



Finding the Familiar in Rural America: How a Rural Lifestyle Helps Older Karen Adapt to Life in the United States

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Abstract

The United States resettled over 70,000 ethnic Karen refugees between 2006 and 2019 due to a protracted civil war in Burma. The vast majority of these refugees have been resettled in urban areas despite the fact that most of them are from rural villages. The refugee-resettlement experience can be daunting, but the challenges are often more acute for elders (Johnson 2017). The aim of this study was to examine how a rural lifestyle may help older Karen as they adjust to their new lives in the US. Our findings suggest that rural living may soften the effects of certain acculturation stressors due to the familiarity of rural living and other factors. In particular, a rural lifestyle may mitigate acculturation stress specifically for elders in three ways: (1) promoting a healthy lifestyle; (2) sustaining or building relationships between elders and grandchildren and other youth; and (3) promoting skills and knowledge that can lead to feelings of self-worth and dignity for older people with a refugee background. In this article, we discuss how the experiences of one community of resettled Karen refugees seem to offer a counter-narrative to the “vulnerability trope” (King et al. 2017) that often dominates portrayals of older resettled refugees.

Keywords: Refugee resettlement; Karen people; Acculturation; Elders; Rural; Aging refugees

Anthropology & Aging, Vol 44, No 1 (2023), pp. 1-18

ISSN 2374-2267 (online) DOI 10.5195/aa.2023.399



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Background

Over 95% of all refugees resettled in the United States are provided housing in urban areas by the US government's Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) (Singer and Wilson 2007), despite the fact that many of these people come from rural areas in their countries of origin. Refugees are generally resettled in urban areas because of the availability of public amenities like employment services, English-language classes, and public transportation (Bloem 2014). However, resettled refugees often struggle to adapt to their new lives in American cities (see Lugar 2010; Enos, Inserra, and Meservey 2017). This is especially true for older individuals with a refugee background (Chenoweth and Burdick 2001; Dubus 2018).

Karen and other ethnic minorities have been fleeing Burma¹ due to a protracted civil war that began shortly after the country's independence from British rule in 1948. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the US offers resettlement to the most vulnerable refugee cases including older people (UNHCR 2023). The resettlement of refugees from Burma represents the third-largest refugee-resettlement program in US history with over 175,000 people resettled from 2006 through 2019. Ethnic Karen people represent the single largest group resettled from Burma with 72,322 individuals having been resettled as of August 2019 (see Figure 1). Karen resettlement mirrors the US's overall resettlement strategy with the majority of Karen having been resettled in metropolitan areas despite the reality that most Karen refugees are from rural villages in Burma.

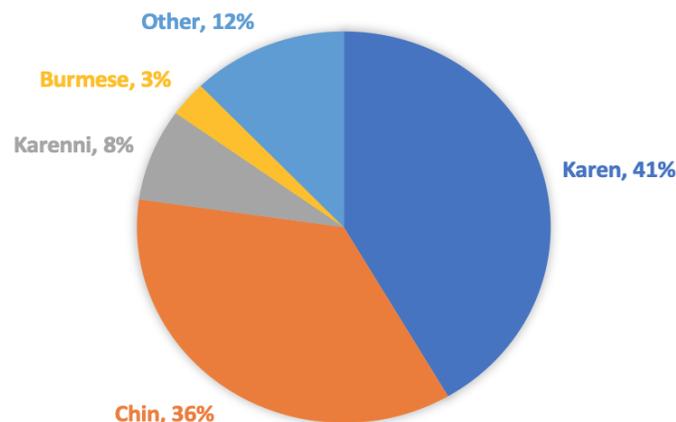


Figure 1: Burmese resettlement by ethnicity (2006–2019). Data adapted from *Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS)* (August 2019).

The refugee-resettlement experience may be marked by manifold hardships as refugees adapt to their new country (Gil and Vega 1996). These challenges often lead to what is known as *acculturation stress*. Drawing on a study conducted by sociologist Kerstin Lueck and biostatistician Machel Wilson (Lueck and Wilson 2010), we conceptualize acculturation stress as “a reduction in mental health and wellbeing of ethnic minorities that occurs during the process of adaptation to a new culture” (2010, 48). Stressors may include, but are not limited to, attaining and maintaining employment, economic hardships, language learning, social and cultural adaptation, building and maintaining friendships, changes in diet, as well as navigating various bureaucratic systems (2010). Moreover, newcomers may have to cope with new roles within the family and their co-ethnic communities (Segal and Mayadas 2005). This research indicates that such changes may be particularly challenging for elders from groups that are culturally distant from the host country (i.e., the resettlement country). This may be because older refugees do not generally have the same opportunities for socialization or English-language development at school or in the workplace. As a result, research indicates that older refugees’ lack of social opportunities may lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness (Atwell, Correa-Velez, and Gifford 2007; Johnson 2017). In our earlier studies, we found that this is often the case with older ethnic Karen living in urban areas in the US (Gilhooly and Lee 2017).

