Lost in the US’ larger immigration debate is consideration for the rights of, and services meant to support, Bhutanese refugees. Advocates and service providers focus on the intricacies of status acquisition, education enrolment, and access to health care for the migrant population as a whole, but rarely provide the special considerations necessary to promote inclusive access to services for vulnerable refugee populations. Specialized services targeting the unique needs of Bhutanese refugees are nascent, with the bulk of current research focused on enhancing service agencies’ awareness of available resources and medical professionals’ cultural competency. While necessary components of rights-based care, these limited interventions promote system dependence and, if delivered alone, are structurally incomplete. Current practices fail to incorporate equally necessary—and more sustainable—family and cultural preservation initiatives.

This study proposes a broader intervention that would empower previously overlooked actors—namely the Bhutanese community and their capable families—to engage in culturally appropriate and holistic integration services alongside the advocates and service providers. This research identifies current gaps in the methodological approach to services for Bhutanese refugees and demonstrates the necessity of holistic care through the adoption of an anti-oppressive approach to service delivery. It seeks to develop a new framework for an integrated advancement of services for Bhutanese refugees in the United States. This framework modifies the current dependency-based model, drawing on opportunities to support cultural continuity along with professional competency. This study includes the development of a structured curriculum which would enable the refugees and their care providers to engage in strategic skill development which, it is hypothesized, will increase Bhutanese refugees’ access to sustainable livelihoods, and, ultimately, greater community integration. By engaging the Bhutanese refugees and their families in decision-making processes, this curriculum promotes a rights-based approach to strategically navigating an often overlooked dimension of difference.
Resettled Bhutanese refugees’ self-sufficiency and wellbeing: a case study in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

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Globally, twenty-seven countries have resettlement programs associated with UNHCR – representing commitments to the international refugee framework and domestic commitments to those refugees resettled. The US program is held up as an archetype of this commitment. Since 1975, the US has resettled over three million refugees, including over 60,000 Bhutanese refugees since 2008 – more than all other countries combined on both counts.

The role this resettlement plays as a ‘durable solution’ for these refugees hinges on the programming of the system itself. The US 1980 Refugee Act states that the Director of the Office of Refugee Resettlement shall ‘make available sufficient resources for employment training and placement in order to achieve economic self-sufficiency among refugees as quickly as possible’ (emphasis added). This paper examines economic self-sufficiency interventions for Bhutanese refugees, their theories of change, and perceptions of effectiveness in an archetypal city: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

A community of approximately 3,500 Bhutanese refugees have settled in Pittsburgh, nestled in the hills of fourteen neighborhoods. Now, ‘in [the camps in] Nepal, Pittsburgh is very famous’ because of the population assembled for jobs, affordability, geography, elder care, and relative safety. The author assisted the first families in 2008 and returned for research with the Bhutanese population and their service providers in March 2011, August-September 2012, and January-April 2013. This paper presents qualitative fieldwork results and the demographic profile from the Bhutanese Community Association of Pittsburgh’s 2013 census.

Understanding the employment services and perspectives of economic self-sufficiency and wellbeing for Bhutanese refugees in Pittsburgh provides a frame to see not only the challenges and successes of this population and resettlement, but also national and international obligations. As one Bhutanese refugee said in a focus group, ‘Government should understand the nature of the refugees arriving and put us with jobs that… allow the life to sustain.’
Changing relations among refugees and local communities in Nepal

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During 2008-12, many changes have taken place in the refugee camps of eastern Nepal. More than 78,000 refugees have already been resettled in eight western countries. More than 20,000 refugees are waiting for third country resettlement. The remaining 10,000 refugees are still undecided on durable solutions. However, they are enjoying electricity in their huts, LP gas for cooking in the kitchen, and are equipped with smart phones and laptops, which they often use for chat and browsing. These were only dreams before 2008.

The third country resettlement of the refugees opened in 2007 and brought various changes in the life of people at the refugee camps and outside camps of Nepal. Life in the refugee camps became easier because of the flow of remittances from relatives who are resettled. Every day, around 7 million Nepalese rupees (about USD 90,000) entered the camps. There are more than 36 remittance companies only at one camp of Damak. The financial capability of the refugees has increased these days because of these remittances. They have money in their hands and are able to start small businesses and industry, buy goods for living and afford a good education for their children.

