

# Role Adjustment in Southeast Asian Refugee Families

Maureen Lynch and Leslie Richards

## Abstract

Little is known about the relationship between family history and family identity. One way to initially explore whether or how families incorporate their history into the development of their identity would be to talk to members of families who have had a discrete event in their history. Refugee families are such families. Seventeen members from ten refugee families who fled Cambodia or Vietnam and resettled in the United States between 1975 and 1990, were interviewed about their perceptions of how their experience affected their family identity. Transcripts were qualitatively analyzed. The findings presented here are limited to descriptions of adjustment that occurred in family roles.

## Précis

*La relation entre histoire familiale et identité familiale est peu connue. Une façon préliminaire d'explorer si et comment les familles incorporent leur histoire dans le développement de leur identité serait d'échanger avec les membres de familles ayant vécu une cassure dans leur trajectoire historique. Les familles de réfugiés représentent des cas de ce type. Dix-sept membres de dix familles de réfugiés qui ont fui le Cambodge et le Vietnam et se sont installés aux États-Unis entre 1975 et 1990 ont été interviewés sur leur perception de l'impact de leur expérience sur leur identité familiale. Les entrevues ont été analysées qualitativement. Les résultats exposés ici sont limités à la descrip-*

*tion des ajustements ayant eu lieu dans les rôles familiaux.*

## Introduction

Some families experience discrete events in the course of their history. The readily identifiable groups are those that experience human-initiated disasters, groups like refugees. Refugees are not people simply responding to political, economic, and social opportunities. They face "transition that involves major changes in the ... family" (Liu and Cheung 1985, 488).

The goal of the present study is to capture the unique contribution of families that have experienced a discrete historical experience, a refugee experience, while exploring the construct of family identity. Using Bennett, Wolin, and McAvity's (1988) model, the role component of family identity is examined in the light of a significant family historical event and the research question: How do people perceive a major family historical event, becoming refugees, has shaped and continues to shape their sense of family identity?

Learning about refugees and their families can enhance the theoretical understanding of family identity and family functioning as well as contribute to applied work with refugee families. That is, the present exploration offers a contribution in that its theme (family identity), population (Southeast Asians), subgroup (refugee families), and methodology (qualitative) have been underrepresented in past research.

## Theoretical Background

Family identity is, according to Bennett, Wolin, and McAvity (1988, 212), the family's subjective sense of its own continuation over time, its present situation and its character. It is the composite of qualities and attributes that answer the question:

"What does it mean to be a member of your family" (Sherman 1990, 255).

Family identity is composed of three primary parts: family membership, quality of day to day life, and an elusive historical component. Specifically, family membership includes family structure (members) and relationships (roles, rules, and boundaries). Discussion in this paper will be limited to role adjustment.

In general, the literature reveals members of refugee families often experience radical changes in roles (Eisikovits and Beck 1990; Westermeyer 1989). If parents are separated, one parent may have difficulty in fulfilling responsibilities that were once shared. The child may have lost a major source of nurture and may also be expected to take on major adult responsibilities at a very early age. This shift constitutes a risk because children may need to assume roles for which they may not be developmentally prepared.

Refugee parents may become dependent on a child for practical needs, particularly since the child may learn the new language of the settlement country much more quickly and easily than the parent (Westermeyer 1989). Children find themselves translating for their parents in encounters with professionals, helping in the business, and negotiating situations with community agencies and helpers (Prilleltensky 1993). With understanding of the family identity construct and of role changes occurring in refugee families, this project was undertaken to explore how individuals perceived refugee experience affects family identity.

## Methods

There are a number of methodological challenges associated with interviewing refugees or former refugees. Primary difficulties include finding

Maureen Lynch, Ph.D., is a recent graduate of the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR, USA.

Leslie Richards, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences at Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR, USA.

willing participants, discussing emotionally painful memories, and choosing an appropriate unit and method of analysis. The manner in which these issues were ultimately handled are described below.

### Sample

Use of the snowballing technique (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981; Coleman 1958; Lincoln and Guba 1985) produced seventeen willing families, six Cambodian and four Vietnamese. Family size for all families (limited to father, mother, and children) before the refugee experience ranged from three to eleven members, with an average of nearly eight. All but one of the ten families were initially two-parent households.

### Procedure

Personal and telephone interviews were tape-recorded and ranged in length from about one hour to nearly three hours, with an average of one and a half hours. Participants were not asked in great depth about the refugee experience itself, were free to stop the interview at any time, and there was arrangement for bilingual crisis intervention.

