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Canadian Ethnic Studies, Volume 44, Number 3, 2012, pp. 11-28 (Article)

Published by Canadian Ethnic Studies Association

DOI: [10.1353/ces.2013.0011](https://doi.org/10.1353/ces.2013.0011)



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Family Relationships of Afghan, Karen and Sudanese Refugee Youth

Abstract

Research with immigrant and refugee families consistently documents acculturation gaps and role reversals between migrant youth and their parents. However, debate exists over whether these necessarily lead to family conflict and distress. This question was explored in this community-based qualitative study through focus groups and interviews with 70 newcomer refugee youth aged 16 to 24 from the Afghan, Karen and Sudanese communities in Toronto. Thematic analysis revealed that youths' responsibilities increased following migration, often involving service navigation, language interpretation, and providing financial and emotional support, in addition to household chores and pursuing education and employment. Several youth explicitly took on parental roles in the absence of a parent. These changes did not necessarily lead to conflict, and where family conflict and distancing occurred, other factors such as lack of time together or low levels of family support seemed to be the contributing factors. Youth were clearly "resettlement champions" for their families, which increased family-level well-being, often at the cost of individual-level well-being. Policy implications are discussed.

Résumé

Une recherche documentée sur les familles d'immigrés et de réfugiés montre de manière consistante des écarts dus à l'acculturation ainsi que des renversements de rôle entre les jeunes immigrants et leurs parents. Il y a cependant un débat sur la question de savoir si ceci doit forcément mener à des conflits familiaux et à une certaine détresse. Cette question a fait l'objet d'une étude qualitative réalisée dans les communautés afghanes, karènes et soudanaises de Toronto à partir de groupes cibles et d'entrevues menées avec 70 jeunes réfugiés nouvellement arrivés et âgés de 16 à 24 ans. Une analyse thématique a révélé que les responsabilités de ces jeunes augmentaient suite à l'immigration, souvent afin d'aider les leurs à s'orienter dans les services, à leur servir d'interprète et à leur apporter un soutien financier et émotionnel, et ce en plus de tenir la maison, de continuer des études et de gagner leur vie. Plusieurs d'entre eux ont pris explicitement le rôle de parents en l'absence de l'un d'entre eux. Ces changements n'ont pas automatiquement provoqué de conflits sauf que, là où il y en a eu dans la famille ou qu'elle a souffert de distanciation, d'autres facteurs tels que le manque de temps en commun ou un bas niveau de support familial semblent y avoir contribué. Les jeunes sont clairement les «champions du rétablissement» pour les leurs, améliorant le bien-être familial, souvent au prix d'un mieux-vivre individuel. Il s'agit donc de voir ce que cette situation implique au niveau des politiques à leur égard.



INTRODUCTION

Immigrant and refugee families share many challenges in the process of migration, such as learning a new “host” culture, experiencing extended family separation, and difficulties in accessing appropriate education and employment. Refugee families differ from immigrant families, though, because they may not have chosen the time, means or location of their migration, and often face unique challenges in maintaining a connection with their country of origin and with family left behind (Heger Boyle and Ali 2009; Williams 2010). The effects of migration on intergenerational relationships in refugee families may, therefore, differ from those in immigrant families in the intensity and/or nature of the changes brought about.

Members of refugee families may have experienced a collapse of social order, which can be mirrored in a collapse of ordered relationships within families, and may have personally witnessed or experienced war and violence (Boyden et al. 2002). In some cases, military forces may have actively promoted intergenerational mistrust and conflict as part of their assault on communities (Newman 2005). Refugee families also often spend years in refugee camps prior to migration, thus experiencing prolonged uncertainty and difficult living conditions that can challenge family structure and relationships (Heger Boyle and Ali 2009). As a result, their hopes, expectations and experiences of migration and settlement may be very different from those of voluntary migrants (Heger Boyle and Ali 2009; Williams 2010). The goal of this paper is to examine intergenerational relationships from the perspective of Afghan, Karen and Sudanese refugee youth (older adolescents and young adults), in the first five years of their settlement in Toronto, Canada, in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of how their family roles and responsibilities change during the process of settlement.

