Overview of the Study

Background

- More than 100,000 Nepali-speaking southern Bhutanese (Lhoptshi-khas) were rendered refugees in the early 1990s as a result of the Royal Government of Bhutan’s ethnic cleansing policy.
- Refugees from Bhutan lived in UNHCR managed camps in Eastern Nepal for about two decades.
- Since 2008, more than 80,000 refugees have resettled in the USA and other developed countries like Australia, Canada, Norway, Great Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands.
- In 2010, Minnesota hosted approximately 1000 Bhutanese refugees out of which 70-80 are 65 and older.

Conceptual Framework

- This study was sensitized by social ecological theories.
- The goal is to understand participants’ own experiences.
- Study considers peoples’ experiences, behavior, health, and wellbeing as embedded in sociocultural and environmental context, and how Bhutanese elders’ experiences contribute to this framework.
- Bhutanese culture – strong sense of community inherent to the interdependent agricultural lifestyles of Bhutanese villages.
- Continuity of communal living guaranteed and strengthened through years of living in the refugee camp.
- Now living in a completely unfamiliar environment and away from the network, circles they had developed over years in refugee camp.

Research Questions

- What are the aging experiences of Bhutanese refugee elders (65 and older) living in the Twin Cities?
- What are the aging experiences of Bhutanese refugee elders for theories – vital involvement in aging, successful aging, productive aging - developed in Western cultures?

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- Methods
- Literature Review

Emerging Themes

- Positive Experiences
- Sense of Fulfillment: Elders seemed to rejoice in their children’s success in the U.S. “I came to America for my children’s sake and I am happy they are doing well. Some are going to school, others have job, they have and some are thinking of buying a house. I am happy.”
- Sense of Security: Welcomed by friendly and helpful volunteers. Don’t have to worry about food, clothes, shelter and health care. “we have food to eat, nice house to stay and medicine when we are sick”
- Happiness: Most elders expressed happiness to be living with their children and being able to play with their grandchildren. Some of them felt happy that they were taking care of their grandchildren when their children went to work.

- Negative Experiences
- Loss: Most of the elders talked about loss of “Ghar Bari” which literally means “house and land” but refers to place attachment. It symbolizes a place where they felt they belonged to, had control over and where they felt safe, at ease, accepted, and able to freely express themselves. This longing for the lost “Ghar Bari” seemed more than just nostalgia. This longing is best conveyed in the poignant yearning, “Can we ever touch those orange trees again?”
- Isolation: Loss of familiar environment, network of friends and family, skills, language barrier. Inability to travel around on their own.
- Fear/worry: One of the biggest fear of the elders appeared to be the fear of abandonment – that they may become unable to take care of themselves and they may be sent to an institution, away from their family. One elder expressed this feeling as “I would rather die than live away from my family.”
- Some elders expressed the view that the old age assistance they were receiving provided incentive and resources to their children to take care of them. A similar role played by land in the villages in Bhutan. They feared abandonment if the assistance stopped because they may not pass the citizenship exams. If they don’t become citizens they can receive assistance only for a limited period.
- Many elders expressed fear that their children may not perform their last rites – The children may not get time off from work to perform the elaborate rites which take for 13 days from the day of death, or they may simply feel that the rites are not important and unnecessary. Elders feel this will certainly jeopardize their chances of security in the after life through salvation.
- Insecurity: Some elders expressed fear of being harmed when they are walking on the street or when they are alone at home. “Somebody may come and harm us when our children are away at work or school and we are alone at home.”
- Feel de-valued: Some elders felt that nobody listened to them. As elders have to depend on the younger generation especially young grandchildren for navigating the environment, younger generations seemed to think that the elders didn’t know anything. “Kare Bhutanese” translated as “My words don’t sell”- which means nobody listens to me. It also suggests that they cannot communicate as they don’t speak English.

- Aspirations
- Consistent with the experiences of other refugee older adults resettled in the U.S. and other development countries - Bhutanese elders expressed experiencing isolation, fear of separation from their children and grandchildren, fear of being a burden to their children and feeling de-valued. Despite these challenges and fear, they expressed aspirations about how they want to live happily.
- They said they dream of living in a house overlooking corn fields or at least vegetable gardens with lots of neighbors around.
- Many elders expressed the need to get together with peers, pray together, share their experiences and tell their stories about who they were, what they did and where they belonged.
- Bhutanese elders seemed to aspire to find an environment/place to belong and get attached to it the way they were to their “Ghar Bari” in Bhutan.

- Implication
- Create aspects of Bhutanese villages that are practical, make sense and appropriate to the life in the Twin Cities to help them find the place equivalent to their “Ghar Bari” in Bhutan.
- Concept of rebuilding villages was experienced by Ethos Doew, a Karen refugee leader in Minnesota – “We had villages in Burma, when we escaped to the jungle we rebuild villages there, and then again rebuilt them in the refugee camps in Thailand, and now we are rebuilding our villages here in America again” (personal communication, October 15, 2012). This concept of rebuilding villages seems to be relevant in supporting Bhutanese elders find their “Ghar Bari” here in the Twin Cities.
- What this may mean is:
  - Have a common place where elders can engage in activities meaningful to them like – praying together and sharing their experiences. They may find their “Ghar Bari” – a safe place where they feel belonged, accepted and where they can express themselves freely.
  - Further research is needed to understand what aging well means in Bhutanese culture to develop a suitable model to support aging with dignity and respect among Bhutanese elders.

- References

- Background/Literature Review

- Previous study has not examined the experiences Bhutanese refugees, elders.
- Southeast Asia Resource Center(2011) reported that most of the older Bhutanese refugees are illiterate and they suffer severe social isolation – “so they have become hopeless ... they struggle for existence.”
- A study done on some Bhutanese resettled in a city in Texas reported – Higher religious coping was associated with higher acculturation and social stress (Benson et al., 2011).
- Studies with other refugee groups have revealed complex experiences of aging in the U.S. including these: (a) loss of role as respected elder, (b) fear of living separate from children, (c) feeling devalued by children, and (d) feeling self-blame for intergenerational cultural gap (Dubus, 2010).
- Findings have revealed significant departures from the norms of filial piety. It cannot be assumed that elderly immigrants' needs are being met through traditional family structures (Lo & Russell, 2007).

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Aging Experiences of Bhutanese Refugee Elders Living in the Twin Cities

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“Can we ever touch those orange trees again?” A question from a 62 year old father to a son after being resettled in the USA (December 2008)