimous. Poe Dah Bue explained his career aspirations, “I think if I become doctor, I would help back my people.” When asked what has affected him most on his journey, Win Win replied that it was watching the Olympics on television. Win Win explained that he is still motivated by the Olympics, and he feels that he has to keep trying like the Olympians and has to do his best to represent the Karen people.

All participants described the hurt from people who did not understand who their people were or felt an isolation because they were different from others upon resettlement, especially at school. Christie said that other students, “They call me bad. They say I am Chinese. Or Mexican people.” Poe Dah Bue said he wasn’t always welcomed by other students; he said “They don’t call us Karen. Some people call us Chino.” The participants longed for others to understand them, but some have given up. For example, Win Win who was consistently teased for being Chinese stopped trying to explain to others that he was Karen,
because they are going to think it is a women name, like Karen. So, in like the first moment I do not say that I am Karen. But like when and if I wait and they are interested, I will explain later. I will say ok I am Karen and our background is like that.

Poe Dah Bue said “If they wanted to know, I would explain everything. The beginning to the end about Karen people.”

Through the participants’ descriptions emerged a unanimous yearning for a free nation beginning when their family fled from Burma. The resolve of the Karen community strengthened in Thailand where they felt like they belonged without persecution and with the majority of the camp being Karen. All participants were proud of being Karen and mentioned their family as being either a part of their identity or what influenced their experience. The need for belongingness was not felt at school or with others who were unfamiliar with their people and their story.

**Structural Description**

The dynamic commonalities and differences of how the participants experienced the textural description make up the structural qualities of the emerging adult Karen refugee participants. After exploring the imaginative variation of the data, the structural themes that emerged include: origin, Protracted Refugee Situation, and third country resettlement. These three themes fall under an overall composition of flight. This section of the chapter will explore these structural themes and discuss the underlying factors that account for the participants’ experiences.
Origin

All of the participants emphatically stated that their nationality was Karen and agreed they were proud to be Karen. Their experience of flight began with their origins of the Karen people in Burma. Even though some of the participants were born in Thailand, when the participants say “our country” they are referring to Burma. Collectively, the participants embarked on their flight from Burma and were forced to escape as a result of, as most described, a “Civil War” which laid the foundation for how they experienced their journey. For example, when asked to tell about herself, Mint Aye immediately began with “When I was a little, little girl, I was born in my country. My country had a civil war and we had to leave to Thai refugee camp.” Burma is where Mint Aye’s story and the other participants’ story began to be shaped and set their story in motion. When I asked about being Karen, Win Win informed me,

I am Karen and we came from the Babylon ...and we walked through Mongolia. When we got there, the Karen people walked across the Gobi desert and then through Tibet. They, if I remember, divided into two groups, the other group and the one group went to Burma. And then when the other group goes East which is to Thailand. That is why there are like Karen people. And we don’t have our own country, but we have our own state, called the Karen state. Because of the situation, you know how it was in Burma, the Karen people had to part there.

Protracted Refugee Situation

Fleeing from Burma, their experience was further assembled by their childhood in the refugee camp. The structural theme of the Protracted Refugee Situation influenced their experiences. Their understanding of a Karen refugee experience was for years confined, like they were, to the camp that they were not permitted to leave. All aspects of their perception of life,
including education, work, and play, came from this environment. Christie described her routine life at the camps, “Go to school and came back. Help my mom to cook and then take care of my little sister. And every morning my parents are prepare food for the children.” When Gre Bin was asked about life at Mae La, he said,

It is difficult. Ok, let me tell you what I know about the camps. I was born there and when I was five years old I start to go to elementary school. It doesn’t matter how poor my family is, my parents like try to go out and find the jobs to take care of our families. But it is hard to get a job and to get a money to support the family. But we also gather egg from the hen and they give us everything we need. It is ok. It is enough. It is a little bit, but they still have to go find a job to support our family.

School took up the majority of their time and the participants’ understanding of formal education was formed there. Most participants said at camp “all I did was go to school” and described comparisons of schools as “there” in the camp and “here” in the United States. Poe Dah Bue discussed the differences that meant the most to him,

Like there we learn English but we just learn English only one class. We speak only during the class we speak Karen. But the teacher they try to teach English. In here, you know, like in my country every day you have to write. You have to write with your hand. You have to sit at a table. The table is made of the tree and bamboo, you know? Sometime you if too many people you have to sit tight. I don’t like in rainy time. You have to go to school all wet and dirty, you know? I don’t like.

The next variation to their flight, the preparation to leave the camps was described similarly by the participants; there was a medical examination and then there was as some described, an interview where they were asked why they wanted to come to the United States.
Jamal explained the process as, “One day we have to answer questions about go to America... They teach us why you want to go to America like that.” Some remembered more or perhaps received more preparation to go to the United States than others and participants described lessons such as how to act on the plane, about the four seasons instead of three, how to say English greeting, or as Jamal described, “They just tell in America that they just eat pizza.”

Third Country Resettlement

The last structural theme is the resettlement in a third county. To whatever degree the aide agencies worked to prepare them for their literal flight to the United States, the vastly strange situation of the physical journey changed them forever. The participants had never ridden in a car or seen buildings before, so even their drive to Bangkok distinctively shaped their experience. Gre Bin describes the ride in the van to the airport, “Some of the Karen people because they have not had a ride before, they start to get dizzy and throw up and vomit. It was so weird.” Poe Dah Bue explains, “Like, we live in camp so we see only ugly things. If you go to town, you got to see everything. Like you see everything.” He went on to explain how excited he was to ride on an elevator and then a plane. No one had previously been on a plane and that was a marked experience of fear and excitement. Christie described her first time adventure, “When I saw the airplane, I was so nervous because I never ride before.” Win Win explained, “Some people say “I didn’t like... the feel of the airplane.” I felt it was a high place. For me, noooo. I loved it. The time in the airplane took off, you feel like eek (excited squeal) and then it is like a good feeling.” All of the participants were in agreement with the confusion and difficulty when their final plane landed and they searched for their agency caseworkers with no knowledge of English. Mint Aye said, “We have problem when we arrive airport because we can’t speak English. We don’t know how to go!” Var Lee echoed that when her family landed, “It’s hard.
It’s hard to. Like we can’t speak English, right? We have to find one of the people that take us. We don’t know how to speak English. We didn’t know how to find the people.”

