This is the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:


This file was downloaded from: http://eprints.qut.edu.au/53406/

© Copyright 2012 The Authors

**Notice:** Changes introduced as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing and formatting may not be reflected in this document. For a definitive version of this work, please refer to the published source:

http://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fes025
Unpacking the Micro–Macro Nexus: Narratives of Suffering and Hope among Refugees from Burma Recently Settled in Australia

MARK BROUGH,* ROBERT SCHWEITZER,** JANE SHAKESPEARE-FINCH,** LYN VROMANS** and JULIE KING*

*School of Public Health and Social Work, Faculty of Health, Queensland University of Technology, Victoria Park Road, Kelvin Grove Qld 4059
**School of Psychology and Counselling, Faculty of Health, Queensland University of Technology, Victoria Park Road, Kelvin Grove Qld 4059
Email: m.brough@qut.edu.au

MS received November 2011; revised MS received February 2012

Narratives of forced migration are open to a variety of interpretations. In mental health, refugee narratives of arduous journeys in the face of systemic macro socio-political forces are often transformed from this context into a medicalized micro context of inner individual worlds. Both the dominant pathogenic lens of trauma studies and the growing salutogenic lens embodied in resilience research, often reflect a western cultural idiom of focusing on the individualized nature of these phenomena. Using qualitative data collected from refugees from Burma now settling in Australia, the article emphasizes the need for a more reflexive and expansive account of both suffering and hope within refugee narratives. It recounts these narratives within a conceptual framework which acknowledges the importance of the connections between the micro individual experience and the macro, socio-political context. This is not only a question of political principle, but also a matter of listening to the voice of those who know most about the relationship between macro forces of human rights violations and their impact on individual, family and community trajectories.

Keywords: Burma, Australia, Refugees, Mental Health

Introduction

As a result of systematic and ongoing human rights violations in Burma, forced migration both within Burma and from Burma into neighbouring countries remains a major international crisis of social injustice. These human rights violations include persecution, torture, extrajudicial executions, forcible conscription of children, rape, demolition of places of worship and forced labour (Shukla 2008: 7). At the beginning of 2011, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated a total population of concern within Burma of 859,403, with a further 499,955 persons of concern residing outside the country (UNHCR 2011). In recent years, Australia has accepted a growing number of refugees from Burma as part of its refugee resettlement programme. According to Department for Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) data for the 2009–2010 period, Burma was ranked first as the largest source country for humanitarian entrants to Australia with 1,959 visas granted, just ahead of 1,688 visas granted to refugees from Iraq (DIAC n.d.).

Not surprisingly, many of the people from Burma now settling in Australia bring with them personal experiences of human rights violations. Their recounting of these experiences brings a human depth to the socio-political situation in Burma. However, this same group must also contend with the challenges of settlement within Australia; hence new narratives of life in Australia now mingle with narratives from Burma as well as from the protracted periods of time most have spent in second country situations such as Thailand, Malaysia, Bangladesh and India. Such narratives reflect both individual and collective experience and as such speak to the nexus between the individual and the wider social context. It is hardly surprising that a group of people persecuted on the basis of their social position within Burmese society should be insightful about this micro–macro nexus; more surprising though is the scant attention paid to this layer of meaning in the study of refugee mental health generally. More common within this literature is a transformative discourse which re-imagines the experiences of suffering as an individual, medicalized category only and in a similar epistemological vein considers the capacity not to succumb to such pathology a sign only of individual resilience. This article recounts the narratives of refugees from Burma within a framework which acknowledges the connections between the micro, individual experience and the macro, socio-political context in which that experience is so firmly embedded.
We recognize that there is no essentialist foundation to the micro–macro nexus referred to; rather it is a question of drawing attention to the tensions within this nexus. A critical epistemological tension here is bound up with the use of the term ‘mental health’ and underpinning categories of disorder. As Good et al. (1985) have argued, whilst there has been an established concern for the way in which social events trigger psycho-physiological responses, the social characteristics of the mental health category itself are largely understood as ‘epiphenomenal’. Like Good et al. (1985: 373) we argue here for the importance of interpretive research which acknowledges the ways in which people bring meaning to their situations. Thus we deploy the term ‘mental health’ with a broad set of possibilities in mind, including a desire to acknowledge its nexus with the colonial and postcolonial forces which have shaped Burma’s recent history. Thus ‘disorder’, whether expressed in relation to mental health problems or in relation to the organization of the state, speaks to the political, moral and epistemic environment (Good et al. 2008).