Acculturation stress has been studied in multiple immigrant communities (Dona and Berry 1994; Gil and Vega 1996; Flakerud and Uman 1996; Cervantes et al. 2013) and refugee communities (Berry 1986; Nwadiora and McAdoo 1996; Milner and Khawaja 2010). A growing corpus of studies specifically examines the acculturation stress that older resettled refugees often experience. For example, in the US, acculturation stress and depression has been documented in a study of 200 Arab Americans (Wrobel, Farrag, and Hymes 2009). The relationship between acculturation and physical and mental health has also been examined (Abu-Bader, Tirmazi, and Ross-Sheriff 2011), and the role that English proficiency plays in the acculturation stress of older Russian immigrants has been analyzed (Tran, Sung, and Huynh-Hohnbaum 2008). However, few current studies consider how a rural setting may affect the experiences of older individuals with a refugee background. This paper aims to fill that gap via a case study of six Karen elders living in the rural Karen community of Sandville (pseudonym) located in the southern US state of Georgia.

This study is also situated among other literature that focuses on the multiple stories associated with resettled refugees, and our work offers a counter-narrative to what has been described as the “trope of vulnerability” (King et al. 2017). We conceptualize the trope of vulnerability as focusing on the vulnerabilities of older refugees and ignoring their strengths and resilience. Following geographer Russell King and colleagues (2017), we suggest our study highlights creative ways that older Karen refugees are finding to adapt and meet some of the challenges of resettlement. Anthropologist Monika Palmberger’s (2022) study of Iraqi, Syrian, and Afghan refugees in Vienna, Austria, documents how refugees use internet connected technologies (ICTs) to stay connected to family in their country of origin or other locations, which is a critical step to “placemaking.” Anthropologist Nicole Newendorp’s (2020) study of how the paid and unpaid caregiving work performed by Chinese-born older migrants in the US also describes how this work provides a means for them to act strategically to secure their own support in older age.

In this article, we present an ethnographic case study to investigate the role that a rural setting may have in mitigating acculturation stress and promoting well-being among older Karen. We first describe the Karen people, our focal community, and our methods, before presenting our findings. The following research question framed this study: How has a rural setting affected the resettlement experiences of six elder Karen?

The People Called Karen

This study specifically looks at a community of Sgaw Karen. The history and culture of the Sgaw Karen are unique, and the path of displaced Karen from villages in Burma to refugee camps in Thailand to third countries like the US is likewise singular. Unlike earlier refugee groups arriving from southeast Asia (e.g., Vietnamese, Laotian, Hmong, and Cambodian), the Karen diaspora (i.e., the dispersion of Karen to other areas around the world) is not directly related to US military involvement. Many Karen insurgency groups fought in a 60-year civil war against multiple Burmese governments. This protracted civil war led to the internal and external displacement of Karen and other ethnic minorities. In 2006, US President George W. Bush's administration decided to allow the Karen and other ethnic minorities to begin resettling to the United States from Thailand – a decision that was ostensibly made for humanitarian reasons. However, when we consider that the majority of those resettled under the designation *Burmese* are Christian Karen, Christian Karenni, or Christian Chin, the real motivation may lie in the long religious-historical ties between American missionaries and ethnic minorities like the Karen, Karenni, and Chin (see Figure 2).

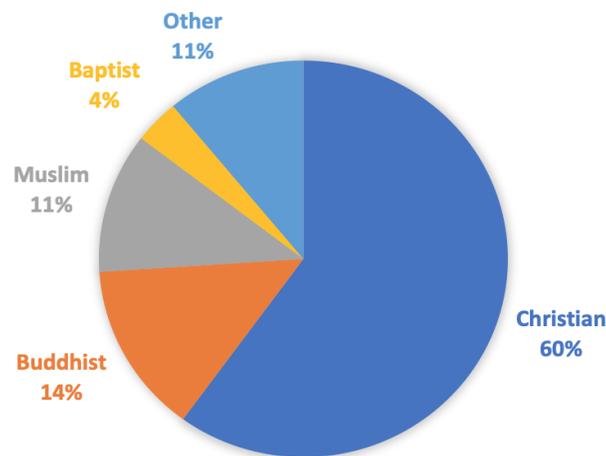


Figure 2: Burmese resettlement by religious affiliation. Data adapted from WRAPS (August 2019).

There are multiple Karen groups, and the largest are the Sgaw Karen people. Each of our participants identifies as Sgaw Karen. The Sgaw Karen people in particular have a long history with the American Baptist mission. Since the mid-19th century, many Sgaw Karen in Burma have been baptized, and Christianity has become a major part of modern Sgaw Karen identity. This is especially true in Sandville, where the Sandville Karen Baptist Church (SKBC) (pseudonym) is the center of the community's religious and social life.