Resettlement is an appropriate term for these Karen refugees. Not because they were ever settled in their native country, but because the Karen participants had settled for over ten years in the Thai refugee camps. Moving to Dallas, Texas, was the commonality for the refugees that they all understood as life in America. Discovering and adjusting to the unfamiliar surroundings was a foundation for their experience. When Mint Aye was asked how her life was different from the others at her school, she explained it was harder, “because we can’t speak English and we don’t understand when people talk. Some people don’t understand us.”

Flight

The Karen refugees who are emerging adults constructed their journey as one of flight. Whether they experienced it with their own two feet, or they understood it because of their family and Karen people, the participants began their shared experience in motion. Their flight occurred in stages exposing them to new episodes and understandings. While they were in the camps or as they now plan to remain in the United States, their lives have been marked by this flight and it is what makes their experience different from other emerging adults around them. Regarding her people, Christie sadly said, “Right now we still don’t have a country.”

The participants all shared the desire for people to know about their flight, although no one had asked them before. They described their flight as a part of their identity and therefore a part of their future, but not one that would make them remain a victim. Win Win explained to me why being a Karen refugee will always be part of his identity,

I just want people to be like.. “Ok.. he is just a Karen refugee guy.” So I will be like ok,

“You think all I am is a Karen refugee camp? I am going to prove it to you who I am and
that I am getting here.” And by that I mean, you might think of me as a Karen refugee, yeah, I am a Karen refugee, and I am more than that. I can do what you can do.

Their flight gave them perspective and would be a part of who they are, but not all of who they are. Their flight is also one that will continue. The future was spoken with the desire to remember their past, but to keep moving forward while helping their people. Poe Dah Bue explained why he wants to return to Burma one day,

If I go back there, I will help my people. I will help my country. Like, in my country, it’s like, they don’t have the education like to fourth grade, you know? They don’t have higher education. I would go back and help them have the higher education.

Composite Description

The objective of this transcendental phenomenological research is to encapsulate the essence of the lived understanding of the eight participants. Figure 1 illustrates the composite description reduced from the textural and structural description of the participants. The passage that follows narrates the figure and illuminates the synthesized transcendental meaning of the shared understanding of their experience.
The emerging adult Karen refugees resettled to Dallas, Texas, but began their journey of flight in Burma before some of them were even born. After a life full of oppression, pressure to fight in an ongoing civil war, and with no hopes for a free and independent Karen nation, the Karen refugees escaped their country with their families. The displaced Karen refugees sought safety and a better life in neighboring Thailand and travelled to, or were born in, a Thai refugee camp. The camp offered a location of childhood belonging and community, but the Protracted Refugee Situation was a confined one with many hardships. Life was monotonous for the Karen and their childhood through adolescent ages were filled with going to school or finding food for their family with occasional times of play with friends in the forest. With limited opportunity and no credentials to their education, the Karen refugees did not have freedom to go beyond the camp gates and saw no independence in the future. The Karen refugees’ parents, drawn by the promise of education for their children and the possibility of a “better life,” agreed to the option available to resettle in the United States. After a medical checkup and some cultural preparation, the Karen refugees continued their flight as they departed the refugee camp to go to the United States.

After exciting travels, the jarring language barrier was waiting for the Karen refugees at the airport. The hardship of English continued as they went to school and had to overcome their challenges while supporting one another in the Karen community. Without hesitation the Karen refugees found that here (the United States) was better than there (the refugee camp), but it was not easy. The Karen refugees in high school looked for belongingness in school while they continued their education. With no physical constraints and seemingly limitless opportunities, the Karen refugees saw freedom everywhere. They hope to finish their education pending barriers such as state testing. Feeling pride in their Karen nationalism, the Karen refugees have
remained close to their family and hope to give back to the Karen community or perhaps even go back to Burma to help there. The emerging adult Karen refugee resettled in the United States sees possibilities, not obstacles. Their experience is not one of a victim; their identity is not lost. The Karen refugees have been marked by their flight, but continue their experience with that perspective and they feel satisfaction when given the opportunity of sharing their experience.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The findings of the previous chapter are examined and reviewed in relation to existing literature with consideration of the initial phenomenological research question this study explores: What is the lived experience of emerging adult Karen refugees who resettled in the United States? The individual differences between the participants’ shared knowledge are not highlighted or analyzed because the phenomenological method of this study requires a focus on the communal understanding of the experience. This chapter therefore discusses the shared meaning of the collective findings from the Karen refugees within the context of relevant theoretical and empirical literature. The chapter first looks at how the participants’ current perspective of their experience intersected with the conventions of the emerging adulthood developmental stage. The findings of the study are then used to inform the theoretical underpinnings of refugee experience. Lastly, the contextual Karen experience is discussed in relation to empirical studies on Karen refugees and identity.

Intersections of Emerging Adulthood

Although the participants in the study all fall under the delineated age of emerging adulthood, the five essential qualities that define emerging adulthood do not all correspond with them (Arnett, 2004). Arnett points out that emerging adulthood specifically applies to those in a Western industrial nation, which all of the participants have been in for over five years. The argument against the universality of the developmental stage even in industrialized nations, along with Arnett’s own disclaimers, resonate in this study (Henry & Kloep, 2010), although the participants do have notable intersections with Arnett’s development theory. Regardless of whether the participants did not coincide with the emerging adult experience because of their culture, marginalized status, low socioeconomic status, or previous non-Western childhood, the
connections and divergences to the characterizations of emerging adulthood that surfaced in the findings are worth examining.

What Arnett identifies as the most pertinent quality of emerging adulthood seemed absent in the participants: identity exploration. Questions of identity were met with confusion and seemed to have never been contemplated. I often had to explain the concept of identity and the answers I was given conveyed communicative identity like “religion” and “family” and being “Karen.” No participants voiced the desire to explore their identity, nor were there ever statements of “finding” oneself, as Arnett described of typical emerging adults. There was never any desire for exploration outside of the community they were in, except for the participant who left for college. The participants did discuss repeatedly a desire for independence as reported in the findings, but this is different from the identity that Arnett explains. The independence they wanted could be linked to the idea of identity because of the desire for some control over self. The fact that the participants did not have any control over their future in the refugee camp was voiced repeatedly.