Chimni (1998) has described the ways in which a ‘northern’ perspective has shaped refugee studies generally, citing the common tendency to lay the blame for global refugee movements at the door of postcolonial states. As an example, Chimni (1998: 361) notes the regular depiction of the genocide in Rwanda as a product of ‘ethnic tension’ as deeply problematic, given its failure to consider the complex social and economic forces at work, including the role of global institutions. Similarly, Smith (1994: 22) has expressed concern about understanding Burma’s history only in terms of ethnic division. Historically Burma was a very multi-ethnic space and there appear to have been substantial precedents for inter-ethnic tolerance prior to the divisions created by British colonization in the nineteenth century. Indeed Leach’s (1954) well known ethnographic work in Burma soon after the Second World War emphasized a system of inter-ethnic relations held together by a nodal throne network (U Chit Hlaing 2008: 244). However, there were many discrepancies in the creation of postcolonial Burma as exemplified in the 1947 constitution. Whilst a federation of states was to make up the new Burma, Burmans predominated in both houses of parliament. The Mon and Rakhine were without states of their own, whilst the Shan and Karen were at least initially awarded the right to secession after a ten year trial period within the new state. The promised Karen state was for a long time not demarcated and the diverging meanings of ‘nationality states’, ‘communal seats’ and ‘ethnic minority rights’ all helped to lay the groundwork for the political turmoil which has continued to the present (Smith 1994). Thus from the outset it should be understood that in exploring the micro–macro nexus, the macro is not bounded by the borders of Burma and the discourses of history are no more immune from hegemonic forces than the discourses of mental health.

We are not suggesting that the more familiar individualized lenses of either trauma or resilience are not useful. However, as Kleinman (1995: 187) puts it, the medicalization of distress becomes a problem when it becomes a part of the ‘standard public discourse’. This is a dangerous outcome since it transforms macro political events into a series of micro, medicalized experiences inappropriately divorced from both the wider contexts of their creation and the political commitments required for their solutions. This article aims to bring a heightened cultural and political sensitivity to our understanding of both the trauma and resilience lens. Hence it explicitly explores the micro–macro, individual–collective, psycho-social nexus within the narratives of refugees from Burma now settling in Australia. It draws from their narratives the meanings they routinely attach to their journeys from Burma to settlement in Australia. Described below are stories of social suffering and hope. They draw strength and purpose from shared meanings produced from a shared oppression and a shared sense of responsibility to family, home and country.

The conceptual framework for this article draws inspiration from the growing body of reflexive literature which has sought to critique the dominant narrow gaze of refugee mental health both internationally (e.g. Coker 2004; Guribye 2011; Kirmayer 2003) and within Australia (e.g. Kokanovic and Stone 2010; McPherson 2010: Savvy and Sawyer 2008). Zur (1996) has contrasted the fundamental differences between ‘experience near’ and ‘experience far’ conceptualizations of trauma in relation to refugee studies. ‘Experience far’ approaches have tended to emphasize the individual experience and have little to say about the macro socio-political forces which shape such experiences. In the spirit of emic centred qualitative research, we emphasize here the ‘experience near’ constructs of suffering and hope drawn from the narratives of refugees from Burma now settling in Australia. Of course, suffering and hope speak to ideas that can be found more generally under the etic banners of trauma and resilience. However by emphasizing the emic lens, we argue it is possible to imagine new
perspectives beyond the micro-individualized lens which dominates both trauma and resilience studies.

Thus we take on board the critique of the ‘experience far’ post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) lens as having ‘pigeon-holed’ trauma (Summerfield 1999). Within this lens macro socio-political events are transformed into a set of individual medicalized experiences (Kleinman 1995: 176). Kleinman et al. (1997: x) remind us that human suffering is both individual and collective, both local and global, and further the notion of social suffering has helped to emphasize the nexus between the physical and emotional pain of people battling with chronic poverty, social marginalization, and routinized violence’ (Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010: 72). The narrowly focused trauma lens has helped underpin stereotypical understandings of culturally diverse people from refugee backgrounds into a singular pathologized, needy identity bereft of resilient and self-determining capacity (Watters 2001). One response to this state of affairs has been to challenge the pathogenic nature of trauma studies and replace it with the salutogenic perspective found within resilience studies (Antonovsky 1987). Yet, whilst studies in resilience have assisted in depathologizing the nature of trauma, they have done little to move the focus away from an individualized view of the world (Bottrell 2009). Just as the micro, medicalized ‘PTSD lens’ blurs the macro, we should also be very wary of the micro, individualized view of resilience in which macro matters of social justice are transformed by ‘the resilient individual, self-inventing for prosperity and success, with no regard for the adverse conditions that stack the odds against success for the disadvantaged and marginalized’ (Bottrell 2009: 334). In contrast, narratives of hope for better futures, whilst potentially functioning as sources of resilience, are also statements about desired social and political change. To interpret such narratives as only sources of resilience shows little respect for the socio-political agendas of people struggling against oppressive regimes.