### Data Analysis

Analysis of conversations about refugee experiences can be best accomplished by an on-going dialogue between data collection, coding of the data, and analysis (Bogdan and Biklen 1982; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lincoln and Guba 1985; Schwartz and Jacobs 1979). Thus it was planned to assess the information gathered through qualitative research which permits such a process. After verbatim transcription, data analysis was initiated with a basic organizing system developed by writing the names of key codes on separate pages to allowing for recording, expansion, and comparison within and across families (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Simple tables were constructed for each code showing speaker identification, main points addressed, and the location of the pertinent conversation in the transcripts. A list of the main

categories was made which included any obvious patterns and the range of responses among families.

### Findings

In the report of findings that follows, families are identified by a label such as "Family One" or "Family Two." Language errors in participant quotations have not been corrected. Bracketed words or phrases have been added for clarity. Nonetheless, it must be remembered that the reproduction of words spoken during an interview cannot totally represent the original response with its producer's original tone, gesture, and expression.

Interviews started with questions about family life before becoming refugees. Responding to question about roles, members talked about what the family situation was like. Representing the majority of families in this study, the 28-year-old son of Family Six generalized that in Cambodian culture, each parent in a two-parent household has a clearly recognized role with the father commonly the head and primary provider of the family unit. The son described the traditional roles of both fathers and mothers stating:

Normally father always man of the family ... Because he is the person who earn a lot of income and support the whole family ... Father is the man of the house.

The same participant identified the roles in his own family where his father was the main provider (who travelled extensively on business) and his mother was responsible for household tasks:

My dad, man, always the big macho in the family. He can do whatever he want. He always think that. But I think that's the kind of tradition he take for granted ... When he came home, he brought little stuff to us ... He send money ... He always make sure that the money will go right to the kid and my mom especially. Mom take care of kid and he [father] always phone my mom, he always send a telegram in letter all the time, and once in a while he call ... My mother ... she have a servant. Yeah,

because my dad make a lot of money, so they hired a servant to help.

Vietnamese fathers were also traditionally the primary providers. Mothers usually took care of the homes (though sometimes with outside domestic help) and the children. Vietnamese families in this project followed this traditional pattern. For example, the third child of Family Seven, with two parents who upheld the traditional roles in their homeland of Vietnam, said the following about her father:

He was the only one working ... My mom took care of the kids at home. Well, my mom has always had a say in something I guess ... but ... my dad was always the head figure ... My mom was always the financial person that keeps the money ...

Her father, also a participant, concurred that he was the main provider and that his wife took care of the domestic work. Speaking about their situation he said, "My income was good enough for my family. So my wife stay at home to take care of my children." It should be noted however, that although women traditionally stayed at home and cared for the children, they also were active in other paid or unpaid outside labour while in the homeland. The youngest son of Cambodian Family Three contradictorily noted the work of his mother:

My mother ... at the rice planting season she would go and plant rice with my grandfather, and she also had just an acre of rice field and just given by my grandparents. And when she was not busy or when nothing to do with the rice field she sold some stuff, some candy. She usually just stay at home—home-maker.

Members of three families talked about the unusual roles played by women in their families. The daughter of Family Four from Cambodia acknowledged the traditional pattern of male dominance, but said that in her family it was not maternal or paternal dominance but that the parents were equal partners because of her father's ethnic background:

My mom is a very strong woman, and you know how usually you have the man in the household, he order everything. Well, in my family he is not really that way ... The women are very strong ... comparably to others. I mean strong in the sense like, if we don't like something we will say it ... It's kind of hard ... because he [father] makes money, but she has more power because she knows the people. He was Chinese, she was born in Cambodian. There was a lot of prejudice in Cambodian in the sense against Chinese people. I think they see themselves as equal partners.

The daughter of the single mother of Family One from Cambodia reported, "My mom was like everything. She was like the dad, the protector, the provider." Daughter of Family Two talked about the role of her strong Vietnamese mother had played, reporting, "My mom has been always the provider for the household, and she still is." After talking about family roles before forced flight, members were asked to briefly describe their experience.

Each family had a distinct experience in the process of leaving their homeland. Members discussed adjustments in roles that took place when separation and loss occurred in their families after being forced from their homes, particularly in the case of the separation from, or death of, one or both parents.