AFGHAN, KAREN AND SUDANESE REFUGEE COMMUNITIES IN CANADA

Afghanistan, Myanmar (Burma; Karen refugees), and Sudan were selected for the study as these three countries have ranked within the top ten source countries for sponsored Convention refugees to Canada since 2006. Census 2006 data show that there are currently 18,205 people in Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) who were born in Afghanistan. The majority of immigrants from Afghanistan to the Toronto CMA (75.8%) came as ‘protected persons’ (sponsored refugees or refugee claimants). Afghan people are a heterogeneous group comprised of many ethnic groups including Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara. Most immigrants from Afghanistan are Muslim, of whom 80% identify as Sunni.

Between 2000 and 2009, roughly 10,100 people from Sudan arrived in Canada, of whom 2,707 settled in Toronto CMA. Two thirds of those who settled in the

Toronto CMA (66.2%) came as ‘protected persons.’ Sudan is made up of over 570 distinct groups with more than 100 different languages spoken in the country. This is reflected in the Sudanese community in Canada, which comprises many ethnic groups including Arab, Dinka, Beja, Nuer, and Nuba.

The Karen people are the largest of several minority ethnic communities who fled their Karen state (Kawtholei) in Myanmar (Burma) following increased persecution by the Myanmar military government from late 1980s. Many have lived in refugee camps in Thailand for over 20 years. The majority of Karens are Bhuddist or believe in Animism while 30% are Christians. The two main Karen groups are the Sgaws (S’waw) and the Pwos. Canada has only recently begun resettling Karen refugees; since 2000, about 3,100 Karen refugees have resettled in Canada, the majority of whom have arrived since 2006.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on family dynamics among immigrants and refugees tends to focus on three areas of challenge for intergenerational relationships: an “acculturation gap” that can occur between parents and children, role reversals, and losses of intimacy and respect in parent-child relationships. A fourth theme that emerges, not as a challenge but a strength, is that migrant families are also a source of tremendous support, co-facilitating the settlement and acculturation process for one another. These themes are discussed in more detail below.

The Acculturation Gap

Value conflicts are a normal part of adolescent-parent experiences in North America (Laursen et al. 1998), but may be more intense between immigrant adolescents and their parents (Kwak 2003) and greater in more recent immigrant families (Chung 2001). Children have been found to learn the language, navigate the systems and endorse the values of the new culture more quickly than their parents (Birman 2006; Ho 2010; Lau et al. 2005). These so-called “acculturation gaps” (Dennis et al. 2010, but see Bhatia and Ram 2009 for a critique of acculturation theories) are thought to underlie children’s complaints that parents place inappropriate restrictions on their behaviour, and parents’ concerns around children’s excess freedom in the new country, inappropriate behaviours around clothing and dating, and loss of the language and values of their heritage culture (Birman 2006; Este and Tachble 2009a, 2009b; Szapocznik and Williams 2000).

While larger parent-child differences have been associated with more family conflict (Birman 2006) and poorer psychological outcomes, such as parent and child depression (Hwang et al. 2010; Szapocznik and Williams 2000), the findings are

inconsistent and may depend on the dimension of change being considered. For example, Ho (2010) found that among Vietnamese immigrant families in the United States, identity gaps (but not behavioural or language gaps) influenced family cohesion. Other researchers (e.g., Lau et al. 2005) have found no relationship between the size of intergenerational differences and measures of family conflict. In light of these contradictory findings, some researchers suggest that what matters to family well-being are not actual gaps between parents' and children's reported beliefs and behaviours but perceived differences (Dennis et al. 2010; Mirali 2004).