One should also be alert to the dynamic nature of human experience in which resilience and trauma are fluid and intertwined rather than fixed discrete absolutes (Nguyen-Gillham et al. 2008: 296). The culturally constructed nature of both trauma and resilience requires acknowledgement here. Ungar (2003: 87) has discussed the ‘troubling amount of uncertainty’ in how both risk and resilience are conceptualized. Resilience requires evidence of having overcome adversity ‘beyond predicted expectations’ (Richman and Fraser 2001: 6 quoted in Ungar 2003: 87). But how is adversity to be judged? Kleinman (1995: 179) has pointed out the ethnocentric assumptions contained within the original clinical definition of ‘traumatic event’ as ‘outside the range of usual human experience’. The ‘stressors’ associated with war and related human rights violations may well be outside the range of most white western middle class experiences of life and therefore ‘unusual’, but it is in fact their everyday ‘usualness’ in other geopolitical contexts that should most concern us. Whilst more recent definitions have sought to use more objective criteria, there remains a lack of clarity around whether PTSD speaks to abnormal reactions to normal (but stressful) events or remains a normal reaction to abnormal events (Boone 2011). Further, the seemingly taken for granted, western neo-liberal cultural assumptions of transforming the social, political and economic realities of everyday living into the western idiom of ‘stress’ need to be acknowledged as a specific cultural response rather than an acultural, universalist construct. For example, Obrist and Büchi (2008: 256) have described the experience of sub-Saharan Africans in Switzerland having to ‘learn’ the western idea of stress. Implied here is the need to understand constructs within their own ‘experience near’ terms rather than imposing outsider ‘experience far’ constructs. Qualitative research provides the possibility to explore phenomena in this way.

**Methodology**

**Research Design and Approach**

An overarching narrative approach was adopted, drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews in order to provide rich, meaning centred understanding. This research was one component of a larger mixed methods study, undertaken in collaboration with a local Non-Government Organization (NGO), responsible for a refugee resettlement programme within a specified area of South East Queensland, Australia. The qualitative data used in this paper is drawn from 34 study participants who were interviewed during the course of 2009–2010. Participants ranged in age from 20–58. A diverse range of ethnic minorities from Burma were represented in our sample including Karen, Karenni, Kachin, Matu, Rohingya, Chin, Kayan and Arakan. In this study we were more interested in broad patterns of
experience of people from Burma, drawing on an opportunistic recruitment approach within this
diverse population which includes ethnicities beyond those included here. Participants were recruited
using a combination of a client population sample (20 qualitative interviews) of the NGO partner
organization (as part of the larger mixed method study, see Schweitzer et al (2011) for purposes of blind review) as well as a community snowball sample (14 qualitative interviews) starting from an initial community leader contact point. Twenty one interviews were with men and 13 with women. This is acknowledged as a limitation in terms of understanding the gendered nature of the refugee experience. We also acknowledge that there are many diversities in the sample including for example culture, age, length of time living in Australia as well as in second country situations. These are all valid points of difference likely to shape narratives of suffering and hope, and we do not wish to assume homogeneity of experience or meaning across these diverse social and cultural positions. Rather we present this data with a view to opening up an understanding of this population in a way which can inform future more nuanced work.

Ethical Issues
We drew advice about the ethical context of research from our NGO settlement service provider partner and received approval from the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Human Research Ethics committee. Due to the potential vulnerabilities of the participants, a number of steps were taken to ensure the research was conducted sensitively. The study was verbally explained to participants, and also written information was provided to all participants with signed voluntary consent sought prior to any interview. The interviewers had professional backgrounds which enabled them to be sensitive to the needs of participants, one interviewer being a registered psychologist and the other a registered nurse with extensive anthropological field experience. All participants were informed that they were able to withdraw at any time, without reason or comment. No participants withdrew and seemed to find satisfaction in sharing their experience. Provision was made to address any distress which may have resulted from the interviews, via referral to free professional counselling and support, but this was not required during the course of the study.

Qualitative research with people from diverse cultural backgrounds raises particular questions surrounding the ethics and rigour of research protocols and the importance of cultural translation (Bhabha 1994; Spivak 2007). This research recognizes the plurality that arises through socially and culturally constructed experience and the complex processes at work in the spaces between cultures. There is no pristine way to either obtain or represent the voice of others, which is always mediated in the original telling of the story, in the translation process and in the researcher’s recounting of the story. With these complexities in mind we set out our methods below.