All of the Karen ethnic groups have long lived primarily in the remote regions along the Thai-Burmese central border in what is the Karen (Kayin) State. While some Karen have become more urbanized, all our participants are from rural areas within the Karen state or the Irrawaddy Delta. For much of their history, the Karen people have largely farmed rice and lived off the land. The Karen of Sandville have maintained many of their traditional practices in agriculture as well as language, recreation, and religious worship. The following offers some description of how a rural environment has helped preserve Karen traditions familiar to elder Karen members.

The Karen of Sandville

Sandville, Georgia, has a population of approximately 1,200 people and is located in a rural part of the state. As of March 2020, there were 56 Karen living in 10 households in Sandville, which included four

Karen couples over the age of 65; another 85 Karen were living in 18 households in the neighboring rural town of Pineville (pseudonym). These communities developed after a Karen couple was resettled in the area in 2006 by Festivity Partners (pseudonym), a Christian service community that has been active in resettling refugees in the US since the 1970s. The parents, aunts, adult cousins, and friends of this initial couple later followed and members of this family comprise a significant percent of Karen in the area.

Importantly, the Sandville Karen have established roots in this area. Nine out of ten Karen families own their home. All of the Karen in Sandville identify as Christian.¹ Initially, the Karen community attended worship services at Sandville Baptist Church alongside the predominantly White congregation. In 2014, the Karen community built the SKBC, which has become the center of the Sandville Karens' religious, cultural, and social life. The neighboring town of Pineville has a Karen store that sells Karen clothing (see Figure 3), rice, as well as an assortment of canned and frozen foods, and spices from Thailand. Local non-Karen pastors and congregants have provided the Karen community help to purchase land, borrow heavy equipment, and navigate building codes, as well as with transportation and paperwork. They also often attend Karen festivals, weddings, funerals, and other Karen events locally and regionally. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that other local residents are less enthusiastic about the arrival and growth of the Karen community in the area.



Figure 3: Karen clothing. Courtesy of Daniel Gilhooly.

Methods

Our central participants are three ethnic Sgaw Karen couples who were resettled to the US in 2007 (see Figure 1) and arrived in Sandville between 2009 and 2012. Importantly, each of our six participants was born in Burma, lived in Mae La Refugee camp in Thailand for over 15 years, and originally resettled to urban Phoenix, Arizona, before moving to rural Georgia. Our research participants were selected based on their common experiences in both urban and rural US communities. They were also chosen due to the close rapport they shared with us as researchers: each is a grandparent or relative of one of the children the first author taught as an English-language tutor from 2010 to 2016. From more than 10 years of experience with the community as teachers and researchers, our interactions with other elder Karen also inform our understanding of the experiences of elder Karen in Sandville. Our research suggests

that the experiences of the six focal participants are similar to the experiences of other older Karen in the area.

We interviewed each of the six participants twice. One iteration of interviews focused on the participants' experiences and attitudes towards urban and rural living in the US. The other interview consisted of biographical questions as well as questions about their healthcare practices.

Name	Estimated year of birth	Employment in Sandville	Employment in AZ	Employment in Burma
Eh Wah (male)	1953	Raises chickens, hunts, fishes, grows and sells vegetables	Bus boy, stocking shelves	Farmer, preacher
Sara Paw (female)	1957	Retired poultry-plant worker	Hotel maid	Farmer
Kyaw Mo (male)	1950	Grows and sell vegetables	None	Farmer
Htoo Paw (female)	1947	Retired poultry-plant worker Grows and sell vegetables	None	Farmer
Lah Lah (male)	1945	Makes and sells machetes, bamboo baskets	None	Farmer
Paw Spee (female)	1938	Raises and sells chickens	None	Farmer

Figure 4: Karen participants (all names are pseudonyms and gender self-identified)

This ethnography also draws on larger studies conducted between 2010 and 2021 (see Gilhooly and Lee 2017; Gilhooly, Amos, and Kitson 2019; Gilhooly and Htoo 2022). Through the first author's involvement in these projects, we were introduced to other older Karen and their families. From 2010 to 2011, the first author worked alongside three adolescent Karen brothers and conducted a needs-analysis pilot study of the Karen community in Sandville. That study explored issues germane to employment, housing, education, English-language learning, religion, and acculturation using field notes, survey questionnaires, photographs, video files, and interviews.

This manuscript is also informed by a second collaborative research project conducted alongside the same three Karen brothers. In the summer of 2011, the first author conducted a participatory action research (PAR) project in Karen communities in Des Moines, Iowa, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Atlanta, Georgia. That study involved interviews, informal conversations, video and photographic data, and questionnaires that also inform the current ethnography. During the organization and analysis of our earlier data, we learned that significant differences exist between the lifestyles and overall well-being

of Karen in rural and urban areas. Themes specifically related to elder Karen began to emerge. It seemed clear to us that elder Karen preferred the rural lifestyle offered in Sandville. Each of our participants indicated in interviews that they had relocated to Sandville, in large part, due to a preference for rural living.