Role Reversal

Other research suggests that it may not be differential changes, but rather the resulting role reversal that determines family conflict. Children typically learn the host language more easily and quickly than their parents (Birman 2006). As a result, it is often children rather than parents who negotiate with officials and bureaucracy, and who speak for the family, thus taking on leadership roles in their family that would normally be taken on by parents (McQuillan and Tse 1995; Oznobishin and Kurman 2009; Puig 2002; Trickett and Jones 2007; Walsh et al. 2006). Hampshire and colleagues proposed that role reversals may be even more prevalent in families that have negotiated war and armed conflict, because youth are more adaptable to changes and more resourceful in responding to them than their older family members (Hampshire et al. 2008).

Role reversals have been associated with higher levels of psychological distress and family disagreements (Oznobishin and Kurman 2009; Trickett and Jones 2007). Children and parents report feeling embarrassed by the parents' problems negotiating their environment, which can lead to rejection of parents by the children (Puig 2002). However, the contribution that children make to their families have also been seen as beneficial, not only to the family, but to the youth themselves (Fuligni 1998; Fuligni and Pederson 2002). Participating in meaningful work that benefits their families and communities is a learning experience that can increase children's sense of self-worth and competency (Orellana 2001), improve their language learning, cultural knowledge and cognitive skills, and increase their feelings of independence and maturity (McQuillan and Tse 1995). Trickett and Jones (2007) noted that families in which youth engaged in more cultural brokering reported increased family adjustment to their environment, without any reported decreases in family-level cohesion or satisfaction.

Relationship Deterioration

Migrant parents can report sadness and frustration at their loss of respect in the family, and negotiating parental authority can be a major area of conflict (Dennis et al. 2009; Dubus 2010; Hwang 2006; Puig 2002). For refugee families, parents' pow-

erlessness to protect their children from systemic violence and harassment can undermine their authority in the eyes of their children (Boydon et al. 2002; Newman 2005), as can parents' relative inability to provide for their families' material needs, both in refugee camps and following migration (Hampshire et al. 2008). Some research suggests that parents may try to compensate for their feelings of lost status by demanding complete control over their adolescents (Newman 2005).

In contrast, Hwang (2006) suggests that differences in values and language may challenge effective intergenerational communication, which may, in turn, result in increasing distance and further erosion of communication. This is consistent with the evidence, noted above, that it is *perceptions* of intergenerational differences in beliefs, skills, and behaviours, as well as value conflicts, that may be the best predictors of family conflict (Dinh and Nguyen 2006). Relationships may also be eroded by conflicting work and education schedules that prevent children and parents from spending time together, thus increasing the psychological distance between them (Este and Tachble 2009a, 2009b; Puig 2002). Cuban refugees in Puig's (2002) study explicitly attributed some of their family conflict and loss of connectedness with their adolescent children to a lack of shared time. Refugees' experience of prolonged periods of separation in the family can also increase both psychological distance and erosion of parental authority, as children learn to cope and make decisions in their parents' absence (Este and Tachble 2009b; Williams 2010).

Resources and Support

While intergenerational relationships may be negatively affected by the process of forced migration, these relationships are also a source of mutual support, resources, and strength (Whittaker et al. 2005). The presence and support of family members is perceived as essential to well-being by immigrant and refugee youth, and has been associated with better mental health among them (Hampshire et al. 2008; Merz et al. 2009; Tempany 2009; Whittaker et al. 2005). The role of parents in providing social support in migrant families may be particularly critical because of elevated levels of stress and social challenges brought on by migration. In a study comparing immigrant youth from the former Soviet Union with non-immigrant Israeli youth, only immigrant youth showed a positive relationship between the strength of their relationship with their parents and their ability to cope with stressful life events (Walsh et al. 2006). Similarly, Oznobishin and Kurman (2009) found only immigrant Israeli youth who reported low (versus high) support from their families showed a negative relationship between the amount of language brokering they engaged in for their parents and their perceived personal competence and agency (i.e., self-efficacy).