Interviews
One of two trained female interviewers interviewed participants using the same semi-structured interview guide. Interview question lines focused on: the journey that people had undertaken in leaving Burma; living in neighbouring ‘second countries’; and ultimately their settlement in the ‘third country’ context of Australia (a copy of the interview protocol is available from the authors). Since these journeys inevitably involved experiences of both suffering and hope, these were elicited as life journeys as much as physical ones. We did not focus on the finer detail of events; rather we were interested in the meanings attached to these journeys. This was as much an ethical protocol as an epistemological one. We were keen to give participants the opportunity to interpret our question lines flexibly, to decide for themselves not only what meanings were important for them, but also what degree of detail they wished to share.

Bi-cultural Workers
All interviews were conducted with the assistance of bicultural workers, who interpreted communications and bridged lexical differences, both linguistic and cultural. In the client sample, working in collaboration with a settlement agency afforded the interviewer and participants access to a diverse group of bicultural workers who could be drawn upon to interpret, depending on the language needs of the participant. This provided quality linguistic capacity but also presented challenges in developing sustained rapport with each interpreter involved. In the second snowball sample, the interviewer worked with a single bicultural worker fluent in Chin, Burman and
English. While working with a single interpreter provided a narrowed linguistic range, the interviewer gained opportunities to developing stronger rapport with the bicultural worker.

Awareness of the potential politics of language was important. Given the linguistic diversity of our sample, at times the bicultural worker and participant would use a shared second language. Participants sometimes chose to utilize their developing command of English and sometimes Burman, a second language among a number of our participants, was used. In negotiating the interview process, sensitivity to the potential politics of language was vital. For many of the forced migrants from ethnic minorities in Burma, symbolically, Burman is the language of the oppressors; hence it was important to allow participants to choose whether they wished to use it. Though much more could be said about methodological challenges associated with translation and the use of bicultural workers (see Temple and Young 2004), we simply wish to emphasize here the principle of respectful collaborative engagement as a foundation for this sort of cross-cultural work.

Trustworthiness of Findings
We understand cultural translation and trustworthiness of findings as intrinsically connected. Our goals here were to achieve credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of findings (Guba 1981). The narratives of refugees, like any narrative, are a particular interpretation of the past created within a specific moment of the present. This is not a question of accuracy or truthfulness, but one of meaning and context. As Eastmond (2007: 250) suggests, narrative methodology is concerned with the ways in which people narrate their life experiences, including the negotiation of meaning, the evaluation of significance and the assessment of the next step for action.

In terms of credibility, interviewers had developed familiarity with participants’ cultures and experience through lengthy engagement with community members and consultation with the literature before qualitative data collection commenced. Analyses and interpretations were discussed and confirmed amongst the research team with particular reference to team members directly involved in the data collection.

In terms of transferability of findings, the researchers were meticulous in documenting their interviews and observations and describing the process of analysis (Mays and Pope 1995). Such transparent descriptions of research protocols, data collection, analyses and interpretations provided a basis for others to judge the research process and to consider the extent of transferability of findings. Peer examination and the detailed description of how the research was planned and conducted also supported the reliability of the findings. We acknowledge the many diversities in our sample including for example, culture, age, length of time living in Australia as well as in second country situations. These are all valid points of difference likely to shape narratives of suffering and hope, and we do not wish to assume homogeneity of experience or meaning across these diverse social positions. Rather we present this data with a view to opening up an understanding of this population in a way which can inform future more nuanced work. While we recognize the difficulty in achieving confirmability, we have attempted to be both transparent and reflexive about the strengths and limitations of our approach.

Findings
Leaving Burma and Life in Neighbouring Countries
Although flight from Burma sometimes followed specific events, common to all interviewees was a long lead time to the decision to flee. Persecution or fear of persecution were chronic features of life inside Burma. The most common human rights violations described by participants related to forced labour in which people were taken from their homes by the Burmese military to carry munitions and other supplies through the jungle. This experience regularly included beatings and physically arduous work with little or no food. Food insecurity was not only an issue for those taken by the military, but had wider social consequences since many of our interviewees were subsistence farmers with families to feed; thus many spoke of their concerns for the family whilst they were under the conscription of the military. This food insecurity was only made worse by the common occurrence of the Burmese military entering villages and taking whatever food they required. These sorts of loss of freedom and chronic fear led a number of participants to characterize their life in Burma in terms of ‘not really existing’:
You don’t have your own right to live or to exist because the dictator will dictate you and you belong to them, so really don’t have a choice of your life or anything.