We conducted follow-up interviews in May 2020 for two weeks. These interviews consisted of open-ended questions. The data sets from each of the research iterations described above were analyzed using deductive coding, and then we verbally discussed the codes and themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). For this article, we focused on themes that related specifically to the older participants' urban and rural resettlement experiences. Interviews were conducted in English and Karen with various community members assisting as interpreters. Questions were first posed in English and then in Sgaw Karen, if participants asked for clarification. Participants' written consent was obtained to use their images for publication.

Field notes were also generated in Sandville from 2010 to 2016. Participant observations with the families were an important source of data, and our field notes document multiple Karen homes in which we both worked as volunteer teachers. The first author initially began working with the community when he was hired as a tutor for four Karen families. He visited the community over 300 times as a tutor and an ad hoc caseworker, helping Karen families with paperwork, applying for services and benefits, and transportation. The second author distributed surveys and interviewed Karen households in Sandville in 2020.

Our findings suggest that a rural setting allows for the preservation of cultural practices that are beneficial to elder Karen as they adapt to their new lives. Rural living was also found to be conducive to a healthy lifestyle, family cohesion, and, most importantly, to maintain self-worth and dignity within family and community. We discuss this in further detail in the following sections.

Karen Elders and Rural Sandville

Some research suggests that older refugees are particularly vulnerable to acculturation stress (Yee 1992; Chenoweth and Burdick 2001; Mui and Kang 2006; Lee et al. 2010; Lee and Yoon 2011; Gilhooly and Lee 2017). Karen elders, like many other older people with refugee backgrounds/from other immigrant groups, often struggle due to a lack of English proficiency, social isolation, and changing roles within their family and community (Chenoweth and Burdick 2001). However, some sources of acculturation stress seem to have been mitigated in Sandville due to the familiarity of its rural lifestyle. Here, we use the term 'rural' not only in reference to population size but also to the prevalence of farming activities as well as hunting and fishing.

Each of our participants expressed a preference for rural living. They most often cited the importance of being involved in agricultural practices that were reminiscent of their native villages. They also indicated their preference for the tranquility of rural living. One participant, Say-Paw, described her dislike of city living:

City is too busy and many noise all the time. I never like big city. My village in Burma always quiet and I only hear chickens. When I live Phoenix we always hearing many noises that scare me. I like quiet. Here [Sandville] I like garden and many animals like where I live in Burma. (interview; June 2016)

They also cited their preference for rural living due to their ability to maintain a familiar lifestyle. Each of the couples has a large garden and chicken flocks, and two couples have goats. Another couple maintains a flock of ducks much as they did in Burma and, in two cases, as they did in the refugee camps but on a smaller scale. Participants viewed this familiar lifestyle as an asset to their overall quality of life. We also found that rural living seemed to be conducive to a healthy lifestyle and diet.

Healthy Lifestyle and Diet

Refugees resettled in urban areas often lack access to healthy foods, have busy schedules, and limited physical activity which leads to adverse health outcomes among resettled refugees from a variety of backgrounds (Meng et al. 2018). This section addresses how rural living may mitigate some of these adversities by providing a more active lifestyle and healthier diet.

Physical activity and exercise are widely considered to contribute to better mental and physical health among resettled refugees (Purgato et al. 2021). Each of the older Karen couples in our study engage in more regular physical activity, especially compared to when they lived in urban Phoenix. In addition to preparing, planting, maintaining, and harvesting their gardens and maintaining large chicken flocks for eggs and meat, our participants each collect firewood from the nearby forests; they also build fences, animal pens, and other structures. Htoo Paw, an older Karen who has lived in Sandville since 2009, compared her physical activity experiences living in Phoenix to her life in Sandville:

When I come to America I live Phoenix city four years. I never like. I live in small apartment with my son family and only sitting every day. All day sitting reading Bible and sometime watch TV. My son tell to me go walking but I don't like – I scared. I don't know. My family work and go school all day. ... Now I like garden and many chicken. I like teaching kid [grandchildren]. I always busy. *Pu* (grandfather) [her husband] always say I happy now. (interview; June 2016)



Figure 5: Karen elder collecting wood. Courtesy of Daniel Gilhooly.