Categorized as the age of instability, according to Arnett, emerging adulthood is a time when the future is unknown (2004). Outsiders to the participants’ lives could read into the participants’ situations and deem the characterization to be true because the majority of the participants went months without knowing if they were graduating or if they were going back to school. However, instability is not something they expressed, and they discussed their present state with no objection or articulation of worry. They thought they would get a job, and then when they had all gotten a job before the follow-up interview, they stated it as a matter of fact. Because of their experience, they may have an alternative and more dramatic understanding of stability. Prior to arriving in the United States, they had to worry about the clothes on their back
and the food they would eat. As a result, having those basic needs taken care of and also having a
social support network, probably seemed fairly stable to them. As Win Win explained about
other students in high school, “Maybe they don’t understand life. You know they don’t really
have that knowledge. When you are in the camp and just how hard you have to try.”

The starkest contrast is the participants’ divergence to the quality of being self-focused
(Arnett, 2004). The participants all still lived with their families; even the one in community
college was living with sisters. Family was mentioned as what affected them in their journey and
repeatedly, they wanted to help their family. Beyond their family, they were focused on their
people. They all wanted to give back to the Karen people and explained their desire to do so.
Even Win Win’s seemingly individualistic desire to try hard in education had the added
dimension that he felt like he was representing his people. Or Gre Bin’s discussion of going to
business school and owning a shop could be understood to be about him, but he explained that it
would be so that his shop could help the Karen in his community. Var Lee went from doing most
of the work for her family to being married and had plans to move in with her husband soon; she
never had a time on her own that Arnett contends is the norm for emerging adults.

According to Arnett, emerging adulthood is a place of in-between. The participants
certainly did describe a feeling of in-between, but I would not say it was because of their
transition in life span from adolescence to adulthood. I would say it was in-between spatially and
culturally, not developmentally. The in-between that Arnett discusses rests on the emerging
adults not feeling the restraints of adolescents nor the responsibilities of adulthood. However, all
the participants acknowledged their responsibility to help the family and all those not in school
got a job during the study. Emerging adulthood also is about becoming financially independent,
but none of the participants felt the need to move from their family unit, and Win Win who left to another city for college moved in with his two sisters.

The most compatible characteristic that the participants expressed was “the age of possibility” (Arnett, 2004, p. 29). Opportunity was a theme and a feeling that exuded from them. This was a reoccurring theme that had brought them to the United States and they were transitioning into making the possibilities come true. The participants continued to compare the lack of opportunity in the camps as “there” to “here” where they viewed their environment in Dallas as offering promise and potential. The age characteristic of possibility for the Karen refugee has been magnified because of their past Protracted Refugee Situation.

Complicating the Refugee Experience

While navigating the Karen refugee experience, it is important to keep the concerns of labeling and generalizing a patterned “refugee experience” in mind (Malkki, 1995; Black, 2001). However, as Stein (1981) explains, refugee problems are not as temporary and unique as critics contend and a conceptualized theory of the “elements of refugee phenomenon” should be utilized (Kunz, 1973, p. 144). The data collected does show that the participants’ shared experience can be broken down into different structural stages comparable to the foundational theorizing of Kunz (1973; 1981) and Stein’s typology (1981). Although not as extensively as the ten stages that Stein divides the refugee experience into and more than the exile and resettlement stages that Kunz focuses on, the participants examined their journey as three primary stages: into the origins or leaving Burma, the protracted situation of the Thai border refugee camp, and resettlement to the United States with a focus on when they first arrived. The participants’ description of the motivation to leave Burma fits into Kunz’s categorization of an acute refugee movement of an events-alienated reactive fate-group (1973, 1981). The participants all noted
“the fighting” as a reason why their families left, and three specifically called the fighting the “Civil War.” Calling the continued ethnic fighting in Burma the Civil War makes the cause to leave even more of a pronounced event-driven flight and one with no solution in sight. As Gre Bin stated, “They had to flee away” (Emphasis added). The participants further classification into the fate group is exemplified by the connection and desire to be identified with their native country of Burma, while realizing their personal (or family’s) flight took place because their nation rejected them. They all acknowledged that they had a place in Burma, but it was taken from them as Win Win explains, “We don’t have our own country, but we have our own state, called the Karen state…the Karen people had to part there.” Unlike most events-alienated refugees, however, participants did express the hope that they could return to Burma. That was only wished with the caveat that the current changes in government continue and democracy is one day established with the aspiration that there would still someday be a free Karen state.

Mae La and Umphien, the two Thai refugee camps where asylum was sought by the participants, would be their stage of what Kunz termed “midway to nowhere” (1973). The dramatic term does not reflect the participants’ description because they spent over a decade in the refugee camps before the third-country resettlement opportunity was even offered. The participants did not express any kind of purgatory, but instead understood the camp to be what growing up is. At that young developmental stage of life, it offered them a belonging, filling their need for community. Var Lee simply stated that Mae Lot was, “my childhood.” Stein’s description of the refugee camp stage is more comparable because along with the feeling of belonging, the participants did voice the limited status and confinement. Although Stein describes focusing on loss as a key characteristic of the refugee camp stage, this was not mentioned by the refugees. Loss not being a focus was primarily as a result of the participants’
age because they would not really have had developed a “former life” in Burma as Stein
discusses (1981, p. 324), and the refugee camp was life as they knew it, especially for those who
were born in the camps.

According to the Kinetic Model of flight patterns that Kunz proposes (1973), the
participants shared experience falls into the acute refugee movement in the “push-pressure-
plunge” model (p. 134). Like Kunz described, the participants fled Burma in mass and were
“pushed out” (Stein, 1981, p. 322), but not necessarily pulled into Thailand; only Poe De Bue
mentioned a factor other than danger which was economic assistance. After feeling the pressure
and the constraint of the camps which they described as “no freedom,” they took the “plunge”
into third country resettlement. Once they arrived in their new situation, their shared experience
of resettlement could be categorized as “integration realists” who seek an accommodation in the
United States that is consistent to their past and present roles (Kunz, 1981).