The chronic fear of the Burmese military permeated daily life:

We were in a village, they burn every house one by one and that is the biggest thing, the most hurtful thing when I was trying to put, what you call...tins to surround my house so that they cannot burn and everyday you were afraid about what will happen, ‘would my house be burned or not?’ ...My duty was to protect the family but I couldn’t sleep, I was afraid of everything and anything and I think that time was the hardest for me.

Such fear extended through whole families and villages and often led people to leave Burma. This decision brought with it difficult choices, however, since the journey itself was likely to be very dangerous. Thus the risk of a whole family, including children, travelling had to be weighed against a single adult leaving with a view to establishing a secure base outside Burma and extracting their family at a later date:

Basically, it is not myself only but it was also my family and the other people around us that were suffering so I want to help them but there is no other ways, so the reason I leave the country is that if I could get freedom from Burma and if I am in a free country then I would be able to help those people and so that is the point of why I must go on.

At times the decision to flee the country was precipitated by a sudden dramatic event, such as the arrest or murder of a family member, leaving the rest of the family no option but to leave the country immediately. Women were particularly vulnerable to sexual assault by the Burmese military and could experience further injustice by then having to flee their homes without their families. A young woman raped by two soldiers reported the incident to her father who confronted the military. Not only was the incident denied but the family and village was threatened with death if further allegations were made. The young woman then had to flee not only for her own life but also to protect her family and village:

I run to save the village...and...at that time...my brothers came to me...the military try to kill you, so you should run from this village...so run in India...he said...my brother send me...to India.

Such rapid departures were often described as the beginning of very protracted periods of family separations:

When my father - after my father took away, I leave my country with my mum and we go to India, the border of India...without my father, a long time; maybe six/seven years. So after we arrive...my father come. Maybe seven, eight years, yeah.

In one scenario a Rohingya family escaped Burma to Bangladesh where they lived for 12 years at which point (due to a negotiated deal between Bangladesh and Burma) they were abruptly returned to a still dangerous situation in Burma. After one year, the father fled to Thailand hoping to then bring out the rest of his family; however in the meantime, his wife and children feared for their lives and had to flee once again to Bangladesh. Conditions for Burmese refugees in Bangladesh are known to be very difficult (Médecins Sans Frontières 2002) and this was tragically emphasized by the death of one of the children in this family whilst living in the Bangladeshi camp. Meanwhile, the father spent three years surviving illegally in Thailand, followed by two years in a refugee camp. During the three years outside the camp, the father was sent back to Burma three times by the Thai government. In the camp the father gained a humanitarian resettlement offer to Australia and is now attempting to bring out the remainder of his family from Bangladesh after five years of separation. In this circumstance, there can be no neat separation of a single self either in terms of ‘trauma’ or ‘resilience’. At issue here is the action required to reunite this family. This man was very clear in his interview that relocating
his family to safety was the central meaning of leaving Burma and remained so for him since coming to Australia. Whilst there may be multiple ways to interpret the significance of these events, we should be wary of any which lose this meaning.

Many of our interviewees had experienced difficult dilemmas as they confronted exploitative systems, particularly in relation to labour exploitation in second country situations. Since most were trying to assist family still in Burma, the realization of the impact of this exploitation on their hope to assist others carried particular weight and led some away from illegal work into refugee camps, particularly in Thailand:

Yeah, we were arrested all the time, including my wife and so there is no point in working and we did not have enough food and then they would say you are illegal, you are a refugee. Are you going to stay in a camp or are you going to stay like that so I decided to join a camp.

Most reported life inside camps as relatively safe, though this varied depending on the particular camp and was also gendered, with women, especially single women, vulnerable to sexual assault and exploitative relationships. Some women reported abusive relationships sometimes exacerbated by drug and alcohol problems. Family breakdowns of this nature could lead to further separations, multiplied by the reality that offers of humanitarian resettlement might then follow the splits in families, with some members taking an offer to go to one country whilst others remained or took offers to go to different third countries. Many reported being moved from one camp to another and sometimes these moves also resulted in family separations. There were positive stories of camps as well, however, with experiences of support and opportunities for education and training. But despite the availability of valuable social, health and education infrastructure in some of the camps, there was no illusion that camps provided any genuine solution. Certainly the length of time spent in camps disrupts any illusion that second country experiences for people fleeing Burma are merely temporary ‘transmigratory’ experiences. Some of the people we interviewed had lived in refugee camps for up to 20 years, including for some, years in education, marriage and raising children.