When considering urban refugee communities in the US, Htoo Paw's experience is not an isolated case. Sociologist Heather-Lyn Haley et al.'s (2014) study on health programs for resettled Burmese in urban Worcester, Massachusetts, found that their adult participants lacked opportunities for physical activity (2014, 14). As we learned in our research, Karen elders in urban areas tend to be unfamiliar with Western-style exercise choices, and thereby often live unhealthy, sedentary lifestyles compared to their rural peers. One grandchild, Htoo Wah (pseudonym), summed up his grandparents' disconnect with Western-style exercise:

They don't know things like going to the gym. They don't jog. They don't exercise like that in Burma – nobody does. They work too much in the fields and don't need the gym. (interview; August 2020)

Likewise, sociologist Akiko Kamimura and colleague's (2017) study for the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) found that fewer than 20% of their Karen participants reported engaging in regular physical activity. Their study's findings suggest that regular physical activity should be promoted among resettled Karen (2017, 390). This inactivity is most likely due to the Karen refugees' urban confinement, as Htoo Paw suggests. Other resettled refugee groups also seem to have similar issues. For example, older Bhutanese who were resettled in urban areas of the northeast US have experienced health-related issues due to a more sedentary lifestyle (Bhatta, Assad, and Shakha 2014).

According to nutritionist Jessie Satia-Abouta, dietary acculturation is the "process that occurs when members of a migrating group adopt the eating patterns and food choices of their new environment" (2003, 74). Changes in diet can have detrimental effects on the overall health of immigrants and refugees. For example, one study documented a dramatic shift in the diet of Liberian and Somali refugees resettled in the US (Patil, Hadley, and Nahayo 2009). Satia-Abouta suggests that the change in living environment from rural to urban areas can lead to an "increase in consumption of energy-rich foods, a decrease in energy expenditure (through less physical activity), and a loss of the traditional social support mechanisms" (2003, 72). These traditional support systems are evident in Sandville, which we describe later.

In sociologist Mandy Hughes' (2015) study on the eating and cooking practices of Burmese who were resettled in rural Australia, food and cooking are considered to be a way for resettled refugees to reconnect to their pasts and reassert their cultural identity. All of our Karen participants in Sandville have maintained traditional cooking and eating practices from Burma. In general, the food that Karen families eat is similar to how they would eat in their native villages, which may help to limit the dietary acculturation stress that could be brought on by the high-fat, high-salt, and high-sugar diet that is common in the southeastern US.

As mentioned, each Karen family in Sandville supports large gardens and grows an assortment of vegetables using the same practices and handmade machetes and other tools used in their native villages in Burma. Red pepper, fuzzy melon, tobacco, red onions, bitter melon, okra, and long beans are grown in Sandville Karen gardens. These vegetables are usually cooked using more traditional methods, relying on homemade charcoal for most of the cooking (see Figure 6). While some families opt for these homemade stoves to save money on gas and electric bills, elder Karen in our study expressed a preference for these traditional cooking methods. "This is the way I like cooking and know how to do," Paw Htoo responded when she was asked about cooking outdoors.



Figure 6: Sandville Karen elder cooking. Courtesy of Daniel Gilhooly.

Hunting, fishing, and trapping are typical activities for Sandville Karen of all ages. In addition, some members of the community have become adept at collecting dead animals from the sides of county roads ('roadkill'), a common practice in rural America. Elder Karen men show deftness in butchering everything from the smallest bird to squirrels, wild hogs, foxes, coyotes, and deer. For some families, fishing, hunting, and collecting roadkill has become a free or low-cost means to supplement their diet with added protein, and many have expressed a preference for this wild game over store-bought meat.

Vegetables grown in family gardens have become an important source of healthy eating. Paw Spee expressed her satisfaction with cooking the food she grows, hunts, and collects:

Now we grow many vegetable, and many thing we like. We have same here [as] Burma and more food now when in Mae La [refugee camp]. In city I have only small, small garden. Here I grow many. And I like eating chickens, my chickens, and *pu* (grandfather) [her husband] hunting many squirrel. ...I not like food here [in the US]. ... I like cooking how I do in Burma and eating with family. (interview; June 2016)

Research indicates that food is an important part of the resettlement process, and dietary acculturation has gained more saliency in the literature. Satia-Abouta (2003) offers an important perspective on the role of dietary acculturation among Korean immigrants in the US. She argues that a major concern for many immigrants to the US is the change in dietary habits, and a Westernized diet can increase the risk factors of several chronic diseases (Satia-Abouta 2003, 72). This can be seen in the greater Karen community in the US, who are increasingly developing complications from hypertension, obesity, and diabetes (Bardenheier et al. 2019). In addition to affording a better diet and more opportunities for physical activity, we found living in a rural area had a positive effect on intergenerational relationships.

Maintaining Intergenerational Relationships

The resettlement process may have a major impact on family structure and the roles of individuals within the family (e.g., Yee 1992; Schouler-Ocak 2015). This can be especially true of the dynamic

between generations, as younger refugees take on responsibilities typically associated with adults. In particular, older people may lag behind their younger relatives in adapting to their host country (Lueck and Wilson 2010). However, strong familial relationships are generally an important factor in the successful resettlement of refugee families (McCleary 2017, 1465). Our research suggests that Sandville's rural isolation has helped to promote close familial relationships.