Youth benefit from the support of their families, but they also make important contributions to the well-being of their family. Youths' skill at mediating between

their parents and others are seen as improving the outcomes for the entire family by youth and parents alike (McQuillan and Tse 1995; Orellana 2001; Trickett and Jones 2007). In his review of immigrant youth adjustment, Fuligni (1998) notes that youth not only contribute resources to the family through chores and assistance, but often through academic achievement, seeing their academic success as eventually bringing benefits and resources to the family as a whole.

The Present Study

The literature suggests that youth play an important role in migrant families, largely because of their more rapid adaptation to cultural systems and norms, and language acquisition. While this is well documented, there is debate in the literature about whether youths' faster rate of change comes at a cost, with larger intergenerational differences in rates of change associated with increasing conflict and alienation in the family and with the potential role reversals disrupting family roles and authority. The present study explores whether differential changes and role reversals result in negative family outcomes in the context of newcomer refugee youth from three communities: Afghan, Karen and Sudanese.

METHOD

Participants

Seventy participants were recruited using a number of strategies: distribution of flyers to community centers and student associations, presentations at schools with high numbers of newcomer youth students, Facebook invitations, announcements at youth-focused events, word of mouth, and face-to-face or telephone contacts. Potential participants were youth 16 to 24 years old who self-identified as belonging to the Afghan, Karen or Sudanese communities, and who had come to Canada within the last 5 years as Government Assisted Refugees, Privately Sponsored Refugees or through the in-Canada refugee claimant process.

We intended to conduct four gender-specific and age-specific (16–19 year and 20–24 year) focus groups per community. Only 10 of the 12 focus groups were conducted; recruitment challenges made it impossible to conduct focus groups with the younger Sudanese youth. Focus groups included 4 to 7 participants ($N = 57$) and were facilitated by trained peer researchers who came from the same community. Participant characteristics for the focus groups are described in Table 1.

We also conducted 13 individual follow up interviews to explore in more detail the issues that had been raised in the focus groups. The interviews were with five Afghan youth (1 female, age 16-19; 2 male, age 16-19; 1 female, age 20-24; 1 male, age 20-24), five Karen youth (2 female, age 16-19 ;1 male, age 16-19; 2 female, age

TABLE 1. Demographic Characteristics for Youth in Focus Groups

Group	N	Mean years in Canada	Live with family	Understand English “very well”	Religion:		Employed	Is a student	Student at High School/ University/ ESL/College*
					Muslim/ Christian/ Buddhist				
Afghan									
16-19 F	7	2.4	7	3	6/0/0	2	5	5/0/1/0	
16-19 M	5	1.0	3	4	5/0/0	0	5	5/0/0/0	
20-24 F	6	2.5	5	3	6/0/0	0	3	0/0/3/1	
20-24M	6	0.5	2	1	6/0/0	1	4	1/1/3/1	
Karen									
16-19 F	6	2.5	5	0	0/5/1	2	6	6/0/0/0	
16-19 M	7	1.8	6	0	0/6/1	3	4	5/0/1/0	
20-24 F	5	2.0	4	0	0/5/0	2	5	2/0/3/0	
20-24M	5	1.2	4	0	0/4/1	3	2	0/0/4/0	
Sudanese									
20-24 F	4	2.3	4	3	2/2/0	2	4	0/3/0/1	
20-24M	6	2.8	2	4	2/4/0	3	6	0/6/0/0	

* Some youth reported more than one place of current education.

20-24) and three Sudanese youth (1 male, age 16-19; 2 female, age 20-24). Only gender, ethnic group, and age category demographic information was collected in the interviews.

Procedures

This community-based research study was a collaboration between academics, community partners, and eight refugee youth peer researchers from the three communities, who were equal partners in the design, planning and analysis of the project, and partners and co-leads on most academic and non-academic dissemination activities (depending on their availability following project completion). An advisory committee comprised of academics and community members who were knowledgeable about the three communities provided guidance to the team regarding participant recruitment, interview and focus group protocols, and the study report. Ethics approval was obtained from the appropriate agencies prior to study onset.