The Australian political discourse of asylum seekers being processed via orderly queues (see for example Kampmark 2006) does not accord with the lived experiences described by participants in this study. That is not to say that UNHCR was viewed negatively by participants; however, its operations within countries like Thailand, Malaysia, India and Bangladesh are clearly complicated and at times corrupted by local contexts of poverty and lack of local capacity. Many found the process of being granted humanitarian settlement in third countries opaque, with many years passing before an offer was abruptly made with little preparation for the resettlement. Nevertheless the ‘discovery’ of UNHCR was of great significance for some who had spent several years living illegally in problematic second country situations. The first quote below outlines an experience from Malaysia whilst the second describes the situation in India:

We cannot rent rooms or anything in Malaysia so we live in the jungles...When the United Nations heard about people living in the jungles they come and visit and they were shocked and they saw many people like that dying and so they requested us to come to the United Nations office and interview us why you leave your country and things like that and we have to tell our story and so I tell my story as well and then they make appointment all the time and we go there and that is how I got here.

Though we have the freedom kind of from the military, but the common people, every day you go out then you look different, they will abuse you because we look different and we are totally different, even at every shop they will abuse you, that is the most difficult part. But still you have the courage that you are not like in Burma where they can arrest you all the time, so you have kind of the freedom but you have the abuse, so the motivation is so that you have to go on, and the good news is that we have someone there like the UN that we can report to, and then later on when they recognize they will provide a little assistance...
These sorts of judgements about the prevailing circumstances of life in second countries often came in the form of statements balancing the pros and cons of the experience. In another example, the positive came in the form of an appreciation of the possibilities of ‘good government’ even if not for ‘non-citizens’ like them:

The kind of positive experience is that I see the difference between the Burmese government and other governments, even though Thailand and Malaysia governments are not as good as this place (Australia) and although they are terrible to foreigners but they still care about their own people. In Burma I don’t see the same thing happens, they torture and kill their own people.

**Settling in Australia**

The fears described above relating to both Burma and second country situations changed substantially in meaning when people spoke about their experience of settlement in Australia. Certainly all of those interviewed were hopeful about their new life in Australia, but the contours of this hope were very much intertwined with other aspects of their life situation. By ‘hopefulness’ we are not referring to illusory imaginations of a favourable future, but ‘the certainty that something makes sense’ (Havel 1990: 181 quoted in Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010: 72). Thus the parent quoted below, cites his hope for the future as predicated on being a support for the achievements of his children, rather than his own achievements:

Basically I don’t have so many things for my future I will just learn to communicate and then get any job that I can do but for my kids I want them to be educated first so they don’t have to be a servant like me and they will be able to get a job that they want.

The dangerous journeys that many had undertaken could finally ‘make sense’, if the hope that had driven that resolve could now be realized. In that regard almost all of those interviewed expressed the value of the lifting of fear and the sense of freedom they experienced in Australia:

It is like a 100 times more difficult in Burma because you are a person and you do not exist, because they dictate everything that you have to do. I miss my family, I love them, I can call them and talk to them, but I can live like a human here—that is how different it is.

Of course, the statement above also reflects the social losses that are regularly involved in the migration process. Indeed, many interviewees expressed strong feelings of sadness and loneliness associated with their new-found safety and freedom. It is not difficult to understand the connections between these emotional states. Separation from family and community was multiplied not only by the geographic isolation of being so far away, but also the added social isolation associated with beginning a new life in an unfamiliar social, economic and linguistic landscape. There was a particular loss, though, that played on people’s minds. As discussed earlier, the hope that had travelled with people for so long was to find freedom in order to help those left behind. This second part of this hope narrative now came to the fore as a heavy responsibility. Below a father without his wife and children poignantly captures the emotional contours of his situation:

I fill out these sponsor forms (shows forms to interviewer) to bring my family here, so that gives me a bit of hope and that is it... I am upset, sad and lonely and so it is difficult to sleep... There is nothing I can do but sleep and wake-up, sleep and wake-up...I am not afraid of anything because no one will arrest me and I feel safe. For me it is just that I don’t have my family here, so I miss them. I think the future will be good once they are here.

There is clarity of purpose and meaning here which deserves respect. Sadness hinges on the loss of family, while hope depends on reunification. Is this person resilient because he has overcome the fears of past traumas, or is he vulnerable because he now experiences sadness as a result of separation from
his family? We argue that it is the whole package of meaning that requires our understanding. Hope is central here; it is both a source of resolve and, unrealized, a source of sadness and frustration:

So being away from the family is the hardest thing, the most difficult thing but on the other hand I am here, so the hope are the strength that I have to handle or to manage those difficulties is because I am the hope for the family as well.