Differences in the United States culture were noted, but the participants did not express a
desire to make changes to their Dallas community; they did express an interest in becoming
citizens. The participants would measure what Kunz defines as the “cultural compatibility” of the
United States as fairly high. They described feeling welcome and expressed their ability to
celebrate their nationality freely while able to participate in their religion of choice. The
linguistic barrier that Kunz describes was lamented by the participants, but they did not
experience the inability to overcome that element. As Kunz indicated, the resiliency, despite the
gap, can partly be attributed to the number of people in Dallas who do speak the same language
and share their traditions. Another factor mentioned by Kunz regarding the host country that
offered compatibility for the participants was that Dallas is multi-ethnic. The social-
receptiveness of Dallas, an urban environment with diverse populations, may have given the
participants a different experience than those Karen resettled in smaller communities. This does not mean in reality that the Karen refugees were not marginalized, but that they could integrate into the diverse society. This may have influenced the participants’ ability to see themselves as capable of advancement. Although the participants are best described as events-alienated refugees, the participants vocalized the existence of “historic responsibility” that is usually characterized by majority-identified refugees (Kunz, 1981, p.46). Each participant explained a desire to help the Karen people and those they left behind in some regard. For example, Poe De Bue explained, “If I go back there, I will help my people. I will help my country.” Even though Poe De Bue was not even born in Burma, he calls it “my country” and feels the need that he should help.

As Black (2010) points out, Kunz does provide a reference point for refugee theory and as Kunz (1981) himself explains, his framework satisfies the need for a comprehensive approach to the refugee experience. However, the phenomenological study brings into view what is missing when the movement is explained by a predictive pattern: the meaning. By isolating the movements and giving each stage characteristics, we can subtract from the underlying meanings the Karen participants experienced that ebbed and flowed throughout their journey. For example, the hope for opportunity and a better life did not occur in an isolated stage and still has not stopped occurring as the participants all expressed the various occupations they planned on pursuing. Also lost is the participants’ own perception of their journey. Kunz and Stein used refugee movement and reasoning to analyze their findings, but never applied the refugee’s voice and his or her own understanding of the experience. The essence of these participants’ experience shows that navigating the refugee experience was much more than a formula, but an emotional flight that continues today.
Their continued flight and shared experience problematizes the writings of Agier (2008) and Bauman (2004). The findings suggest that there is some truth to universal dimensions of the refugee experience today (2008). The three stages he divides the experience into: destruction, confinement, and action for the right to life, replicate the structural variation of the participants: origin, Protracted Refugee Situation and resettlement. Agier, however, concludes that after these three stages, their only outcome will be as undesirable victims. The participants certainly felt marked by the refugee experience and their time at the refugee camp, but it was not to the calamitous extent that Agier and Bauman contend. “Once a refugee, always a refugee,” may be true for the participants’ shared experience (Bauman, 2004, p. 79). Jamal did say that the most important thing people know about him is “That I lived in the camp,” and Christie wanted people to know “Where I come from and that I am a refugee.”

However, this study’s findings contend that the Karen refugees do not feel a permanent exclusion and they are much more than victimized “human waste” (Bauman, 2004, p. 77). Even at the refugee camps, the participants felt a belongingness and school gave them a sense of purpose in the camps, contrary to what Bauman describes, which may be because they were children and adolescents. After resettlement, the participants described a community, almost a pride in being a refugee and being Karen that did not promote a “stateless” feeling. Their drive to overcome hardship and even Poe Dah Bue’s insistence during the focus group that determination be pointed out, shows that they think of themselves as much more than victims. As Win Win declared, “I am a Karen refugee, and I am more than that. I can do what you can do.”

The Karen Context

Taking Black’s (2001) suggestion of looking at a particular group of refugees into consideration, or as Kunz calls it a specific vintage (1973), we can further unpack the Karen
refugee experience. The shared experience of the emerging adult Karen refugees in the study can further some understanding but also add complexity to the findings in the literature review.

A major structural factor that shaped the shared Karen experience was the large time period the participants spent in the refugee camp. The Protracted Refugee Situation magnified the themes of oppression and quest for freedom. Concurrent to the findings of research done within the Thai refugee camps, the participants echoed the poor infrastructure and limited access to a quality grade school education and little to no access to higher education (Oh & Stouwe, 2008; Zeus, 2011; Oh, 2010). Win Win articulated the little prospect they saw of furthering their education and Poe Dah Bue enthusiastically said that unlike in the camp, in the United States, “America is the famous country. The education is high. The education is high.” The struggle and importance to get an accredited education was illustrated by Gre Bin, “They give you a report card, but you don’t get a transcript. There is no document.”

The lack of inclusion and curbing of diversity in the camps that Oh and Stouwe’s findings recorded were not described by the participants in this study. The participants were the Karen majority, so it may not have affected them, but they did answer that there were other ethnic groups there that lived together with no problems. As Oh and Stouwe explained, all of them learned and were taught in Sgaw Karen but Gre Bin did mention learning Pwo and Win Win said most of his classes were in English. The participants all described taking some Thai language classes and some English classes.

Participants did mention that the majority status of Karen in the camps and the camps themselves, were a major part of their foundation for the community theme. According to Oh and Stouwe, the camps facilitated a cohesion for the Karen which was certainly true and as South
pointed out, it definitely manifested their Karen nationalism, or at least gave them an open place to be Karen without fear of danger (2007). For example, Win Win explained,

*They didn’t persecute you and the authority there did not say, Ok you cannot be Karen.*

*They didn’t tell us that. They gave you free life to live there as long as you don’t cross the law and the rules that they put there for you.*

The Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny study included research of the same Karen refugee participants at a Thai refugee camp (Mae La) and then in their resettlement to “Westville” in the United States. Adding some complexity to Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny’s findings that the camp was “no life at all,” the participants of this study spoke of the camp with reminiscence. In addition to the safety and presence of community that the camp offered and acknowledged by Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny, the participants also spoke of playing, friends, and the forest. Jamal called the camp “my place” and Var Lee called it “my childhood” which suggests part of the reason why their descriptions of the camp were different from the adults that Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny interviewed at Mae La. Also, the time separation of five years that my participants experienced, may have affected their feelings of nostalgia as opposed to the refugees interviewed while at the camp. However, there was a monotony of camp life that the participants unanimously reported that made camp life hard, just as Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny had found. The human warehousing that has been described in Protracted Refugee Situations clearly became a part of the participants’ experience. Gre Bin explained the repetitiveness of his life, “*I live there 15 years and every day is mostly the same. Every day you just go to school and study.*”

Kenny and Kenny-Lockwood’s findings that the decision to resettle was mainly to avoid spending any more of their lives in the camp and that the United States was chosen because it was obtained more quickly than other countries, were not the shared experience of the
participants in this study. The participants all spoke with excitement about moving to the United States. For example, Mint Aye exclaimed, “Yeah! I want to come here! Because many people can be here and we heard the America is better than the Thai refugee camp. So we want to come here!” However, most said the decision was based on education and opportunity, not escape, like Christie explained, “In here is better education, because in here is a developed country, because they give us a good opportunity to learn.” This might be because it was described as the parents’ decision, or in one case older siblings’ decision to resettle and they were repeating what had been told to them -- education and better opportunity.