The preservation of traditional family roles allows parents and grandparents to maintain some status and authority within the family, thus mitigating generational dissonance. We have found that, within the rural setting of Sandville, parents and grandparents seem to play a greater role in their children and grandchildren's daily lives compared to Karen families living in urban settings. Seventeen-year-old Sher Htoo, who was interviewed as part of our broader study, expressed it best when discussing his behavior in the city compared to Sandville:

In city I do whatever I want. I really bad and I not listen to no one. I drink, get high every day, every day! And never caring. I just be with friends. But here [Sandville] I don't get into no trouble. I sometimes smoke weed like that but out here like to be with my family and help my mom or grandma. Here *pi* (grandmother) she see everything. (interview; December 2019)

Here, Sher Htoo directly addresses the issue of how living in rural Sandville has kept him out of trouble under the watchful eye of his grandmother. In Burma, many Karen grandparents care for grandchildren and often act as surrogate parents while the parents work the fields.

Urban Karen adults often complain about the lifestyles of Karen youth in the US (Gilhooly and Lee 2017). Moreover, due to their relative language proficiency and American schooling, children with a refugee background tend to take on the roles of parents, as they are often tasked with interpreting for older relatives. This can lead some refugee children to become resentful of their burdensome responsibilities, eventually developing negative views of older generations and their home culture. As a result, some immigrant and refugee children may actually "downwardly assimilate" (Zhou 2001), as Sher Htoo described.

Sociologist Jennifer McCleary's (2017) study of Karen families in the US found that a lack of parental respect could cause fractures in family relations. However, rural living often provides parents and grandparents with more opportunities to interact, which allows for more awareness of their children's lives outside the home. Children also benefit in other ways from this connection with grandparents. One of our participants, Sara Paw, shared Sher Htoo's assessment of how a rural setting influences children's behavior:

Here [Sandville] I know what they [children] do. Phoenix, I never knowing. They coming, going and I afraid they do bad thing like drug. Too many Karen kid do like that. In city, many Karen kid go to do bad thing. And school bad. But here [Sandville] they helping many thing like garden, cooking, washing [clothes] and working with me every day. Here they always helping, listen. (interview; November 2017)

In our study, many Karen adults shared Sara Paw's sentiments and expressed a belief that a rural setting allowed them to maintain more parental control. We argue that maintaining their authority as parents is critical to limiting the generational dissonance that often occurs within immigrant/refugee families. In rural Sandville, fewer youth choose to join gangs or downwardly assimilate as compared to their

urban peers (Gilhooly and Lee 2017). In the next section, we discuss how older Karen maintain dignity by passing on and using their skills and knowledge.

Rural Knowledge, Skills, and Dignity

Many older people with a refugee background can be concerned about being a burden to their families (Chenoweth and Burdick 2001). These elders may feel incapable of contributing economically to the family and may feel that their skills and knowledge do not translate to contemporary Western society. Research suggests that they also experience a loss of independence as they rely on children and grandchildren (Chenoweth and Burdick 2001). Yet, as we found in Sandville, many traditional roles persevere.

In Burma, elders have long played an important role within Karen villages as arbitrators of disputes and keepers of the village's history through oral narratives (Marshall 1922, 127). Stories were passed down orally to ensure that future generations would retain the ancient legends and histories. These *htas* (oral stories) remain an important means of preserving traditional narratives. In Sandville, the narratives – particularly stories related to Karen family history, myths, superstitions, and legends – continue to be told by elders and passed down to children and grandchildren.

During church sermons, elder Karen pastors use the pulpit to address the Karen diaspora, telling personal narratives about their own flight from their native village and stories about life in the refugee camps. In Karen homes in Sandville, elders tell stories of their experiences during the long civil war and their subsequent flight from Burma. We also documented our participants telling diaspora stories to their children and grandchildren. For example, Lah Lah told us:

I want they [pointing to his grandchildren] to know they Karen people. Many kid they don't remember Burma, never know, only Mae La [refugee camps]. Many kid saying "I from Thailand" but they Karen from Burma. Karen have many bad time and we always going, going. Burma soldier always coming, coming very bad time. The kid must know. It even happened today in Burma and kids must remembering. (interview; December 2019)

Traditionally, Karen elders were responsible for electing a village chief who acted as the patriarch of the village (Marshall 1922, 129). Analogously, Karen pastors and other elders hold similar leadership positions within the Karen diaspora and offer cultural, spiritual, and moral leadership. One such elder is Lah Lah, who often preaches about the importance of cultural and religious maintenance to his congregation and to his grandchildren. This is evident from his quote above, in which he emphasizes that the younger generations should understand their cultural identity and heritage as Karen from Burma.

Sandville Karen Baptist Church (SKBC) has created various youth, missionary, and language programs for Sgaw Karen adults and youth. The church has also maintained ties with Karen missionary organizations from Burma, Thailand, and other Karen church organizations throughout the Karen diaspora. Representatives of these groups frequently visit Sandville and other Karen communities across the US. Visitors are often old acquaintances of Karen elders. Karen elders also return to their native villages in Burma to visit family and friends. New stories are exchanged about family and friends back in the refugee camps as well as in their native villages.