For another, however, hope was turning to disappointment:

When I was young, I know very well our family condition. Here in Australia, I still can't save any money and I am very concerned about my mother and my sister and I know they will have lot of difficulties for food, for their daily basic needs. So I am very upset whenever I think about my family and last time when I talk to them, I ask them if there's a chance to live here, would they like to come to Australia but my mum said, ‘No, I am already old, so I don't want to go to another country.’ But my two siblings are willing to come. Since I'm not able to send them any money, it's hard for me. As soon as possible I want to work and send them the money.

The narratives of hope expressed here provide something of a bridge between the worlds of ‘pre-migration’ and ‘post-migration’. The challenges of ‘post-migration’ life in Australia are not neat separate challenges to those of ‘pre-migration’ life in Burma or even ‘trans-migration’ life in second countries like Thailand or Bangladesh. They are woven together with meanings of hope that traverse the temporal distinction. Thus the post-migration challenge of learning English is much more than a practical challenge of communication; it is also a meaningful symbol of hope. The social isolation of being unable to communicate in the dominant language is not hard to understand; however, it is the inability to assist family that most burdens people:

Problems number one is language; two is loneliness, three sadness. I cannot help them at this time, so I feel very sad because I am here and I still cannot help them.

The focus here is very clearly articulated toward the needs of others. Strong social connections mean strong social responsibilities, which together underpin the social nature of both suffering and hope.

Social Suffering and Hope: Unpacking the Micro–Macro Nexus

Earlier, we described a set of concerns about the capacity of individualized discourses of both trauma and resilience to transform macro political forces into micro encounters of the individual. From the preceding discussion it can be seen that both adversity and hope are socially intertwined. Whilst these are accounts of individuals, they speak to broader social meanings. At the very least the social scale of oppression over a long historical period and at a whole of country level should alert us to the need not to lose sight of the bigger picture. This scale contrasts with the ethnocentricity of commonly used constructs of trauma and resilience, which often assume powerful but acute events followed by a return to normality. Consider then the narration below of the past experience of human rights violations:

This happened to me a long, long time ago. I feel that it's not a big trouble or something any more. When I was a little bit younger - whenever I talk about myself, I always cry but now I feel like...like normal because it happened again and again all the time…

(Interviewer) It's almost like

I am used to it.

The tragedy here is not founded on the remarkable or unusual nature of the adversity; rather it is the daily, protracted nature which deserves our attention. The past is interpreted here as having become normalized, leaving a space for a focus on the future. Thus in another interview
when asked to elaborate on what advice should be given to refugees settling in Australia, the interviewee spoke of the importance of ‘encouraging’. This was ultimately put into the following terms:

Don't think anything about for the past, events already gone. Thinking of the future.

Another aspect of the protracted nature of human rights violations and the consequent social experience of those violations is that people have had little choice but to maintain a very high level of resolve to deal with such experiences:

... what I have learned is that when you are faced with difficulties, facing everyday and I count it as lessons and if you don’t give up then you have the best results...

Another explicitly drew on a Buddhist philosophy:

It is a very necessary thing to know, according to our philosophy...we take training for our mind, it is very important thing. We can get the physical suffering, but we cannot get the mental suffering if you train your mind. That is a very important thing.

When asked what would help people from Burma deal with the experiences of suffering, it was poignant that most interpreted this question as a social/ political question concerned with social solidarity rather than a concern for the isolated individual.

I already mentioned you, the aim is to change our country, this is a very important thing because now we live for our country.

Others answered the same question with a similarly macro political response:

I know the government was so bad for my country for many years and if I die it is not going to change but if I can live I can do something.

Basically, it is not myself only but it was also my family and the people around us that were suffering so I want to help them but there is no other ways, so the reason I leave the country is that if I could get freedom from Burma and if I am in a free country then I would be able to help those people and so that is the point of why I must go on.

My dad was arrested and then escaped and joined the underground and my brothers were arrested and so from my childhood I was thinking that I cannot give up these difficulties because the government will not be changed in one night so I had the responsibility to take care of my life and respect my life and also the responsibility to take care of the rest of my siblings. And so this was the reason why I keep trying with my life to get out of the problem.

If I had the chance or if someone could help like you I want to let the foreign minister know or the secretary or the prime minister that to go to Burma and help the people because the people are suffering and the military is just enjoying and the Lady (Aung San Suu Kyi) is in prison.

There is a level of resolve in these statements which requires acknowledgement, not transformation to a de-politicized sense of individual selfhood. Interestingly a couple of people used the analogy of a family to talk about their country. Burma for them was like a family ‘without good parents’.