The increased financial capability of the refugees has also helped to change the perception of local people towards them. Refugees are buyers of meat, green vegetables, groceries, milk and other daily commodities that help to grow the business, market and entrepreneurship of local community. The relations are better and locals benefit from refugee resources. It is clear that the 3rd country resettlement has brought in money as remittances and also brings social changes in the local community which ultimately will create a favourable environment for local integration and local assimilation.

Social service provider perceptions of “Nepali-ness” of asylum seekers and refugees in Austin, Texas

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“Well, are they Bhutanese or Nepalese?” This question, asked by a local school administrator, prompted this exploration of the perceptions of difference held by the refugee
service community in Austin, Texas. In this paper, I examine the understandings of organizations serving Bhutanese-Nepali refugees about culture and difference and how their perceptions of what distinctions are important influence the support that refugees receive. I place this problem of identitarian assignments in the context of conflicts that stem from the different paths that Nepalis and Nepalese-Americans have taken to their current residence in Texas. While the city has long had a small population of successful Nepali business people in the tech sector, in the early 2000s it became home to a number of Nepalis seeking asylum status as a result of the Maoist conflict. Many of those asylum seekers have spent significant time working through the U.S. legal system and many are still awaiting the final outcomes of their cases. During this time, these asylum seekers became well known to those who provide social services in Austin, and were seen as valuable assets, given their strong skills in English. With the large influx of Bhutanese-Nepalis to Austin since 2006, asylum seekers have often been the first people that service providers turn to in providing support for Bhutanese-Nepali refugees, noting that both populations speak the same language. Yet, in a metaphorical sense, they do not, and there has been conflict between refugees and asylum seekers, the nature and cause of which is often unrecognized by those in charge of large service organizations. In this paper, I will explore the structures that permit these conflicts as well as the limits of refugee service providers’ understandings of the distinctions between various members of the diverse Nepali community in Austin.

A Daughter Married: A Daughter Lost? Underage Marriages and Bhutanese Refugee Resettlement
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In Bhutan, arranged child marriages were both accepted and common within the Lhotshampa community. Among Bhutanese refugees in camps in Nepal, attitudes to this practice changed significantly—the reduction in child marriages reflects a shift in which awareness-raising by humanitarian agencies and the ample availability of free education for girls are likely to have played an important role.

After the start of the resettlement process, claims began to surface that underage marriages were once again on the rise. In contrast to earlier child marriages, however, these new underage marriages were ‘love’ marriages that often took place against parents’ wishes.
They were also handled differently: where Nepalese law prescribes punishment for parents who arrange the marriage of an underage child, these new marriages invoked a different type of legal case: parents now brought their children before the camp mediation system in attempts to undo the marriage that had taken place.

By pointing to the rules and effects of the Bhutanese refugee resettlement program, this paper attempts to explain what caused this rise in underage marriages and parents’ responses to them, and to address the consequences for refugee families both during and after the resettlement process.