A member of Family Five, in which both parents were executed by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, noted the process of how the vacant parental roles were filled by the young members. One daughter of this family, referring to the period of time from her parents' death in Cambodia through the end of their refugee camp stay in Cambodia and Thailand, described the new roles of her older siblings. They, and the participant herself, were all under the age of 21 at the time of the death of their parents and as she recalled adjustment in the Cambodian camp first, and then in the refugee camp in Thailand:

I took a role ... probably more like an older sister in that I ... knowing that we were not given rations by the

Khmer Rouge ... and we couldn't find rice ... staying in that village and noticing that there were Cambodian people who ... travelled through that village [and] back ... I thought about opportunity to make ... a business ... So somehow I kind of pulled the family together to be involved in this little business ... And also then ... my older sister decided she didn't want, ... even back in Cambodia she didn't want to sell food because she is shy and stuff. So when we came to this camp, I want to still doing some trading and stuff, like selling food. But she didn't want to, and she wanted to depend on her boyfriend. And so we, I, we gave him our share of the gold to trade with Thai and Cambodian ... My sister and my brother ... tried to take that father role ... So when we ... were transferred, ... when we were taken to the refugee camp in Thailand, the first refugee camp and we got rations again ... and when oldest sister take charge of us, making meal and stuff, but then when we didn't have enough food to eat because the rations were limited ... my brother started to smuggle refugees inside the camp and get paid from the refugees and he kind of provide food for us ... But I still play a role because I, having traded with Cambodian people in Cambodia ... I was good in detecting what was real gold, 24-karat gold and what was not ... I remember my older brother risk going to smuggle new refugees inside that camp ... He was paid by those people and I guess that kind of shift ... that kind of shifted the role of the bread [breadwinner].

In another case, with the father and oldest brother isolated from the rest of the family as anchors in the United States, a participating member of Family Ten described the specialized and cooperative roles individuals in her family played as the rest of the family prepared for departure from Vietnam:

We didn't have a lot of feedback from him because he was so far away. But my mom ... had decided to save some money. My sister told her to move to another part, like move to my aunt's house. And then when things got really, really bad ... my second oldest brother, the one that was oldest because my oldest brother

left, the one that was oldest there, ... said ... he had heard of a ship ... leaving at 2 o'clock in the morning, and we had better prepare. He was the one that made those arrangements. My mom is the one who saved the money and gave him the money and then he ran to them [ship owner] and gave them the money and did that stuff. So anybody who was old enough to really know what was going on ... helped her [the mother] make that decision [to leave]. It wasn't like everybody gave her, "We should go now" ... or "Oh, we should go tomorrow" or "We should take this boat" and stuff like that.

With the exception of the members of Family Ten who initially began resettlement in Germany, all of the other families came directly to the United States after leaving refugee camps. The period of time immediately after arrival was overloaded with the tasks of reorganizing life in a foreign environment without, in most cases, basic English skills. The daughter of Family Four mentioned that after they arrived in the United States, she was responsible for helping the family by doing household work so her parents could get educated and be able to find work in their new homeland. She stated:

In household responsibility ... I end up having to do most of the work ... partly I knew I have to do that because my parents were so way too busy trying to go to work and then study at night to try and get their associate degree just so that they can have a better chance at getting another job that can help the family better. So it is like everyone of us kind of like have to play a different role to support each other.

The mother of Family Four most poignantly described the tension as she talked about her own experience of trying to go to school part time, work part time, be the housekeeper and the mother and wife, while dealing with the personal emotional upheaval of being a refugee. Remembering the frustration of trying to balance many demands and the disharmony it caused, she stated:

I was just so busy ... two hours sleep a day and pressed, you know, depressed. And all stressed out. And so sometimes I spank her [daughter] ... Well, I picked up as much [of what was lying around the house] as I can. And I told them not to do that [leave things lying around the house] ... but nobody care ... nobody listen. And you know, I try to give them some chore, you know, like a kind of dispatching, like a sharing responsibility. And they didn't care. That frustrate me ... Well, I asked them to do something, and they never did. And then when you ask them ... they always say, "Later, later" and they never did ... So getting angry, yelling, frustration ... I didn't have time ... I didn't have time to think about anything ... When I look back now, I just can't believe that we can get through that. Because in the morning, I left home at 7 o'clock and about 3:30 got home [from school], I grab something and I went to work right away ... And I came home 10:30 [from work] and grabbed something for dinner and do the homework until I got so really tired I went to bed ... And then most the time my husband help me a lot. But you know, he never helping discipline kids either. So for him, for man, you know, he didn't see as much as we do [what needs to be done around the house and training the children]. Yeah, when I got so angry because the house was messy all the time, you spend so much time just to get it clean, and not even two hours ... mess again. And I was so really frustrate. Really feel so bad about that because I never live in the situation like that in my life. It is really hard you know ... We used to have a maid and people clean the house and everything. And my husband, finally my husband told me, "Don't look at the mess. Just go upstairs to sleep." ... Yeah, but it is really hard.