Yeah, you know in our house, our father or any other person he should be good and he should be wise, OK, he should be good and he should be wise. If he is good and wise he
will give advice to the youngsters, OK. Similarly in our country, government in at the top, so we need a wise government OK. Wise government and suitable government for our community.

The delicate symbolism here captures the interconnectedness of meanings at the levels of individual, family and country.

**Discussion**

The narratives of social suffering and hope described in this paper represent complex fields of meaning from which our interview participants interpret their difficult pasts and hopeful futures. We make no attempt to discern an essentialist logic here from which we might then suggest the ‘best’ way to come to terms with suffering or to build hope. Rather it is the flexible logics at work here which are of most interest. There are some similarities to Gemignani’s (2011) study of refugee narratives from the former Yugoslavia, in which people both drew on the past for strength and also rejected it as no longer relevant. Thus in our results, hope could be attached to ‘forgetting’ the past, yet also could be based on making good on promises to the self and others made in the past. Moreover, commitments to help others left behind could be framed in terms of assisting family members, but also could be framed on a macro scale of political change. Narratives of ‘carrying on through difficult times’ are a discursive resource which can draw from a variety of social meanings, including a sense of internal strength (‘to train the mind’), a resolve to reunite families or a political commitment to change of government. There is certainly a strong sense of resilience here but it is not an excised resilience of the ‘inner individual’ discrete from social suffering or social hope. It is a resilience of dynamic ‘meaning-making’ giving coherence to past, present and future experiences (Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010: 81). It is a resilience which relies on shared social values of family and community, ideas about good government and cultural respect.

Like Bracken et al.’s (1997: 439) commentary concerning the relationship between human rights violations and trauma in Bosnia and Rwanda, survivors’ concerns are not restricted to an inwards direction, but also focus outwards. This speaks to the nature of personhood and deserves more understanding than we can bring here. Suffice to say that Eisenbruch’s (1992) work on personhood among Cambodians and more recent accounts of this in relation to understanding breaches of ontological security for Cambodian refugees (Hinton et al. 2009) show how the experience of traumatic events is deeply rooted within an ontological identity. Like Bottrell (2009) we are concerned with the over-abundance of normative epistemologies and individual-only levels of analysis associated with psychopathology. In explicitly recognizing the social level of suffering and hope, we are not suggesting an exclusion of the individual; rather we are affirming the need to be vigilant against transforming accounts of social suffering and hope into micro, individualized only interpretations.

This requires more than a touristic interest in cultural ‘others’, since the dominance of ‘frozen’ biomedical transformations of social phenomena into individual pathology (Kleinman 1995) is as much a product of the lack of cultural reflexivity about the neo-liberal space of white, western ‘culture’ as it is about any misunderstanding of cultural ‘others’. Bottrell (2009: 334) has argued ‘resilience building’ as conceptualized within neo-liberal frameworks can easily create a transformation from ‘positive adaption despite adversity to positive adaption to adversity’. We are reminded here of the ecological principles of healing and adaption put forward by Miller and Rasco (2004). The first principle relates to moving western mental health forward from ‘fixing’ the ‘insides’ of people to addressing the relationship between the person and their setting (2004: 35). Within this conceptualization, changing environments is as valued as fixing ‘insides’. The second principle relates to the importance of intervention reflecting the priorities of the community rather than continuing to work with the assumptions of the dominant trauma lens (2004: 39). We suggest that narrative approaches such as the one adopted here go some way toward constructing a research agenda which can help to establish these two principles of good practice more firmly.

**Conclusion**

The social nature of both suffering and hope requires an appreciation of ‘individual biography in a larger matrix of culture, history, and political economy’ (Keinzler 2008: 225). This is not only a
matter of political principle, but also a matter of listening to the voice of those who know best how macro forces of human rights violations impact on individual, family and community trajectories. In exploring narrations of the journey from Burma to Australia, we have attempted to provide an opportunity for this voice to be heard. We recognize that this is an ongoing process of narration in which dialogue will continue to be dynamic. Our conclusion then is not to suggest a new frozen category of how best to understand refugee life experiences. We would rather the more dynamic proposition of a sustained commitment to reflexivity, in which we are prepared to question the dominant categories of understanding and learn from the oppressed.

Acknowledgements
This study was supported by an Australian Research Council linkage grant (ARC grant: LP0776558).


Temple, B and Young, A (2004) Qualitative Research and Translation Dilemmas Qualitative Research and Translation Dilemmas *Qualitative Research* 4(2) 161-178.