Each of our participants expressed a desire for their community to retain and maintain Karen culture and identity. Lah Lah spoke of how the rural community in Sandville is conducive to this:

Our people, our culture, language, and we must stay Karen. Here we teach the kids to know to be Karen. This very important for me and many Karen old people. We want to stay Karen. Here [Sandville] we can do but in the city the kids not listen and not behaving like Karen. Here we can [be] Karen people and more child respect. Many Karen people wish they live here, too. (interview; December 2019)

This excerpt represents the sentiments of many other Karen adults we interviewed. Other elder Karen in Sandville are also important sources of information related to pre- and postnatal care, diet, traditional remedies for sickness, hunting and trapping techniques, as well as helping to resolve family and community disputes. We found that each of these roles is a way to preserve cultural knowledge and practices.

Importantly, we found that elder Karen in Sandville are able to maintain their ‘expert’ status within the family. In addition to teaching gardening and cooking techniques, Karen elders often go hunting and fishing with their grandchildren. They show them how to construct the same kind of bamboo fishing poles and nets they used in Burma and at the refugee camps in Thailand. They also teach youth how to build tools and craft bamboo snares, as well as how to clean and butcher dead animals and preserve meat. This allows the elders to pass along practical survival skills that would likely be lost in an urban environment.

Being able to pass down knowledge and skills to younger generations seems to help elders maintain important respect and standing within their family and community. Chris Htoo, a Karen youth in Sandville, offered this description of her grandfather:

I never know my grandfather knows many things about plants, animals, and stuff like that. He never says much but shows me all the time. He always knows how to build things and we help him. He’s old but he can do many things and grows so many things we like to eat. My mom says it’s good for him because he stays busy all the time and can help. And he can really build things like the chicken coop and other buildings we use. He is always proud but never says anything. My dad builds but they always fall apart but not [what] my grandfather [builds]. (interview; December 2019)

For older men like Chris Htoo’s grandfather, passing down important knowledge and skills to younger generations may also be a way to build the elder’s sense of self-worth. Sociologist Hee Yun Lee et al.’s (2010) study of elderly Cambodians in Saint Paul, Minnesota, found that a lack of “culture-specific knowledge and beliefs” was a cause for depression (327). However, in a rural setting such as Sandville, we found that Karen elders are purveyors of cultural knowledge and actively pass it down to younger generations.

As mentioned in the introduction of this article, the SKBC serves as the Karen enclave’s spiritual, social, and cultural center, and is a space for Karen elders to socialize and maintain active leadership roles within the community. Many of these elders are also responsible for teaching Karen language classes as well as classes in choir, singing, piano, flute, and guitar (see Figure 7). Karen elders also teach the youth how to organize and lead various religious and cultural events, and thus train Karen youth to be community leaders.



Figure 7: Karen elder teaching Sgaw Karen language classes (Sandville, GA, 2016). Courtesy of Daniel Gilhooly.

While we observed the preservation of these church roles in both rural and urban Karen communities, we found that these roles and relationships were more easily maintained in rural Sandville. This was due to the ability of the community to maintain very close daily connections, much as they would in Burma or in the refugee camps. Paw Spee described her relations:

Many Karen people always too busy in city. Every Karen people always working, going, busy, and sometimes we only meet in church, only Sunday. I like it here [Sandville]. We see family every day and eat and sleep together. In the city family too busy. I like every day reading Bible with family and see every day like we do back in Burma. (interview; November 2017)

As mentioned previously, some older refugees may feel like a burden to their family because of their inability to work and contribute to the family's finances. Yet in Sandville, Karen elders are also active in the informal economy. While all elders help to sell vegetables, chickens, and fresh and dried meat to urban Karen, others sell homemade machetes, woven bamboo baskets, Karen clothing, and Karen music recordings. Each of our six participants also serve important roles as childcare providers for their grandchildren and other children in the community.

From our research, we have learned that the rural setting of Sandville seems to be conducive to providing elders with an active role in their community. In the rural setting, they can maintain status and dignity that are too often lost to older individuals with a refugee background who are living in urban environments. The ability of Karen elders in Sandville to continue to play an important role within family and community life is therefore a way for elders to maintain their traditional status, sense of purpose, dignity, and self-worth.

Conclusion and Implications

The Karen people of Burma represent one of the most recent ethnic groups attempting to create their own 'American story'. Like other immigrants, they face new challenges when living in unfamiliar urban environments. The successes and failures in creating any American story are rooted in the unique cultural and historical experiences of the group resettling. We have found that the elder Karen living in Sandville are able to preserve traditional practices that may facilitate the adaptation process. Our research with elder Karen in Sandville not only demonstrates how rural living may help to mitigate acculturation stress for people who have been resettled from small villages but also indicates some of the ways that resettled refugee populations are agentive in their resettlement. This counters the "vulnerability trope" (King et al. 2017) that is common in literature about refugees in general and older refugees in particular.