Particularly noted by the families in this project were changes in who was the economic provider or the primary breadwinner for the family. This task, which had formerly been performed primarily by the father (or by the mother in the single-parent family), was divided between two parents or was now distributed among parents and older children.

**For Family Ten, responsibility shifted increasingly to the second oldest brother. The interviewed sister (self-reported as being about 5 or 6 at the time of the events) noted her brother had**

taken on that responsibility more and more than when he came over. And when he came over he didn't understand English ... He had to ... have a lot of burden of responsibility when he was really young. You know when you are 19 and expected to bring nine members of your family from Vietnam over, you take more responsibility than you can imagine.

The daughter of Family Seven addressed changes in her family during their resettlement stating, "... I guess both of my parents were breadwinners ... My brother is always the one to take care of the rest of the family—my oldest brother." Her father confirmed this change and the conditions that enabled them to have two breadwinners. He said, "And you know why me and my wife go to work at that time [within days of arrival in the United States] ... because we had my mother to stay at home and take care of my children."

Without a father figure, Family Three's second oldest brother noted that the primary burden of money-earning responsibility was carried by "mom and older sister and my brother" because the mother let both younger sons go to school. The youngest son additionally commented that additional income was earned by all family members by labouring in the strawberry field labour each summer.

Although the oldest daughter of Family Two did not take on the role of breadwinner in her family, she noticed a substantial change in her function as far as increase in responsibility-taking. The eldest daughter recalled:

After I arrived she [mother] becomes more dependent on me because I am like the translator. I help her translate documents when she goes to the doctor and just show her around ... Well, my brother was, we ... were the same when we were in Vietnam. We weren't so close to my mom, but we were dependent on her. After we arrived here, my brother was pretty

much independent by himself. My mom did not ask him to do anything for her because she knows that whenever she asks, he would not get it done. So she doesn't rely so much on him.

Family One's daughter talked about the provider role in her now single-parent family. She recognized that she had picked up some adult responsibilities before most people her age would be expected to and stated:

I remember just being like in the eighth grade and doing like a lot of responsibilities that were like for an adult would do ... but my sister, she was more, she got into the cooking and helping out with the house and cleaning and stuff like that. And I guess I was more like maybe the semi-dad role. My sister [named] make sure my mom was taken care of and she looked after my mom.

Later, speaking about life at the present time, Family Ten's participants talked about how the older children have become increasingly responsible for the younger members. This change does not revert back to traditional roles once the family was self-sufficient but rather responsibility-taking appears to be exacerbated by the refugee experience. One of the youngest daughters remarked:

My second oldest brother has taken on the responsibility about caring for my sister and I, which is like the two youngest ones ... Yeah I mean the ones need to look after. So he is the one who is like financing, not necessarily financing, our way, but whenever we need a quick loan, an emergency loan, we'll call him up because he will have the money. And we'll send our taxes to him. You know what I mean? And whenever we change, like our life course ... like I am going to move to Oregon or I am going to do this ... we will contact him ... He will make sure that we have computer or he will make sure that we have a car, you know. He has taken on that responsibility more and more than when he came over. And when he came over he didn't understand English ... He didn't even graduate college or anything. So after he graduated college and got

married, he assumed much more of my father's role then ...

Toward the end of the interviews, family members were asked to talk about or describe how they foresee their families in the future. Members repeatedly spoke about the importance of filial piety, taking care of older family members as they aged. Except for Family Five who lost both parents during the refugee experience and Family Six who has only one parent who is still in Cambodia, a member of every family mentioned the importance of this filial caretaking of elders to some extent. Talking about her plans for the future, Family One's first-contact, the daughter said:

I can't imagine myself without having contact with my family and stuff. For me when I will get house, get a job or whatever, I want my mom to come and live with me. Or if she wants to stay with my sister, that's fine. But I want us to be close. I don't want to move like across country or live in a different country ... I don't think so because of the way we were raised ... because of the way each of us took the roles in the family. I think me and my sister would be the ones taking care of my mom, but if my brother wants to take care her ... I don't trust him though, just because he's being, he's just being a guy ... Also, I wouldn't mind having my mom live with me. That would be kind of cool, I think.