“One Nation, Many People”: Nepali-Bhutanese civic engagement in the Rust Belt

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This paper examines civic engagement among Nepali-Bhutanese refugees in the “rust belt” city of Erie, Pennsylvania. As defined by Brettell and Reed-Danahay (Civic Engagements, Stanford University Press 2012), civic engagement is “the process by which individuals enter into and act within civic spaces to address issues of public concern.” In addressing civic engagement, I focus not only on the actions of Nepali-Bhutanese refugees, but also on the ways through which they acquire the knowledge of how to participate as American citizens. More specifically, I analyze an on-going effort by the Bhutanese Community Association of Erie (BCAE)—a democratically elected representative body for Erie’s population of around 4,000 Nepali-Bhutanese refugees—to build a Bhutanese community center. With this community center, BCAE leaders, of whom several are employed at local NGOs, hope both to facilitate integration and to preserve the Nepali-Bhutanese cultural heritage. Three major ways in which BCAE leaders wish to accomplish these goals are: teaching civics courses, teaching Nepali and English classes, and, finally, developing the center as a temple, as no local Hindu temple exists. Each of the center’s proposed components incorporates the lessons of the refugee past into present civic engagements in an effort to build a stable future for the Nepali-Bhutanese community. Through this case study, I demonstrate how the seemingly contradictory projects of cultural preservation and social integration mutually support one another through the civic engagements of Nepali-Bhutanese refugees in Erie, Pennsylvania. More broadly, I show how refugee immigrants draw upon the multicultural notions of citizenship championed by resettlement NGOs in their citizenship practices. This
is not to say that refugee immigrants passively adopt the models of citizenship provided to them by NGOs. Rather, it is through their agentic practices that refugee immigrants construct their own understandings of citizenship and meaningfully enact them to claim civic presence.

“Making peace in the heart-mind:” towards an ethnopsychology of resilience among Bhutanese refugees

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Bhutanese refugees have long been labelled psychiatrically vulnerable, with some figures suggesting that over half of the population experiences lifetime disorder. Moreover, according to the International Organization for Migration, suicide rates among Bhutanese refugees have climbed steadily since the mass resettlement campaign was launched in 2007. This study set out to complement the extensive body of literature on psychiatric morbidity among Bhutanese refugees through an exploration of cultural beliefs and values related to coping and resilience. Data were gathered over one year of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two Bhutanese refugee communities: resettled refugees in Vermont, U.S. and residents of the refugee camps in eastern Nepal. Methods included semi-structured interviews (n=62), a structured survey of coping behavior (n=193), focus groups, and participant observation. Qualitative data were coded and analyzed for recurrent themes. Quantitative data from the coping survey were statistically analyzed and interpreted through the lens of ethnography to illuminate patterns in coping behavior. Key findings include religio-cultural techniques for managing distress (such as yoga and meditation), idioms of vulnerability, distress, and wellbeing, preferred coping strategies, and lay local wisdom, or “ethnopsychology,” around fostering resilient responses to adversity. In addition, the research revealed practices of psychosocial care embedded in the activities of community-based organizations and arts initiatives. Implications for promoting resilience and enhancing intervention in the context of the on-going resettlement are elaborated.
The pitfalls of Front End Loading in refugee resettlement policies: Bhutanese refugees’ struggles in Greater Manchester, UK

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The paper draws upon on-going ethnographic research with a group of Bhutanese refugees who have been resettled to Greater Manchester, UK. This paper critically reflects upon the so-called ‘Front End Loading’ (FEL) approach of refugee resettlement policies, which provides support and resources only during the initial stages of resettlement, in expectation that less support will be needed in later stages. In the UK, policy makers assume that self-sufficiency can be attained after eight to ten months of resettlement. However, my current PhD study suggests that this period is inadequate, and many Bhutanese refugees find themselves struggling with unemployment, a language gap, and access to mainstream (government) services, education and housing.

The high unemployment and marginalisation that Bhutanese refugees experience in the UK may lead to over-dependency on government welfare, rather than fostering empowerment and independence. These issues are also explored in the context of the current economic downturn in the UK, and the subsequent reduction of social and governmental services and support. Furthermore, many refugee households shift responsibilities, such as e.g. provision of monthly income and dissemination of information, solely to the younger generation (18-25 year-olds), who in turn struggle to cope with the burden of providing for their families and the community as a whole. Furthermore, whilst Bhutanese refugees in the UK benefit from the long-established (South) Asian community in the country, many feel marginalised from the mainstream British population. One of the reasons for these issues is a language gap, which particularly affects the older generation. Although Bhutanese refugees have aspirations to develop a reliable network of community support, projects often fail due to inadequate (external) support and lack of resources. The paper concludes that FEL and external support has to be widely extended in order to guarantee ‘successful’ resettlement of refugees in the UK.
Reflections on young Bhutanese refugees’ hopes for and experiences of post-resettlement life