As we have described, a rural setting may offset the negative effects of generational dissonance that often occurs within immigrant/refugee families (Zhou 2001). Karen elders in Sandville are able to pass on their "funds of knowledge" (González, Moll, and Amanti 2006) to Karen youth. As a result, all family members seem to benefit from these continued relationships that help all generations cope with the stressors of resettlement. A rural lifestyle also seems to be conducive to easing the process of dietary acculturation and may offer a healthier lifestyle compared to urban settings. By growing their own vegetables and raising their own animals, rural immigrant/refugee communities like the Karen enclave of Sandville appear to maintain diets that are both familiar and healthier than the host country's typical fare. Working the land through farming also provides physical activity that is associated with better physical and mental health throughout the life course.

As we found, maintaining cultural practices and leadership roles within the family and community also seems to help elder Karen to manage the transition process and thus limit acculturation stress. Policy makers and organizations that assist with resettlement may want to consider the potential of rural placements for similar refugee populations. Importantly, our Karen participants as well as other Karen in our focal community demonstrate great resilience and creativity in making new lives. While they did not downplay the manifold challenges they have faced after more than a decade in the US, many of them told us about their contentment and satisfaction with their current lives. Moreover, each expressed how rural Sandville has provided them with a safe space where they feel at home.

The Limits of Rural America

While all of the Karen adults we interviewed expressed a preference for rural living, we also found some negative trends associated with living in a rural setting. For example, Sandville's isolation has kept many older Karen from learning English as few English language classes are offered in the area. A lack of English skills can lead to a cultural and linguistic gap between English-speaking youth and their Karen-speaking parents and grandparents. Transportation continues to be an issue for Karen living in Sandville. Only one of our study participants drives and with no public transportation available in the area, it is difficult for them to travel freely. This can increase feelings of isolation and dependence on younger drivers.

Sandville also has limited employment opportunities for older Karen, as most Karen in the area work at one of the many poultry-processing facilities. Some elders have been declined jobs because of their physical limitations. While older Karen are able to help offset some of the family expenses through gardening and raising livestock, they are often precluded from earning money via external employment and thus are unable to contribute financially to the family. Anecdotal evidence from our work suggests

that gender likely plays a role in in the acculturation experience, as family roles often change after arrival. We believe that this is a limitation in our current work and an important subject for future research to investigate.

Finally, while the Karen of Sandville share many of the characteristics of other refugee groups from southeast Asia, the rural setting and their strong Christian ties with the local Baptist community provide them with a singular American experience that has allowed them to maintain much of their cultural heritage while also integrating into the local community. However, for other refugee groups who may not share their neighbors' religion, conflicts can arise (Hasan and Mitschke 2017). Similarly, while many congregants at local churches have been enthusiastic about the arrival of their new Karen neighbors and have supported their settlement in Georgia, not all local residents have been so welcoming. Some complain of the condition of the Karen's properties and have expressed reservations about the continued growth of the Karen and Karenni communities in the area. Thus, as more Karen families relocate to the Sandville area, more tensions are expected. Our research suggests that a rural environment and the shared religious traditions between Karen and their American neighbors may be unique. More research is thereby warranted to investigate the relationships between local residents and resettled refugees like the Karen.

Future Research

We believe that our research fills an important gap in the literature regarding the experiences of older individuals with a refugee background who are acculturating in the US. But our case studies also suggest that more research is needed to gain insight into the lived experiences of older refugees resettling in high-income Western countries. Additional studies are warranted to learn more about specific aspects of the resettlement process, such as the changing roles within families and the effect this is having on individual and family acculturation. What are the experiences of older refugees living in rural communities in other parts of the US (and other countries)?

As we described, the elder Karen in our study were able to find ways to thrive post-resettlement. Other studies that highlight how older resettled refugees are successfully coping in unique and beneficial ways would be a welcome contribution to the field of migration studies. Finally, more research related to the growing number of refugee communities in rural areas is necessary to better understand the viability and sustainability of rural resettlement.

Acknowledgements

The research presented in this article was carried out under the IRB protocols PI: Daniel Gilhooly, Committee: University of Georgia IRB, Institute: University of Georgia, approval date: 6/23/2011 – “A comparative case study of ethnic Karen resettlement in the US” and PI: Mayuri Gilhooly, Committee: IRB committee, Institute: Rockhurst University, approval number: 2020-17 – “Health perceptions and practices of Karen refugee families in rural Georgia”.

Notes

1. Although the majority of Karen people in Burma are Buddhist, the majority of Karen in the US are Christian due to the long relationship between Sgaw Karen and Christian missionaries. American and British Christian missionaries arrived in Burma in the early 19th century and had great success converting many Sgaw Karen.

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