Lack of institutional support was not given as the main reason for difficulties faced in the United States by the participants as found in the Kenny and Kenny-Lockwood (2011) study. The participants did not have a shared experience of the agencies roles in resettlement as the descriptions of different levels of support ranged from none to especially helpful. Instead, the participants reported that the English language was the overwhelming barrier, like the findings of the study done on the Karen women resettled in Australia (Watkins et al., 2012).

Second migration was not a major issue for the Karen participants in the research study, unlike other refugee resettlement studies have shown (Kenny & Kenny-Lockwood, 2011, Simich, Beisher, & Mawani, 2003). Four participants were still in the apartment complexes that they were originally placed in by their resettlement agency and three had moved within the same city to another apartment complex with a larger Karen population. Only Win Win had moved outside of Dallas, but that was in order to attend community college. The contrast to the large numbers of second migration refugees that Kenny and Kenny-Lockwood reported is most likely because, unlike their site of “Westville,” Dallas has a large population of Karen that had already formed a
support network. Like Gre Bin pointed out, “they have Karen there already that will help you other refugees out if they need it.”

This study’s findings are interesting in relation to Mitschke et al. ’s research which has a comparable, if not the same, site for research (2011). Some of the psychosocial concerns found in their study of adult Karen refugees including lack of financial resources, health care, and lack of employment opportunity, were not once mentioned by the Karen refugees in this study as challenges. This could possibly again be because of the developmental age that the participants were at, and those issues were not in the forefront of their mind unlike the adult Karen refugees interviewed. Similar to the Mitchke et al. ’s study on Karen, the importance of the Karen community, the desire for education, and the language barrier all emerged as crucial parts of this study. Gre Bin’s wish to go to business school to become a shopkeeper illustrates each of these similarities. He explained, “I know a lot of people who come on their own to America. They don’t understand in English when they come in stores and they are so nervous.” Gre Bin wants to further his education in order to help other people because of the language barrier that exists for his people.

**Characteristically Karen?**

A clustered theme of the shared experience was the prized community the participants found as Karen people. At the beginning of the interviews, each individual said confidently “I am Karen” and later when directly asked, all replied that they were proud to be Karen. As I pressed them about what it meant to be Karen, some offered it was because of language and because their parents were Karen, but two said “Because I am” in a confused way. It was as Cheesman reported that one of the defining characteristics of being Karen “is the conviction one is Karen” (2002, p.201).
When I asked each of the participants what the difference between Pwo and Sgaw was, each one of them informed me that Pwo and Sgaw were basically the same, just a different language. As Cheesman argued (2002), the participants had formed a pan-Karen identity, and only one participant specifically identified that he was Pwo Karen. So, like Cheesman argued of the Karen ethnic group, the participants’ shared meaning of Karen goes beyond the characteristics of language and culture that define most ethnic groups. At a more significant level, the Karen ethnic group identity has historically focused on their oppression, lack of education, and virtuosity (Cheesman, 2002).

The first major theme that continued from the beginning to the end of the participants’ shared journey was the overcoming of oppression and hardship, which parallels the long-term narrative of oppression that Cheesman found as a distinguishing characteristic of Karen heritage (2002). Mint Aye who experienced seven years in Burma blatantly recalled, “If they see me they will kill me.” She had first-hand knowledge of this persecution and it remained a significant part of her story. Christie, who was not born in Burma had been told by her family that in Burma, “they have to worry about the soldiers, the Burmese soldiers... because they kill Karen people.” Cheesman found that the discourse on oppression indicated a destiny of liberation. The quest for freedom had a dominant meaning in the emerging adult Karen refugee experience as confirmed by their overpowering description that the refugee camp was the lack of freedom. As Jamal and multiple people complained, “we can’t go anywhere.” The United States, in the participants’ perspective, was discussed as a form of liberation. Everyone vocalized Poe Dah Bue’s sentiment, “In the United States, it is free.” As Christie put it, there is “freedom of everything here.”

Hope for opportunity and a “better life” was the second theme for their shared experienced revolving around the pursuit of education. Cheesman concluded that the discourse
surrounding pan-Karen identity includes the stigma of being uneducated and trying to regain that education (2002). Roland and Darlington (2010) also listed education as an aspect of Christian Karen identity who had resettled to Australia. Education was discussed at length by the participants and although it was mentioned as a hardship at times, was ultimately a part of their meaning for opportunity and a better life. According to Cheesman, the Karen are in search of education because they once had it as the privileged group of the British colonialists and American missionaries (2002). Whether that historic motivation is true or not, the motivation for the children to have education was mentioned as why they left Burma, in addition to the dominant pressure of persecution. As Jamal stated, “If they stay in Burma... No education.”

Although they all received an education in Thailand at the camp, it was the incentive for a better education that made their parents and other family members decide to move to the United States. Like Gre Bin explained, “Because there is a good education here. It doesn’t matter for them, they did it for the children.” The participants all described the schools here as “better” although some could not give beyond superficial reasons why. Ironically, for five of the participants, the education for which they sought in the United States did not result in a diploma after five years of school. This failure to earn a diploma did not upset or anger the participants, except for Mint Aye’s smiling voice proclaiming “I really want to pass [the tests]!” During the member checking follow up to the interviews, I did finally ask those five how it made them feel that they came here for an education and were not able to graduate. In response, they were not overly concerned and interpreted their educational possibilities surprisingly optimistic. “It’s ok!” Var Lee told me reassuringly; Christie made a whispered promise to me that she would graduate.