The focus groups began with participants drawing a picture of themselves before and after coming to Canada, and listing their roles and responsibilities both before and after migration. The pictures were a starting point for a discussion of these responsibilities, and of the supports and services they currently used, and those that they felt they needed in order to meet their goals and responsibilities. All focus group discussions were conducted in the participants' first language except in the case of Sudanese participants, who participated in English. All were audio-taped and, where necessary, translated into English. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol that probed more deeply into these issues, and included specific probes about gendered roles and responsibilities. Data were analyzed in NVivo using inductive thematic analysis (Bryman 2001) by reading and coding transcripts sentence by sentence, and by searching for recurring themes in the data. A draft coding scheme was discussed and developed by the entire research team and then applied to half of the data. The team then reviewed the coding and additional transcripts with the main coder and discussed changes or adjustments to the coding scheme. The identified subcategories were compared and contrasted to determine commonalities and variations, and to develop categories.

RESULTS

Three overarching themes emerged from focus groups in the discussion of their relationships with their parents. These were: family responsibilities; relationship conflict and deterioration; and social support. These are discussed in detail below.

Family Responsibilities

Youth reported acting as interpreters of the new environment for their parents and grandparents; of providing financial support to the family; of having more work but the same kinds of responsibilities as prior to migration; of achieving growth through increased responsibility; and of providing emotional and moral support for their family.

Interpreting the New Environment

Because of their greater facility with English, youth had interpretation and system navigation responsibilities following migration such as accompanying family members to medical appointments, reading letters, banking, and otherwise taking on additional tasks as an intermediary between their parents and grandparents and organizations and institutions outside of the family, as is described in the quote below.

Because in my particular case, when my father came here, he doesn't know English and neither does my mother. Before, when we were in another county, my father knew their language, and he was almost responsible for everything. But here, because I and my brother know English more and better than my father, then our responsibility increases as well. We have to take our grandmother and our father to doctors' appointments and also solve the problems at home. Here the responsibilities fall more on the children because they learn English much faster, that's why. (Afghan Female Focus Group, age 16-19)

Youth were aware that some of their increasing responsibility is a product of being older. However, the changes were also due to their greater understanding of the language and culture, and included tasks that they would not have been expected to do if they had not migrated. Youth also spoke of having to interpret technology for parents who were unfamiliar with computers.

Providing Financial Support to the Family

One big difference youth noticed was the need to contribute financially to the family. Many had been contributing to the family prior to migration through other means, such as helping around the house or, in the case of the Karen youth, collecting food and tending livestock. In contrast, as one youth noted in the quote below, in Canada youth had to work because their parents could not support the family financially.

Huge difference because back home you tend to rely on your parents. Don't have to think about your financials. Just school work. But here you are not going to base everything on your parents because no matter how educated your parents are there is no good jobs here compared to how they used to work back home and bring everything in as a source of income. Here they have to struggle on their own so we are not going to sit backward and rely on them. So there is more responsibility here than ever compared to back home. (Sudanese Female Focus Group, age 20-24).

Youth also spoke of sending money back to other family members, and of the desire to send money back to the community they had come from in order to help rebuild it. Several youth spoke about the role of being the oldest male, in the absence of their father, and the responsibilities that this entailed for them, including working to secure a family income. These cases are the most consistent with the notion of role reversal.

Same But Increased Responsibilities

Although many youth spoke of taking on new tasks, others reported that they had the same responsibilities in Canada as they had prior to migration, particularly with respect to helping their parents. In the following quote from a Karen youth, she discusses how her responsibilities are very similar in Canada, although her environment is very different.