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London

This paper builds on doctoral fieldwork conducted in Nepal (between 2006 and 2008) prior to the start of the large scale Bhutanese refugee resettlement programme, during a time of intra-community political crisis and disagreement over long-term solutions to the protracted situation. It reflects on young Bhutanese refugees’ hopes and fears of post-resettlement life as they prepared to leave camps in Nepal to begin new lives in third countries. The paper also draws on anecdotal observations from personal visits to Bhutanese refugees in the USA and the author’s facilitation of a participatory filmmaking project with Bhutanese young people in Manchester in 2011 through the charity, Refugee Youth Project. It shares some youth experiences of resettlement in these countries and considers how young people’s experiences match up (or not) to their pre-departure expectations, and how resettlement has impacted on their self-perceptions and life plans.

Transitioning into Nepali-Bhutanese-Americans? : The unsettling resettlement process.

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This paper proposes to focus on the issue of suicides among the resettled Bhutanese refugees. Bhutanese refugees have the highest suicide rate among resettled refugees in the US. There have been sixteen confirmed suicides during the first three year period of their arrival. These statistics were alarming enough to warrant a two year study by the Office of New Comers and the Center for Disease Control. The findings stressed language barriers, worries about family members left behind, separation from family and difficulty in maintaining one’s religious and cultural practices. Since the release of the study in October 2012, there have been more suicides within the resettled community. The resettlement agencies face the prospect of dealing with more mental-health related concerns among the recent arrivals. These factors have subjected the Bhutanese refugees to an intense scrutiny in the field of mental health studies in the US. The refugee community has been uneasy about and critical of the study. This paper examines the resettlement process through one such incident, which was not
covered by the official study. The narrative and the context of this experience is used to understand the complex challenges thrown up for both the refugee community and the official resettlement structures. There is also a growing concern regarding the elderly in the community. Resettlement is offered with the implicit condition and goal of citizenship. Straddling the uneasy duration of the 50s, which fall outside the Medicaid benefits/entitlements, there is increasing anxiety about their ability to navigate the citizenship process. Through these two issues, the paper aims to critically examine the bureaucratic structures of relocation and management. The paper will draw on the experience of working within the official resettlement system both as an insider and an outsider.

When a social movement moves: refugee activism in the context of resettlement

Susan Banki

University of Sydney

This paper examines how resettled Bhutanese refugees who lived in refugee camps in Nepal for two decades perceive, understand, and interact with their home country of Bhutan in the political sphere. It draws on initial field research (of a larger, six-year longitudinal project) of Bhutanese refugees recently resettled in Australia. The project sets out the theoretical and methodological groundwork for a four-dimensional typology to analyze Bhutanese political engagement vis-a-vis the home country. The first part of the paper will review the theories that might predict post-resettlement political engagement as categorized by the author (declining, continuing, shifting, and reformed). The second part of the paper will consider the four elements of a suggested typology (intensity, strategic politics, targets, and exposure), and discuss effective methods for collecting such data (interviews, content analysis, event analysis). In the third section, the data from initial empirical research will be discussed, and ethical and methodological challenges considered.
Reflection on the resettlement of Bhutanese refugees in the UK: the voices of refugees

Lok Nath Bajgai, Ramesh Ghimirey, Til Sharma, Ajay Thapa and Mani Thapa
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This paper is presented by some members of the Bhutanese refugee community. We are drawing on our experience as resettled refugees in the UK, and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of resettlement, as well as the positive and negative outcomes of this project in the UK. As one of the smallest resettled communities, we rely on community self-help, in order to improve our livelihoods. However, external circumstances, such as unemployment, the decrease of governmental support and language problems often constrain our efforts to improve our situation. We are discussing several issues, such as empowerment; community development; access to employment, training and education; and independence. We illustrate issues that both directly and indirectly affect us, and how we manage them on a daily basis. We also explore the lives of the refugee youth and their experiences, as well as presenting voices from the female members of our community. Although we may not be able to locate our paper in particular academic disciplines and theories, we aim to demonstrate what issues are of immediate relevance for us, and therefore improve the global, SOAS-led project on resettlement of Bhutanese refugees.