Virtuousness is the third category that Cheesman argued to be a unifier of pan-Karen identity. The participants did not articulate the moral superiority to which Cheesman found some
Karen felt privy (2002). The participants all voiced that in the Thai camps there were refugees from different ethnic groups and it was not a problem and everyone got along and lived harmoniously together. In Dallas, the participants said that everyone was equal and that being Karen or their religion “didn’t matter”. At times they did distance themselves from other ethnic minorities during the interviews, but that occurred when they were recalling being misidentified as a part of another minority group in Dallas or not being welcomed by another minority group. The participants did not want to be called Chinese or Mexican mainly because they did not want to be lumped into a category that they were not. Participants did prefer to associate with other Karen if possible and they all live in close proximity of eachother. An outsider could examine the group as “clannishness” because seven of them play together with other Karen (p.214), live in the same proximity as other Karen, and now four of them even work together, but the participants would probably describe it as their friends’ social support or a network. In Say’s words, it is “so cool” that there are other Karen here. Cheesman also described the practice of endogamy, but when I asked if they would want to get married and followed up with whether the partner would have to be Karen, only one said the partner would have to be Karen. Roland and Darlington did not mention virtuousness, but did separately list community and nationalism as two different characteristics of Christian Karen identity (2010). The emerging adult Karen refugees in this study talked about being Karen as being a part of a community. Like Jamal described, “if we stay nearby as neighbors, we just know that if you need something right here, we help each other.”

An additional aspect of Christian Karen identity that Roland and Darlington identified is the role of faith (2010). They found the church was central to their participants’ lives in Australia and that faith was how they coped with resettlement. Of course, Roland and Darlington did only
interview Karen identified as Christians and one of the focus groups was held at a Bible Camp. Also, eight out of ten of the community leaders interviewed worked for or were associated with a church. In this research study, on the contrary, religion played an interesting non-role in the emerging adult Karen refugee experience. Only one participant brought up religion before it was directly asked about. However, when they were asked, the participants unanimously answered that religion was important to them. In the past, I had personally witnessed endless gifts that different churches had bestowed upon the Jamal/Var Lee/Say family, and know they spent a lot of time at church, but none of them mentioned church when asked who or what helped them resettle and who or what affected their journey. The three who were Buddhist were all Pwo Karen while four Sgaw Karen participants reported that their family was Buddhist in Burma but converted to Christianity in Thailand. There was indication of a pressure to be Christian in the camps and here in the United States. Most interestingly was Say’s commentary, “We are Christian.” followed by the comment, “We are good.” suggesting that there is a good and bad answer to religion. Gre Bin reported proudly that he and all his family had always been Christian. Meanwhile, Poe Dah Bue humorously shared his experiences with people coming to talk to him about Jesus.

Taken as a whole, the shared description of the Karen refugee phenomenon suggests that there is some legitimacy to an existential refugee experience particularly surrounding pattern of movement. However, the study indicates that perhaps it is the developmental stage of the participants that complicates the meaning of the experience in addition to their sociohistorical and ethnic background. Still, not all characteristics of the emerging adulthood stage could be found in the resettled Karen refugees, especially those involving identity exploration and self-
focus. This could be because of the essential variant of community and Karen nationalism that remains a large part of the participants’ lives, as concluded in previous empirical studies.
CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

Summary

Despite the benefits of theoretical grounding on refugee movement, to homogenize the refugee experience can be problematic, so the phenomenon must be complicated and contextualized with regards to the sociohistorical background of the given refugee group (Malkki, 1995). This study looked at the phenomenon of the refugee experience and specifically at the Karen people from Burma. Participants at the developmental age of emerging adulthood were asked for the shared meaning of their refugee experience from exile to resettlement in the United States. The application of transcendental phenomenology shed light on the question with the synthesis of the participants’ textural and structural descriptions revealing the essence of the participants’ shared experience.

The journey of the emerging adult Karen refugee in the United States is a flight that begins in Burma. Despite origins of oppression, the pursuit of independence and opportunity made the Karen refugees’ home a refugee camp on the Thai border. The Protracted Refugee Situation offered the refugees a safe place to foster a community and a setting of childhood belonging, but was a life full of monotonous hardship and confinement. The hope for a better life led the Karen refugees to resettle in the United States. Overcoming barriers and exploring the idea of freedom, the Karen refugees continue to aspire for belongingness and a “better life.” The participants are not “human waste” or perpetual victims, but determined emerging adults who see optimistic opportunity. Even after resettlement, their flight continues on as they remember their past with hopes to help their own people and share their experience with those who will just ask.

The overall essence captured deviates somewhat from the theoretical refugee experience because the participants described their experience from a Karen emerging adulthood perspective.
(Kunz, 1981; Stein, 1981) while contemplating a life that took place during childhood and adolescence. The textural description, or what they experienced, was affected by their developmental period of life as well as their strong Karen community. Concurrently, the developmental life span characteristics typical of emerging adulthood were affected by the structural variations of their flight, or how they experienced the phenomenon (Arnett, 2004). As a result, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish those characteristics influenced by development stage (childhood, adolescence, and now emerging adulthood) and those particular to the refugee experience.

The participants’ shared experience did include a strong sense of Karen identity that was consistent to what has been historically identified (Cheesman, 2002; Smith, 2007; Roland & Darlington, 2010). Their Karenness affected their composite description because it prevented them from the typical pattern of second-migration and it helped them overcome the stigma of having a wasted life (Kenny & Kenny-Lockwood, 2011; Simich et al., 2003; Bauman, 2004). The meaning of the shared understanding that resonates here is the participants’ common desire to bring awareness to the refugee experience and share their individual experiences having never had the opportunity to do so before.

**Implications**

On a national level, this study has implications relevant to society at a macro level because the United States takes in the largest number of refugees every year (UNHCR, 2012). When analyzing the last five years of refugee arrivals to the United States, refugees from Burma have represented the largest number, yet the Burmese refugees, including the Karen, remain an under-researched and unspecified population (ORR, 2008-2012). The findings in the study could be used by caseworkers and for awareness building amongst the community where the Karen
refugees relocate. For example, instead of the assumption that all refugees from Burma speak Burmese, at least agency workers would know what language their clients might speak. The study also has suggested that the Karen people still represent a multiplicity of religions, and they should be welcomed and supported to keep their religion and Karen identity whether they are Buddhist or Christian. Moreover, the shared experience exposed small parts of resettlement that could be adjusted to make for an easier arrival. The resettlement agencies could perhaps alter their initial intake process. The findings again supported the need for English acquisition upon arrival and stressed the importance of English education to be part of the resettlement assistance program.