Before I came to Canada, I lived in Mae La Oo camp. In the morning I woke up, cooked, washed clothes, cleaned house and went to school. In the evening, came back home, read books and slept. After I came to Canada, I now live in apartment. I go to school, also cook, clean house, wash clothes. (Karen Female Focus Group, age 16-19)

Thus, while they might be busier in Canada because they had more schoolwork or a part-time job, their responsibility to their family, and in many cases their chores at home, remained essentially the same. However, youth felt that they were busier. Often this was because before migration they had done these tasks with their parents, whereas after migration they did them on their own. Moreover, while responsibilities may have been of the same kind, the social context in which they were carried out was very different. As a result, the meanings and definitions of success were radically altered and expectations increased. As one youth remarked:

...the expectations are higher.... They expect me to provide more. They expect me to...do more than I was doing before. (Sudanese Female Interview, age 20-24)

Positive Change

In many cases, the youth spoke of their added family responsibilities and new roles as simply a fact of their present circumstances, with no negative evaluation. One interesting but less common theme was that these added responsibilities, both at home and outside of the home, led to personal growth or greater feelings of self-worth or competence. The following quote from an Afghan male describes it well:

Well now like I feel I am more important to, like, my family and, and everything and my brother and sister, 'cause I really help them with, like, their homeworks and everything. So like I feel that I'm more important for it. (Afghan Male Interview, age 20-24)

Other youth spoke of the importance of helping other newcomers, refugees, and members of their community, and how positively they felt about these activities.

Summary of Family Responsibilities

These findings highlight youths' agency and resilience in the migration process. These youth are actively problem-solving for themselves and their families, taking increased responsibilities in accordance with their greater facility with the Canadian environment. They are clearly taking leadership roles in their families, which benefits the family as a whole. Some youth reported explicitly stepping into parental roles, suggesting that role reversals were occurring. In general, however, rather than speaking of these responsibilities as a burden, youth seem to take them on as part of their growth into adulthood and as a natural part of being in their family.

Relationship Conflict and Deterioration

A critical question is whether youths' leadership in the family was perceived as a lack of respect for their parents' knowledge and authority. While there was little frustration expressed over the added roles and responsibilities these youth took on, there were other challenges that came up in their relationships with their parents. Two main themes emerged: a lack of connection between family members; and disagreements about freedom and control.

Lack of Communication and Understanding

Difficulties in communicating with their parents could make it challenging to solve problems or disagreements. Some youth reported that their parents did not trust their ability to make decisions for themselves, and did not understand their needs or intentions. These issues came up most frequently among the 16 to 19 year-old female Karen group. The youth attributed this problem to cultural norms about parent-child relationships, which may have acted as barriers to families openly communicating about intergenerational differences in expectations, challenges and values, as noted in the quote below:

In the Karen culture, parents and children do not have a relationship like friends. Mother is mother and child is child. This is one of the barriers to communicate openly. When you try to speak and make them know [some]thing, it look as though you... try to show off and teach them. (Karen Female Focus Group, age 16-19)

While some youth stated that their parents needed to be educated in order to better understand their children, other youth located the need for education in both the youth and their parents.

Youth from other communities noted that their relationships had become more distant because of a lack of time to spend together. Family members spent less time socializing and more time working, often independently and away from home, and family intimacy suffered as a result. There were other youth, however, who reported that their feelings of intimacy and connectedness to their families remained the same or even grew closer as a result of migrating.

Freedom and Control

As with most adolescents, a key area of disagreement was around adolescent freedom and parental authority. Once again, this theme was more prominent among the Karen youth group. The following exchange in a Karen focus group highlights this challenge:

F1: How do you see the power of parents upon their children?

P2: I do not think it is good at all. They take too much power beyond limit. Because you are their children, they want to control you and exercise their power on you. When you challenge them, they will beat you up because you are just their children. They take all the power.

F1: How do others see it?

P4: What she said is how I see it.

F1: Because you are their children, does that mean you have no right at all?

P4: You have to do exactly according to their orders. If they say black, you should be black and if they say white, you should be white. (Karen Female Focus Group, age 16-19)

Some youth disagreed with their parents' authority and defended their right to freedom. Youth from all communities also talked about how children were more likely to resist their parents' efforts at control in Canada than prior to migration. For example, youth reported that other youth in their communities would threaten to call the police if parents used corporal punishment as a form of discipline, and youth could take advantage of their parents' lack of English-language facility to avoid or reject their parents' authority.