Talking about their future, Family Two's daughter said:

In the future, it will stay the same, except everyone will grow up and we will be working and taking care of my mom ... I don't know yet. Maybe, maybe not. I don't know. That depends on how ill she gets. If she is like healthy then I don't need to worry so much, let them be far away ... It would be me [taking care of mother] because I am the second oldest. And my brother, he's not so reliable ... My mom wants to be near me so I can take care of her.

However, her brother said regarding his future, "I have to take care of my mom ... not stepdad, just mom ... I have to take care of that ..."

Family Three's youngest son, who currently resides with his mother, expressed great concern for her future care with increased responsibility because of the vulnerability and isolation of the family as a result of their refugee status. He stated:

Well, you know, I thought about going, just live by yourself [myself]. But she is, my mother's almost sixty now, and then she only speak English very little bit so it is better for me to stay with her and take care of her.

Family Four's mother mentioned that her youngest daughter had already invited her to live in the same household, allowing the employed daughter to take care of the mother in older age. And Family Seven's daughter said she couldn't leave her parents in a nursing home because she is "very family oriented."

During discussion about future family issues and probing of the topic about parental care in older age, the youngest son of Family Eight was asked about who would be responsible for the care of his elderly parents. He responded, "Right now I think it is going to be me because I don't have a family yet ... [I] hope to make enough money to support them when they get older. We respect them so much."

### Summary and Discussion

There was role adjustment over the time through the move from the homeland, resettlement, and the current living situation in Cambodian and Vietnamese refugee families in this project. Several patterns were evident. First, the family role of primary breadwinner shifted from one or two parental providers before flight to a more equal distribution of responsibility throughout the family membership. Mothers in most families entered the paid labour force at least temporarily, and many for the first time. This change involved increasing and sustained contributions by the older children in each family. It is not possible to say, however, that the change was entirely related to the demands of the refugee experience as there are numerous other influential factors. It should

be noted though, that even families that had adult-aged or nearly adult-aged children at the time of their experience, specifically recognized this increased dispersion of roles and dependency on children for economic support.

Findings about family identity as demonstrated by the refugee families who participated in this project upheld the previously identified component parts of membership. Most importantly, topics that members raised to the interviewer actually supported the theme of how being refugees impacts family roles in more ways than were anticipated. The fact that families included the role of their experience across time and across dimensions of family identity, helps begin the necessary process of isolating a "family history" component as a critical element of the current family identity construct. Association between family histories and their perceptions of family identity was evident and could not be separated from one another.

Overall, this study makes an important contribution to the research on family identity. For at least some families, history (in the form of the life-changing event of being refugees) does colour perception of family identity, that is, the experience of being refugees does influence what it means to be a member of a particular family. As has been seen here, it may cause adjustment in roles. This knowledge can be particularly beneficial for professionals who aid refugee individuals and families trying to understand and deal with the impact of role adjustment and for researchers of other traumatized families. ■

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*Finalist in the 1997 Thomas V. Kozminski Prize competition  
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# PATHS TO EQUITY

## Cultural, Linguistic, and Racial Diversity in Canadian Early Childhood Education

By Judith K. Bernhard, Marie Louise Lefebvre, Gyda Chud and Rika Lange

Toronto: York Lane Press

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*Paths to Equity* is based on an extensive nationwide study of 77 childcare centres in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver on the cultural, linguistic, and racial diversity in Canadian Early Childhood Education (ECE). The report presents the results of this study on how the ECE system is responding to the increasing diversity of contemporary Canadian society.

A fully one third of teachers interviewed in this study responded, at the time of graduation from ECE programs, did not feel that they were well prepared to work effectively with children and parents from diverse backgrounds. In this groundbreaking study, the authors have addressed teachers' views on diversity in the education programs; parents' difficulties in collaborating within the current education system; teachers' difficulties in understanding many "ethnic" parents; desire of many parents for better communication with staff, preferably in their own languages, and for more information about their individual children, and chances for effective input; and the evidence of some continuing problems with racism, irrespective of the good intentions of centre staff.

*Paths to Equity* will be of interest to ECE faculty, policymakers, centre supervisors and staff and others interested in the inclusion of diversity content in professional education programs.

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