Further, the extent to which the participants discussed their past education experiences points to its significance and how it has relevant implications to public education. These educational findings may assist giving teachers confidence to sensitively ask their students about their past. Teachers cannot be expected to do everything, but this study does show that it is acceptable to attempt to have the conversation and empower their Karen refugee students. If they are only looked at in a victim role, they will not be able to gain agency over their future. Also, teachers may read Karen refugees’ parents’ inability to speak English and unfamiliarity with public schools as not being interested in their children’s education. It would be meaningful for the schools taking in refugees to realize that one of the Karen’s primary reasons for resettling in the United States was for education and that the Karen students are motivated to learn with full support from their families. This study assists in helping us understand the struggles that Karen refugees have in their attempts to graduate from high school and may provide keys to assisting them with future academic success at the national or state level. For example, Texas
Education Agency is already considering changes to their state testing policies regarding refugee populations and studies such as this one could help inform their decision (Kastner, 2013).

In addition, this study has implications relevant to refugee policy. The reforms in Burma and the pressure to repatriate the refugees in Thailand should be handled with extreme caution. The study shows that the long lasting distrust in the Burmese soldiers has been engrained in the Karen along with the quest for a free Karen state. These attitudes could influence their settlement and fear of repatriation. Stateside, this study advocates for the Karen refugees to be placed in an area with other Karen where they have a support network which may assist avoiding second-migration and the problems it brings (Simich et al., 2003). Resettlement agencies try to distribute refugees evenly so that they do not overburden certain communities; however, this study shows the benefits of ensuring there is a support network in place for the refugee group. Placing Karen where other Karen have resettled would proactively avoid the problems of second-migration which include losing agency support and being no longer eligible for government benefits.

**Limitations of Study**

The qualitative study employed a transcendental phenomenological method with the objective to capture the meaning of the eight participants’ refugee experience as Karen emerging adults. As in any qualitative study, this research has its strengths, but also brings with it challenges and limitations. The study attends to the standard criteria outlined by Creswell to evaluate a quality phenomenological study which includes conveying the philosophical tenets of phenomenology, studying a clear phenomenon, using phenomenological procedures such those recommended by Moustakas, conveying the essence of the experience within the context it occurred, and remaining reflective throughout the study (2004). In qualitative studies, Lincoln and Guba parallel reliability to dependability achieved by assessing the process and product of
analysis (Merrick, 1999). Moustakas’ (1994) procedure in the transcendental phenomenological data analysis assisted in upholding the dependability of the study by outlining a systematic process to adhere to. The trustworthiness of the study is also strengthened through the combined use of lengthy interviews, with later follow-ups and member checking in order to ensure the data was being interpreted correctly.

One possible limitation may be the use of three participants from one family and two from another. To have several members from one family could perhaps skew the results. Nonetheless, this does not invalidate the findings because the objective of a phenomenological study is to locate the shared experience. Furthermore, each family participant was of a different age within the range and offered a different experience of the phenomenon.

Although I reassured the participants that they would have full anonymity and could share whatever they wanted with me, my role as a researcher may have affected the participants’ responses. I am a white American woman who helped three of the participants’ transition to the United States. Their answers about resettlement may have been influenced by my identity. They may not have been forthcoming with their answers about life in the United States or they may have deliberately altered their answers in a more positive direction. I could not control this aspect of the study, but they may have responded more openly or differently to a fellow Karen researcher. However, we will never know the extent to which my white female American identity influenced the context of the interview.

Finally, as a result of the specific criterion of participants, number of participants, and the qualitative nature of this study, it is not generalizable to other refugee populations in different contexts. Then again, that is not the objective of a phenomenological study and despite the
inability to generalize the findings, the findings offer practical and theoretical suggestions in refugee work, and the study can be used as a springboard for future refugee studies.

**Future Directions**

This study illuminated the essence of the emerging adult participants’ flight and provided new knowledge of the meaning of the phenomenon of the Karen refugee experience. The findings opened up new directions for further research. As the refugees from Burma continue to represent the largest majority of arrivals in this country, it is important that we continue to give them voice in order to validate who they are and make them feel welcome to the community in which they resettle. A comprehensive study of the different ethnic groups’ experiences coming from Burma would help resettlement agencies and others. At the large national resettlement agency I worked at in the summer of 2012, little was known about the differences amongst the Burmese groups, aside from the obvious that they did not have a common language. It would be interesting to see how the Shan, the Chin, or the Rohingya ethnic groups describe their refugee experience from Burma. The Karen’s story is unique because of the historical ramifications of colonization, but other groups offer other perspectives. For example, the Rohingya offer a story of religious discrimination because they are a Muslim group denied citizenship in Burma and are still being persecuted today (Hookway, 2013).

Most refugee studies focus on refugee youth or refugee adults and allow for a large range of participant ages in-between. The findings from this study can be distinguished from the theoretical refugee construct and previous Karen studies because of the developmental age at which all of the participants described their experience. Meanwhile, Arnett’s emerging adult life stage provided a framework to evaluate the participants vis-à-vis the typical American of the same age. Further research on how different age groups experience the phenomenon among
Karen refugees utilizing different stages of psychosocial development would make for an enlightening comparative study on how developmental transitions impact the way the phenomenon is experienced and described.

**Researcher’s Impressions**

As a humanitarian and public servant, my inner-struggle with this study was continually questioning myself as to how, or if, I was helping my participants and the marginalized Karen people in the United States. I knew that sharing their voices would at least bring that awareness to their community, but that they deserved more than that awareness. I also wondered if we continue to deconstruct refugees, does a time come when we can no longer constructively help them. The simple answer that emerged organically from the study was that the participants want to be both heard and have people listen to them. This means not just asking “Where are you from?” because the question is not only problematic for them, but glosses over centuries of history and a meaningful flight. Instead, it means asking about them and about their people and their past. As Var Lee explains, “If people ask me, I want to tell. Like, nobody asks me.” The essence of their experience and the new knowledge formed has inspired me personally and professionally to encourage others who work with refugees to simply ask them about their refugee experience, empower them, and bring their unshared stories to light.
REFERENCES


United States Office of Refugee Resettlement (2012). Fiscal year 2012 refugee arrivals [Data


APPENDIX B

DATE: May 31, 2012
TO: Laura Booher
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board
PROJECT TITLE: [320681-4] Karen Burmese Refugee Resettlement to the United States
SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: May 31, 2012
EXPIRATION DATE: April 5, 2013
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 12 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on April 5, 2013. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsr@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.
May 2, 2012

You are invited to be part of a research project that is studying what it is like to be a young adult Karen refugee. The purpose of the study is to better understand your experiences at the Thai refugee camps and your journey to and living in the United States. With this information, we hope to be able to help refugees in the future. In order to be part of the study, you must be 18-26 years of age and have spent time in a Thai refugee camp before coming to the United States.