Some youth, particularly in the Afghan community, spoke of other youth taking the "wrong path." They attributed this to choosing the wrong friends, or the temptations and dangers of living in a country that offers too much freedom. These youth spoke about the negative consequences of not respecting parents' values and not abiding by parents' authority.

Variability Within Families

A common theme was the acknowledgement that intergenerational relationships varied widely from family to family within each community. Youth in the focus groups compared their family relationships, rules, responsibilities, authority, communication and connectedness and offered examples of how their families differed. The breadth of difference within these communities is demonstrated by the following exchange in a Karen focus group about dating non-Karen boys, which most girls said was forbidden.

P6: My parents give me full freedom. (Other participants were laughing at her comment). I can do whatever I like. They say it is up to me whether I want to love Karen and/or non-Karen guys. My parents give me full freedom. The most important thing is LOVE and UNDERSTANDING in our family, this is fine.

P3: As for my parents, they check our movement and forbid our relationship if they know that that person is not suitable for us. If that person is good for us but they still forbid, we explain to them and they understand us. It is no problem. It is not that they abuse us or anything. And we do not displease them either. (Karen Female Focus Group, age 16-19)

Although this finding is not surprising, it is an important reminder of the diversity within these communities.

Summary of Relationship Conflict and Deterioration

Some youth reported feeling more disconnected from their families following migration, while others reported no changes, or even that migration improved family dynamics and family connectedness. Where family conflict occurred for refugee youth, it was associated with the same kinds of variables that have been identified among non-refugee youth, namely lack of communication and understanding, and struggles over adolescent freedom from authority. However, it could be aggravated by intergenerational differences in values and expectations. Conflict was particularly salient among the Karen youth, who reported that their parents' control might have been acceptable prior to migration, but was less acceptable to them in Canada. Youth in the Afghan and Sudanese focus groups and interviews reported that they themselves accepted parental control, and agreed that parental control was important for youth well-being, but spoke of many other youth in their communities who rejected their parents' values and authority.

Social Support

Support to Parents

Some youth expressed concern that their parents' sense of self-worth was challenged by their difficulties in adapting to Canada, and that not speaking English aggravated their parents' social isolation. Youth were unsure how to help their parents in these circumstances. In part it was because they felt unable to ease their parents' loss, or did not have the time to spend with them. In other situations it was because their efforts to help could be seen as further undermining their parents' sense of self-respect and self-worth. The following quote from a participant in the Karen focus group reveals the difficulties that the youth faced in trying to help their parents adapt.

If we try to teach them, they themselves do not feel good about themselves. My father is exactly like that always. Whatever we tell our father, he says that because he does not understand English, he.....I don't know what to say. (Karen Female Focus Group, age 16-19)

Support From Parents

Youth also spoke about the role their parents played in providing close emotional bonds and support. In many cases, this was in terms of providing advice and helping youth with their decisions. Some youth were clear that their parents were the most important source of advice and emotional support for them. This theme did not come up as frequently as expected, though, and other youth did not spontaneously offer information about their parents as a source of support. When the facilitator

probed about support from family, participants offered examples, but some seemed to feel that their parents' support to them was limited.

The limited discussion of parents as a source of support is interesting. It is not clear whether the questions about support led youth to think of more formal sources of support, or whether older youth turn more to peers for support than parents. It is also possible that youth felt that parental support was so obvious as to not require naming. Nonetheless, many youth were not as forthcoming with examples of parental support as with other forms, such as support from peers or school staff. It is possible that as youth take greater leadership in their families, they begin to see themselves more as support providers to their families than support recipients, which relates to the idea of role reversals.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that newcomer refugee youth played a vital role as “resettlement champions” for their families in Canada. Since youth generally acquired knowledge of the language and social systems of Canada more quickly than their parents and other older family members, refugee youth took on a number of resettlement responsibilities, including serving as interpreters and system navigators for their families. Also, because their parents often faced acute difficulties in finding jobs, youth stepped in and entered the labour market to support their families, sometimes suggesting role reversals. The need for families to rely on youth for support is a natural outgrowth of Canadian refugee policies which, apart from an initial year of financial and settlement service support, do not address the need to build educational, professional and political capacities among refugees. Youths' leadership in resettlement, however, did not have negative consequences for family relationships.

