



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

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ABSTRACT

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

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1. Introduction

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

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culture which can include parental mental and physical health problems, social isolation, poverty and children's behavioural problems (Lewig, Arney, & Salveron, 2010).

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

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

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

Previously, the intergenerational relationships among Vietnamese refugee families in exile have been addressed. In particular, the challenges associated with value discrepancies between traditional Vietnamese family obligations versus autonomy and individualism in Europe, North-America and Australia have been described and analyzed (e.g. Kwak, 2003; Kwak & Berry, 2001; Nguyen & Williams, 1989; Phinney, Ong, & Madden, 2000; Rosenthal, Ranieri, & Klimidis, 1996; Vedder, Sam, Vijver, & Phinney, 2006). Value disagreements have been observed as producing family disharmony or "acculturation gaps" (Birman, 2006) and might adversely affect adolescent's adaptation beyond the family context (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Kwak, 2003; Vedder et al., 2006). The literature indicates a direct association between parental acculturation and quality of the intergenerational relationship (Kwak, 2003; Ying & Han, 2007).

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

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

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

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

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

A qualitative study (T4) was initiated by the first author in 2006. From the original cohort, eleven families were invited to participate of which nine accepted. The two families that declined to participate gave the explanation that they were

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