If you choose to be part of the study, you will be asked to take part in an interview during which I will ask you questions in English at a place that you choose. The interview will last around 1 hour and go over questions about your life in the Thai camps, moving, and living in the United States. If you say it is ok, the interview will be recorded. After finishing the interview, you will receive a small gift so that I can say, “thank you for your time”. If there are things you said that I need to understand better, or would like to hear more about, I may call you for a follow-up interview that will last less than an hour. That follow-up will be within six months after your first interview, in a place you choose or over the phone, whichever you choose when I call. Your contact information and answers will be electronically stored in a safe file that will be gotten rid of within 5 years after the end of the study. I will call you with the results of the study no later than 8 months from your interview and ask for ideas, concerns, and advice in order to make sure I understood your thoughts correctly.

There will be no risks to you and no cost to you to be in this study, and your answers and identity will remain private. If you are unclear about what a question means, I will ask it again in another way to help you understand what I am asking. If you find that any of the questions in the interview make you feel uncomfortable, you can choose to not answer them or stop the interview at any time. Should you feel you need to speak to a counselor, Andrea Davis, LPC, ART-BC takes Medicaid and can be reached at 972-880-5737 and is located at 9603 White Rock Trail, Suite 121, Dallas, TX 75238.

While there may be no personal advantage from you being in the study, what you share may be helpful to future refugees. Being a part of the study is always your choice. If you decide that you don’t want to be in the study now, or if you want to stop being in the study later, your choice will not result in any bad results or bad feelings. Your decision whether or not to be in the study will not impact any relationship to BGSU.

Your confidentiality (privacy) will be kept while I collect your answers and use them for results. You will be given a pseudonym (fake name) that will be used during your interview and saved to your file as well as in any results recorded and shared. Only the researcher will view collected answers in and any recordings or files will be stored in a safe location.

If you have any questions or comments about this study, you can contact me at (214) 448-9907, or email me at lboother@bgsu.edu. You may also contact my Thesis Advisor, Dr. Margaret Booth, at (419) 372-9950 or email her at boothma@bgsu.edu. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) has approved the procedures of this study. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the BGSU Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu.

Sincerely,

Laura Elizabeth Booher
Graduate Student, BGSU School of Leadership & Policy Studies
Karen Burmese Refugee Resettlement to the United States
Informed Consent Form

I have been informed of the nature of this study and agree to participate. I am at least 18 years old. I received a copy of this form and am aware that I can ask questions at any time during or after the study. I give the principal investigator permission to present this work in written and/or spoken form for teaching or presentation to advance the knowledge of academics without further permission from me provided that my name or identity is not disclosed.

______________________________  _______________________
Participant Signature               Date
Karen Volunteers Needed for Research Study

Research is being done in your area to better understand the experiences of Karen Burmese refugees. This research will explore your experience in Thai refugee camps and your journey to and living in the United States. With this information, we hope to bring awareness to what it is like to be a young adult Karen Burmese refugee in order to try and help refugees in the future.

You must be **18-26 years of age** and have lived in a refugee camp in Thailand before you came to the United States. The study will include a one hour interview in English, so you have to understand English enough that you are willing to try and answer in English. The interview will include questions about what your life was **like** in the Thai camp and what it was **like** moving to the United States. I might have to ask you some more questions later if I need help understanding some of your answers. After the interview, volunteers will receive a small gift as a token of appreciation for your time spent participating in the study.

For more information or to participate in the study, please contact Laura Elizabeth Booher, at 214-448-9907 or lbooher@bgsu.edu. This study is being done as part of a graduate school thesis for the School of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Policy at Bowling Green State University and all research will be conducted by Laura. If you have any questions about the study, feel free to contact Laura.
Karen Burmese Refugee Resettlement to the United States

Interview Questions

*Note: The Interview will be semi-structured and will allow the subject flexibility to bring in additional viewpoints and focus on certain aspects that is pertinent to him or her.*

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

1. What is your name? How old are you?
2. How many people are in your family? What are their ages?
3. Where were you born? Where are you from?
4. If someone asked you what is your nationality, what you say? Why?
5. Did you ever live in Burma? For how long?
6. What was it like being Karen in Burma?

**THAI REFUGEE CAMP**

7. Did your parents explain why you moved to (or were born in) a Thai refugee camp? What did they say?
8. How long did you live in a Thai refugee camp and what was the name of it?
9. If you had to describe your life in the refugee camp to your friends here in the United States, how would you describe it? What was your daily routine?
10. What was it like being Karen in the Thai refugee camp?
11. If your friends here asked what education was like in the Thai refugee camps, what would you tell them?
12. When did you know you were coming to the United States and why did you think it would be like here?

13. In what ways did the refugee camp prepare you for life in the United States? How did you prepare for the move?

MOVING TO THE U.S.

14. When did you move to the United States and can you tell me about that move?

15. In what ways did the refugee camp make it harder for you to move and live in U.S.?

16. What are the biggest difficulties here in the United States?

17. What makes life easier here in the United States?

18. What do you miss about life in the Thai camps?

19. What do you not miss about life in the Thai camps?

20. What is it like being a Karen in the United States?

21. What do you wish you knew before you came to the United States?

22. If you had to describe the United States to your friends or family who are still living in the refugee camps, how would you describe it?

23. Is there anything else you would like to add about life in the United States that I should have asked?

24. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience as a Karen refugee that I should have asked?

25. What have you experienced in terms of your journey from refugee camps to resettlement?

26. What influenced and affected your experiences in the refugee camps and resettlement?