Consistent with other research on migrant family relationships (Trickett and Jones 2007), for some youth, family conflict did seem to arise out of differential acquisition of language, norms and values. Similarly, and also consistent with some other North American studies (Birman 2006), youths' competence in English, and with Canadian culture more generally, was at times a source of tension in the family since some youth attributed their own or other youths' rejection of parents' authority to parents' lack of understanding of the Canadian context. Parents, of course, may have perceived this differently. It was also clear, however, that differential rates of change and even role reversals did not necessarily lead to conflict. Moreover, youths' interpreting the local social context for their families did not necessarily lead to role reversals. Several continued to rely on their parents for support and advice, and believed that parents, and parental values, played an important role in guiding youth in their community.

Some research suggests differential rates of change may only be problematic when youth feel a lack of support from their parents, and this may be tied to larger challenges faced by the families (Oznobishin and Kurman 2009). For example, Su and Hynie's (2010) research suggests that there is a relationship between stress and punitive (i.e., authoritarian) parenting. In the current study, the group that spoke most about family conflict also reported more authoritarian parenting, criticism from their parents, and the sense that their parents perceived them as inadequate. The pattern observed in this group may have reflected a dynamic whereby parents were more focused on controlling their children in the face of greater stress, and inadequate resources to cope with these stressors. This, in turn, may have led youth to reject their parents' control, attributing it to intergenerational differences in interpreting the cultural setting (cf. Newman 2005).

Many youth spoke positively about the leadership role they adopted in their family and community. Moreover, these resettlement responsibilities made important contributions to their family's day-to-day well-being in Canada. However, while fulfilling family obligations may contribute to a positive sense of self-worth and self-efficacy (Fuligni and Pederson 2002), many youth talked about having to juggle multiple resettlement responsibilities with educational and other priorities that are common among those in their age groups (Shakya et al. 2011). The challenge in these role reversals may not come from restructuring family relationships, but the high levels of stress placed on these youth.

This leadership role in resettlement that refugee youth are taking on for their families treads a thin line between empowerment and vulnerability. There is a need to acknowledge and build on this leadership role of refugee youth and recognize youths' agency and resiliency in the settlement process. However, the fact that refugee youth end up taking on such significant responsibilities for their families is indicative of major policy gaps in settlement and other services. Refugee youth are being pressed to step in and take on tasks and support for their families that should have been provided by settlement or other agencies. These failures need to be urgently rectified in order to empower refugee youth and their families. Some differential changes in values and expectations, and even role reversal, may be unavoidable, but need not be harmful to the family. However, policy makers and settlement sector leaders need to provide adequate professional support and implement capacity-building policies for refugee families, so that youth are not forced to take on such heavy roles and responsibilities, and we do not end up exploiting these youths' resilience.

CONCLUSION

Youth from three refugee communities in Toronto all reported taking on a large

number of responsibilities in their families following migration, many of which can be attributed to their faster acculturation to the language and culture, but also to the challenges their parents faced in achieving adequate services and employment. Nonetheless, most youth did not report increased conflict or relationship deterioration arising from these responsibilities. Where youth did report intergenerational conflict, it seemed to occur in a context of greater efforts at parental control and less support, which could have been the result of greater stress for these families. These findings suggest that refugee families and youth are resilient and resourceful, and play key roles in family resettlement. However, the burden of these roles is greater than necessary, and could be reduced through improved services and policies for refugee families.

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